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## Russia's War against Ukraine in 1917–20 (Ideological and Political Context)\*

**Zarys treści:** Wychodząc od obecnej wojny Rosji przeciwko Ukrainie, artykuł analizuje historyczny precedens współczesnych wydarzeń: wojnę pomiędzy Rosją sowiecką a Ukraińską Republiką Ludową, proklamowaną po przejściu władzy w Rosji przez bolszewików i rozpadzie imperium na odrębne podmioty państwowe. Autor przedstawia politykę rządu bolszewickiego, która towarzyszyła okupacji wojskowej Ukrainy, i analizuje kolejne etapy rosyjskiej interwencji. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie bolszewickich prób przedstawienia wojny jako wewnętrznego konfliktu ukraińskiego na tle klasowym, a nie bezpośredniej wojskowej agresji rosyjskiej. Dla realizacji tego celu bolszewicy stworzyli pseudo-ukraińskie rządy sowieckie, pod szyldem których działała armia rosyjska. Artykuł analizuje przebieg konfliktu, krótko charakteryzuje politykę „komunizmu wojennego” stosowaną przez bolszewików w latach 1919–1920 w Ukrainie w celu wykorzystania jej zasobów naturalnych, zwłaszcza żywności, i podsumowuje kwestie związane z okupacją Ukrainy i ustanowieniem na jej terytorium reżimu bolszewickiego.

**Outline of Content:** Adopting as a starting point Russia's current war against Ukraine, the paper discusses the historical precedent of today's events, i.e. the war between Soviet Russia and the Ukrainian People's Republic, which was proclaimed after the Bolsheviks had seized power in Russia and the empire had disintegrated into separate state entities. The author probes into the policies implemented by the Bolshevik government along with the military occupation of Ukraine and analyses the successive stages of the Russian intervention. The paper is intended to show how the Bolsheviks strived to depict the war as an internal Ukrainian class-based conflict rather than a case of direct Russian military aggression. In this pursuit, the Bolsheviks created a pseudo-Ukrainian Soviet government as a banner for the operations

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of Russian troops. The paper discusses how the conflict developed, presents a brief description of the “war communism” policy led by the Bolsheviks in Ukraine in 1919–20 to justify the exploitation of its natural resources, especially food supplies, and presents an overview of the occupation of Ukraine and the establishment of the Bolshevik regime on its territory.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Ukraińska Republika Ludowa, Rosja bolszewicka, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska 1917–1920, komunizm wojenny, Czerwony Terror, dyktatura proletariatu, reżim okupacyjny

**Keywords:** Ukrainian People’s Republic, Bolshevik Russia, Ukrainian-Soviet War, 1917–20, war communism, Red Terror, dictatorship of the proletariat, occupation regime

For more than two years, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has been the focus of public attention worldwide. A war in the heart of Europe, waged on such a scale and with such a devastating force, by a nuclear power which, in doing so, systematically resorts to nuclear blackmail and repeated declarations that it has been fighting NATO rather than Ukraine, raises some legitimate global concerns that the conflict might escalate into the Third World War. The threat is too serious to be ignored. World leaders, the political establishment and intellectual elites have been doing their best to predict the possible course of military and political actions, and in parallel, they have been probing into the root causes of the aggression, the logic behind the conflict and the aggressor’s motives. Statements of the Russian President seem to suggest that these motives are not only not so much rooted in today’s geopolitics but are instead entrenched in Russian mentality and history. Russia is a country that strives for conquests, a descendant of the Golden Horde, which, over several centuries, expanded from the small Principality of Moscow into a vast empire through the successful subjugation of hundreds of nations. Ukraine accepted the rule of the Russian tsar of its own volition on the condition that it would be able to keep its right to autonomy but experienced tsarist despotism instead. Efforts by hetmans Ivan Vyhovsky and Ivan Mazepa to break away from the autocratic captivity ended in defeat. In two centuries, Ukraine turned into a colonial periphery of the empire.

Because human resources required to keep conquered territories under control were scattered, and there was a staff shortage, the empire had to base its economy on extracting raw materials. This, in turn, significantly hampered the emergence of a modern society. Until 1905, the people of Russia were considered subjects of the Tsar and enjoyed no civil liberties. National minorities, accounting for more than half of the population, were particularly disadvantaged. Violence-based tsarist autocracy could not last forever, though. In the mid-nineteenth century, Russia was defeated in the Crimean War, and in the early twentieth century, it lost its war against Japan. The First World War spelled the end of the tsarist rule.

After the February Revolution of 1917, the key task ahead of the Ukrainian independence movement was to strike out for autonomy. This goal failed to be

achieved peacefully. Neither the Provisional Government, the Bolshevik Council of People's Commissars, nor the White movement of General Anton Denikin were able to pave the way for an independent Ukrainian state. But, because of the strength of the Ukrainian independence movement, it took Russia many years to conquer Ukraine again. The war that Russia has been waging against Ukraine today, often qualified as hybrid warfare, shares several attributes with the events from a century ago. Of course, history never repeats itself, even less so after a century, but what definitely has remained unchanged is the strategy of expansion, xenophobia, and the aggressor's strategies and motives. The tactic did not change either: it is all about expansionist goals of renewed dominance and world power status, disguised in ideological euphemisms. The author of the paper will focus precisely on this tactic. Therefore, the discussion here will not cover the course of Russia's war against Ukraine but rather touch upon its ideological and political foundation. What was quintessential of Russian propaganda was the hypocrisy and cynicism of its political leaders who publicly declared one thing and did something else, and strived to depict their overt aggression as an intraclass struggle among Ukrainians and as an act of fraternal aid provided to the working people against bourgeois nationalism. The policy of the White movement led by General Anton Denikin, who did not recognise Ukraine's right to exist, was no less aggressive.

## Civil War or Russian Aggression?

As a next step, the paper will discuss the issue of language. It is a widespread practice in Soviet historiography to depict the civil war which engulfed the entire territory of the former empire, from the Pacific Ocean up to its Western borders, with Ukraine and even Poland included, as a consequence of the October Revolution. In this historiography, forces which defied the Soviet-Bolshevik rule were qualified as members of the hostile, counterrevolutionary exploiting class. As for the events in Ukraine, they were portrayed as a kind of bourgeois-nationalist counterrevolution and the struggle in Poland – as led against “White Poles”. In their writings, Soviet historians claimed that the Soviet Union was under siege by counterrevolutionary forces, which the world imperialism rushed to help. The thesis about a civil war which swept across the entire territory of the former Russian empire for some time also predominated in Western historiography.<sup>1</sup> It still has its currency

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<sup>1</sup> This assumption was gradually discarded. Publications by Ukrainian émigré authors and studies by Western historians, inspired by the former, highlighted the distinctive nature of revolutionary developments in 1917–21 in Ukraine. See the classic works: J.S. Reshetar Jr., *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917–1920. A Study in Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ, 1952); *The Ukraine, 1917–1921. A Study in Revolution*, ed. T. Hunczak (Cambridge, MA, 1977). Cf. important discussions on the topic: M. von Hagen, 1917. *The Empire's Diverging Revolutions*, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org>.

in today's Russian historiographic research.<sup>2</sup> "In Russia, civil war spread throughout the entire expanse of the former empire", argues one of the best-known Russian historians, Vladislav Goldin.<sup>3</sup> The reasoning of Russian history scholars is based on the assertion that there was one Great Russian Revolution in Russia, with no other revolts, in particular the Ukrainian Revolution, ever taking place, and that it was followed by only one civil war. Their concept is not based on objective grounds but is rather driven by efforts to justify the historical policy pursued by today's Russian authorities, unable to come to terms with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of Russia's status as a global power. This is why it is vital for Russian political leaders and scholars who act on their political orders to prove the argument about a shared Russian space, a unified territory and the need to renew Russia's full power there. Therefore, they knowingly overlook Russia's decomposition after the Bolshevik coup of 1917 and the emergence of independent states on the territory of the former empire.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian historiography tends to stress the internationally recognised sovereignty of the Ukrainian state and the distinctiveness of Ukrainian history and to highlight the peculiarities of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–21. Although it converged in time with the Russian Revolution, this revolt had its own dynamics and goals, including establishing and defending Ukrainian statehood. As a result of the Bolshevik coup, Russia of the days of the Provisional Government, the one which covered the vast space inherited from the empire, ceased to exist and broke up into separate state entities. One of these was the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR), recognised *de facto* or *de jure* by several countries worldwide, including Soviet Russia. By definition, a civil war occurs within one state and is marked by an armed conflict between power-vying and organised military formations. There

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org/blog-post/1917-the-empires-diverging-revolutions (accessed: 20 June 2023). Austrian scholar, Hannes Leidinger notes quite aptly: "To describe these events [the developments on the territory of the former empire after the Bolshevik coup in autumn 1917. – V.V.] as a "Russian civil war" would be not only to marginalise important phenomena at the end of the First World War but also to accept the perspective of the October [Bolshevik] regime, whose terminology has entered the thinking and language of its opponents and neutral observers", H. Leidinger, 'A Time of Troubles: Revolutionary Upheavals and Armed Conflicts in the Former Tsarist Empire, 1917–1922', in: *The Emergence of Ukraine. Self-Determination, Occupation, and War in Ukraine, 1917–1922*, ed. W. Dornik et al. (Edmonton–Toronto, 2015), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Россия в годы Гражданской войны. 1917–1922 гг. Очерки истории и историографии*, ed. Д.Б. Павлов (Москва–Санкт Петербург, 2018); *Россия в годы Гражданской войны, 1917–1922 гг. Власть и общество по обе стороны фронта. Материалы Междунар. науч. конф. (Москва, 1–3 октября 2018 г.)*, ed. Ю.А. Петров (Москва, 2018); *Эпоха Революции и Гражданской войны в России. Проблемы истории и историографии*, ed. В.В. Калашников (Санкт Петербург, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> В. Голдин, 'Гражданская война в России, 1917–1922. Итоги работы над XII томом 20-томной академической "Истории России"', in: *Гражданская война в России: проблемы выхода, исторические последствия, уроки для современности. Сборник научных трудов*, ed. В.М. Рынков (Новосибирск, 2022), p. 13.

were no groups in Ukraine to fight similar reciprocal battles. Only the uprising against Hetman Skoropadskyi in the autumn of 1918 could, to some extent, be compared to a civil war. However, as an outcome of some German military intrigue, the Hetmanate did not have and did not produce any significant social base. There was no one to defend it.<sup>4</sup> The uprising was short-lived: only one month passed between establishing the Hetmanate and its collapse. The armed conflict during the uprising could be reduced to a single battle of Motovylyvka, with no information available about any other serious encounters, and one armed clash could hardly be considered a civil war. Also, the fact that Ukrainians fought in the Russian army – whether the Red or the White one – does not legitimise assertions about the civil war, much like it is impossible to consider the German-Soviet war as a civil war just because Andrey Vlasov's Russian Liberation Army fought on the side of Nazi Germany.

Ukrainian Bolsheviks did not exist as a separate Ukrainian political force. There were no distinct Ukrainian Mensheviks either, as unlike Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries, the former did not have their own party. Both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks were members of Russian parties operating at the Dnieper River; they implemented the policy of their central committees, congresses, and plenums and did not pursue any independent policy. There was only one instance when, in March 1920, a group of so-called Decists (members of the Democratic Centralism Group, a faction within the Bolshevik Party) succeeded in electing the new membership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine (CP(b)U). However, on orders from Moscow, the Central Committee was disbanded immediately, and its members were replaced with the people of “trust”.

Therefore, the Bolsheviks' aggression against the Ukrainian People's Republic, which began in late 1917, cannot be regarded just as an episode of the civil war. This was the starting point of the long war of Russia (both the Red and the White) against Ukraine – the war which the Ukrainian People's Republic lost. The victory of the Reds led to the Soviet occupation of Ukraine, which in turn sparked a massive anti-communist insurgency movement. The Bolsheviks needed to get a million-strong

<sup>4</sup> Jan Jacek Bruski discusses that issue: “The Hetman's misfortune was that he was unable to find among Ukrainians any political partners who would support his efforts to build a state based on conservative values. There was no strong social stratum with vital interests in the model offered by the Hetmanate, and intelligentsia – which could provide some ideological legitimacy and promote the model – followed the mood of the masses, succumbing to the widespread fashion for socialism. [...] At the same time, Skoropadsky could not count on a wider support among the Russian public opinion. In the eyes of most Russians – except for a small group of staunch conservatives – he was a political opportunist who was not to be trusted”, J.J. Bruski, *Petlurowcy. Centrum Państwowe Ukraińskiej Republiki Ludowej na wychodźstwie (1919–1924)* (Kraków, 2000), p. 50. For a broader discussion of the intricacies of the Hetman government in Ukraine in Polish literature, see: W. Mędrzecki, *Niemiecka interwencja militarna na Ukrainie w 1918 roku* (Warszawa, 2000).

army by 1921 to harness Ukraine. Besides, they put up a semblance of independence: they proclaimed the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic independent only on paper and, in reality, operating under the full control of Moscow. Military action against Ukraine was conducted by means of mass terror targeted at civilians. The Red Army soldiers, Chekists and members of other law enforcement structures used violence. What was distinctive of these operations was a complete decline of any moral standards and massive-scale looting enterprise. Because of their policies, Soviet authorities caused a great famine of 1921–22. It should also be noted that the Bolsheviks' expansion into Ukraine was the first stage of broader expansion endeavours, conducted under the pretence of promoting the proletarian revolution worldwide. These century-old events bring to mind a full array of ideological and political tools that Russian leaders exploit today. This toolbox will be analysed in detail in the sections below.

## Fall of Russia. Proclamation of the Ukrainian People's Republic

The fall of tsarism in February 1917 set in motion an accelerated development of the Ukrainian mass national movement, led by the Ukrainian Central Rada – the body which put forward the key Ukrainian guiding principles with the aim of reviving the lost statehood. From early spring until the autumn of 1917, the Rada was in dialogue with the Provisional Government of Russia, but its outcomes were mixed. The collapse of the Provisional Government closed that chapter of history. After the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd, the Ukrainian Central Rada did not recognise the new government and proclaimed the Ukrainian People's Republic.<sup>5</sup> The Great Belarusian Rada, in its “Proclamation to the Belarusian People”, also condemned the Bolsheviks' actions in Petrograd and supported the Committee for the Salvation of the Homeland and the Revolution, established at the Stavka of the Supreme Commander of the Russian army. Then, the Union of Mountaineers of Caucasus formed the Government of the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus and, a bit later, the Provisional Terek-Dagestan Government (Government of Terek Cossacks). On 29 November/12 December, in Ufa, the Tatar National Assembly proclaimed the establishment of the Idel-Ural State. In December, the All-Kazakh Congress proclaimed the Alash Autonomy on the territory of today's Kazakhstan (then Kirghizia) and elected the “Alash Orda” as its government. The Siberian Regional Duma, which convened for an extraordinary session in Tomsk, endorsed the autonomy of Siberia. The governments of the Crimean Tatars (national), the Don Army and the Kuban Republic (regional ones) must also be added to the list.

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<sup>5</sup> For more details on the path to the proclamation of the UPR, and the subsequent declaration of the full independence of Ukraine, see: R. Wysocki, ‘Wielka Wojna a naród. Ukraińcy na drodze do proklamacji niepodległości w 1918 roku’, in: *Drogi do niepodległości narodów Europy Wschodniej 1914–1921*, ed. D. Michaluk (Ciechanowiec, 2018), pp. 313–29.

At the same time, Finland, Poland and Lithuania took steps to establish their sovereign statehood. The future of Russia itself remained unclear. Having seized power in their hands, the Bolsheviks declared that the solution would only be in place until a constitutional assembly – the All-Russian Constituent Assembly – was convened. Arguably, their leaders hoped to win the elections and, through the Assembly, legitimise their newly captured power.<sup>6</sup> In Russia, however, hardly anyone believed that this could happen. Even the Bolshevik party was divided on the issue. Bolshevik Heorhij Heorhij Lapchinsky recalled later on: “None of us was sure whether the Council of People’s Commissars, our Bolshevik authority, would survive any longer”.<sup>7</sup> The Bolsheviks were not a major force in Ukraine’s territory compared to central Russia. According to the statistics of the committee of the Sixth Congress of the Bolshevik Party held in August 1917, the party had a total of 22,303 members in Ukraine, including 15,818, or two-thirds, in the Donbas and Kryvyi Rih regions. The city of Kyiv and the Kyiv region accounted for only 4,985 party members.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it was not a homogenous structure but rather a motley of regional organisations, with no mutual liaisons, subordinated directly to the Central Committee in Petrograd. The elections to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly clearly demonstrated the weakness of the Bolsheviks’ organisation in Ukraine and, consequently, their lack of influence over the masses. They obtained only 10 per cent of the overall vote (14 seats), mainly in the Kyiv-region constituency of Katerynoslav (Yekaterinoslav, today – Dnipro), and in the Kyiv constituency itself, they succeeded in introducing only one member. The “cadets” and Russian nationalists did not win a single seat there, while virtually the entire leadership of the Central Rada got their seats. Out of the 131 seats in Ukrainian governorates, 86 went to Ukrainian socialists. The national list amassed the support of more than 60 per cent of voters throughout Ukraine and even more than 70 per cent

<sup>6</sup> Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev, who published the statement “On the Pending Issue in Ukraine”, targeted against Lenin’s plan to seize power by force from the Provisional Government, were inclined to adopt this solution. The statement reads: “The Legislative Assembly and Soviets; this mixed type of state institutions is what we want to achieve. Based thereon, there are serious chances that our party’s policies will really prevail”, *Каменев и Зиновьев в 1917 г. Факты и документы* (Москва, 1927), p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Г. Лапчинський, ‘З перших днів всеукраїнської радянської влади’, *Летопись Революции*, no. 5–6 (1927), p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> М. Скрипник, ‘Начерк історії пролетарської революції на Україні’, *Червоний Шлях*, no. 2 (1923), p. 72. John S. Reshetar highlights one fundamental issue: “Bolshevik Party membership in Ukraine in 1917 was mostly non-Ukrainian – consisting primarily of Russians and Jews – and was either hostile or indifferent to the Ukrainian national movement. It blithely ignored Lenin’s tactical advice in 1917 to utilise national grievances against the Provisional Government in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks in Ukraine made no effort to publish in the Ukrainian language and confined their appeal largely to the cities and to the military units in which Russians tended to predominate. The opportunities for Bolshevik agitators in the smaller cities were very limited”, J.S. Reshetar Jr., ‘The Communist Party of the Ukraine and Its Role in the Ukrainian Revolution’, in: *The Ukraine, 1917–1921. A Study in Revolution*, pp. 163–64.

in some regions (76.9 per cent in Kyiv Governorate, 77.6 per cent in Podolia Governorate, 70 per cent in Volhynia Governorate).<sup>9</sup>

## Lenin's Political Strategies for Ukraine. First Phase of the War

Therefore, it is unsurprising that the Bolsheviks' attempts to seize power in Kyiv failed. Power was in the hands of the Ukrainian Central Rada, which became the supreme legislative authority of the UPR and formed the Ukrainian government. The majority of the Rada was held by Social Democrats, who were much less radical than the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks made no secret of their irritation, and to make matters worse, central Russia was hit by a famine that could not be averted otherwise than with grain supplies from Ukraine. They were also counting on Ukrainian natural resources or, more precisely, on what was left of them after the war. After the Bolsheviks took control of the Russian Army Headquarters, which they believed was their fundamental threat, they launched an attack against Ukrainian authorities.

On 26 November/9 December 1917, the Council of People's Commissars proclaimed to the population which, alongside the troops of Generals Alexey Kaledin, Alexander Dutov and Lavr Kornilov, named "the Central Rada of the Ukrainian Republic" as "counterrevolutionary" and "bourgeois", and denounced it as "combating Ukrainian councils, helping Kaledin to bring in troops over the Don, and obstructing Soviet authorities from relocating military needed to defeat Kaledin's rebellion through the territory of the brotherly Ukrainian people".<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the Bolsheviks demanded that the power in Ukraine be transferred into the hands of councils (soviets). This was to be done by convening the All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets and holding new elections to the Central Rada, already blasted with accusations of being "bourgeois". The plan was put forward by Joseph Stalin in an interview that he gave to *Izvestiya VCIK* daily. He argued that only the successful implementation of this plan would allow the people to show their will. If the Bolsheviks' demands were rejected, the Council of People's Commissars would not recognise the authority of the Ukrainian Central Rada as legitimate.

The Central Rada did not take a confrontational stance towards the Bolsheviks. It refused to recognise the Council of People's Commissars as the government of Russia, but that was all. The Bolshevik structures in Kyiv and across Ukraine continued to operate, and, on 3–5 December/16–18 December 1917, a regional congress of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (Bolsheviks) (RSDRP(b)) was held in Kyiv; it was attended by 47 delegates who represented 22 party

<sup>9</sup> Л.Г. Протасов, *Люди Учредительного собрания: портрет в интерьере эпохи* (Москва, 2008), pp. 137, 139.

<sup>10</sup> *Собрание узаконений и распоряжений правительства за 1917–1918 гг.* (Москва, 1942), pp. 45–46.



organisations from seven governorates and party structures of the Southwestern Front. On 1 December/14 December, the delegation of Bolsheviks from Petrograd arrived in Kyiv to attend the congress, including Grigory Zinoviev, Semyon Roshal, and Zinaida (Zlata) Lilina. Local Bolsheviks organised a meeting in the city theatre where, in his speech, Zinoviev sharply criticised the Central Rada.<sup>11</sup> The Rada's leaders seemed unperturbed by the attack, believing that the All-Ukrainian Legislative Assembly would soon convene and that the Rada would gain full power as a result. In addition, the All-Russian Constituent Assembly was to gather to decide how the power in Russia should be arranged.<sup>12</sup> The success of Ukrainians in the elections to the Russian Constituent Assembly led them to believe that the convening of the All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets in no way threatened the position of the Central Rada. In late November, the Rada agreed to hold the convention. It was scheduled to start on 5 December/18 December 1917.

On the eve of the congress, “The Manifesto to the Ukrainian People with Ultimate Demands to the Central Rada” reached Kyiv from Moscow; the document, produced by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, only formally recognised the right of Ukrainians to self-determination and in fact reiterated the allegations from the proclamation of 26 November/9 December. The authors of the Manifesto announced that the rejection of conditions that were unacceptable to Ukrainians would mean war. This is what the Bolsheviks hoped for, as the decision to invade Ukraine had been taken a couple of days before the ultimatum was sent. In his “Notes on the Civil War”, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko discussed the issue in pretty straightforward terms: “The conflict with the Rada seemed absolutely inevitable. In my presence and on orders from Smolny, Comrade Krylenko sent [...] an ultimatum to Kyiv”.<sup>13</sup>

The General Secretariat of the Central Rada rejected the demands, declaring that “it is not possible to recognise the right to self-determination ‘including the right to break away’ and concurrently invalidate the same right by imposing on a sovereign state the organisation of its political system, as the Russian ‘Council of People’s Commissars’ did with the Ukrainian People’s Republic”.<sup>14</sup> The delegates to the All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets held in Kyiv on 5 December expressed their unanimous support to the Central Rada and unequivocally condemned the ultimatum. The Bolsheviks represented a tiny minority in Congress.

<sup>11</sup> *1917 год на Киевщине. Хроника событий* (Киев, 1928), p. 426.

<sup>12</sup> The Central Rada put forward the proposal to convene the All-Ukrainian Constituent Assembly as early as in April 1917, and in September it took vigorous steps to make it a reality. In doing so, it did surrender from taking part in the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, considering its Ukrainian counterpart as a tool to put pressure on the Provisional Government in the event that Ukraine was denied the right to autonomy.

<sup>13</sup> В.А. Антонов-Овсеевко, *Записки о гражданской войне*, vol. 1 (Москва, 1924), p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> *Українська Центральна Рада. Документи і матеріали у 2-х томах*, vol. 1 (Київ, 1996), pp. 498–500.

Nevertheless, Ukrainians tried to seek a compromise. Heorhiy Lapchynsky recalled that on the evening of 5 December/18 December, “on behalf of the right wing of the Social Democrats and Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries, [Mykola] Porsh tried to negotiate with us, but to no avail”.<sup>15</sup> Bolshevik delegates ostentatiously left the Congress, deeming it illegitimate. After a short discussion, they decided to go to Kharkiv the next day. Why there rather than to Katerynoslav or Odesa? After all, Kharkiv was not a safe city, as it was adjacent to the “counterrevolutionary” Don, unlike Odesa and Katerynoslav, where pro-Soviet forces were quite active. It is impossible to provide an answer based on Bolshevik sources. But the explanation seems self-evident.

The first transports of Red Russian troops arrived in Kharkiv on 9/22 December. Initially, their commanders claimed this was just a stopover on their way to the Don. However, on the orders of Rudolf Sivers, on the night of 9/10 December/22/23 December, local Ukrainian troops were deceitfully disarmed. On 11 December/24 December, the commander of the Russian forces, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, arrived in Kharkiv. That is how the city became a bridgehead for Russian troops. Almost at the same time, members of the Ukrainian Front and Soldiers’ Soviets were apprehended in Minsk, Polotsk and Pskov. The Secretary-General for Military Affairs, Symon Petlura, sent a protest telegram to the Soviet commander-in-chief of the Russian army, Nikolai Krylenko, but it had no effect. The Bolsheviks stopped the relocation of those army units to Ukraine, where the Ukrainian Front’s and Soldiers’ Soviets were still active.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, there could be no coincidence between the delegates’ decision and the redeployment of Russian troops to Kharkiv.

Under such circumstances, the All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets was staged in Kharkiv on 11–13 December/24–26 December.<sup>17</sup> The Congress proclaimed the government of soviets in the Ukrainian People’s Republic, elected the Ukrainian Central Executive Committee, comprised of 41 members, and the Soviet Government, i.e. the People’s Secretariat. On this occasion, Bolshevik Vasily Shakhrai remarked scoffingly that none of the names of the People’s Secretariat membership meant anything to anyone in Ukraine. However, the selection was made with the assumption of “choosing Ukrainian names as far as reasonable”.<sup>18</sup> Congratulations to the newly

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<sup>15</sup> Г. Лапчинський, *З перших днів всеукраїнської радянської влади*, р. 63.

<sup>16</sup> *Народна Воля* (10 Dec. 1917).

<sup>17</sup> During the session the Bolshevik decided that, at the Kharkiv Congress, the delegates who had left the meeting in Kyiv would join the group of delegates to the Third Congress of Donbas Soviets and the Kryvyi Rih (Kryvbas) region. The Congress was attended by 206 delegates, elected by 89 soviets out of the 200 operating back then in Ukraine. It was obvious that the congress was illegitimate but this did not stop the organisers.

<sup>18</sup> Volodymyr Zatonsky recalled that “the people’s secretaries recognised themselves as a government but took that with a grain of irony. Well, after all, what kind of government were we if we had no army, and no territory indeed, as even the Kharkiv Council did not recognise us. We had no apparatus and needed to make appointments even if there were no candidates at hand. We faced

formed “government” were immediately conveyed from Petrograd as a token of its recognition as a representative of the “true people’s power of the soviets in Ukraine” and “the legitimate government of the People’s Republic of Ukraine”. The Council of People’s Commissars promised to “the new government of the brotherly republic to give them its total support in the struggle for peace, and to transfer land, factories, enterprises and banks to the working people of Ukraine”.<sup>19</sup> This is how the fiction was built that there were two centres of political power in the UPR (the Ukrainian Central Rada and the Central Executive Committee), with two governments (the General Secretariat and the People’s Secretariat) and that they were engaged in a power struggle. It was not by accident that at the early stages of negotiations with the Quadruple Alliance in Brest-Litovsk in January 1918, Leon Trotsky stated that “Ukraine’s self-determination has manifested itself in the form of a People’s Republic; there are no occupying troops there, no restrictions are imposed on political life, and everywhere there are soviets of workers’, soldiers’ and peasants’ delegates, elected by vote; it is beyond doubt that the process of self-determination of Ukraine within its geographical boundaries and the creation of a state, as a manifestation of the political will of the Ukrainian people, will be completed”.<sup>20</sup> The statement is plain cynicism; it’s just yet another lie meant to ensure that the process initiated with the formation of a “Soviet government” under Russian bayonets “will be completed”. Sadly, this is precisely what happened.

Under the banner of the People’s Secretariat, the Russian military launched an offensive in the direction of Katerinoslav, Poltava and Kyi.<sup>21</sup> Mikhail Muravyov,

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great chaos and staff shortages. For instance, it was in no way possible to separate the functions of the people’s secretary for finance from the duties of the cash clerk. In general, each [commissar] carried all of the commissariat, or, as it was then called, the secretariat’s files, in his pocket. I came when the government had already been formed. The decision was made not to appoint any head of government. So, we operated without a boss [*без голови*], В. Затонський, ‘Уривки з спогадів про Українську революцію’, *Літопис Революції*, no. 4 (1929), p. 159. Another Bolshevik activist, Heorhiy Lapchynsky, in his writings described the Soviet government of Ukraine as a small and uninfluential group which “encountered resistance among party comrades (in Kharkiv and Katerynoslav, for example), sometimes quite resolute one”, *Лапчинський, 3 перших днів Всеукраїнської радянської влади*, p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> *Известия ВЦИК* (26 Dec. 1917).

<sup>20</sup> *Газета Временного Рабочего и Крестьянского Правительства*, no. 2 (4 Jan. 1918).

<sup>21</sup> For some time Antonov-Ovseenko postponed his order to invade Kyiv. For a simple reason: the “Ukrainian” government had no Ukrainian troops. “All in all, we had few Ukrainian units. There was one detachment of Red Cossacks, formed in late December to support the power of the Soviet government in Ukraine. There were named “Red Cossacks” to distinguish them from “the Free Cossacks” of the Central Rada” – recalled Volodymyr Zatonsky (Затонський, *Уривки з спогадів про Українську революцію*, p. 115). Another member of the Bolshevik government, Heorhiy Lapchynsky, noted that his government colleague, Vasily Shakhrai would complain: “What kind of ‘Ukrainian Minister of Military Affairs’ am I if I have to disarm all the Ukrainised troops in Kharkiv [subdivisions of the former Russian army, composed mostly of Ukrainians and incorporated into the UPR army – VV] because they don’t want to join me to defend the Soviet government. Our only support comes from the troops who arrived here

a socialist revolutionary who received from Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko the mission to occupy Ukraine, called on the citizens of the UPR to surrender to the Soviet government and made no secret of the fact that “this rule is brought by us from the Far North, with our bayonets, and wherever it is established, we will support it with the force of our bayonets and the moral authority of the socialist army”.<sup>22</sup>

That Ukraine’s ‘Soviet government’ was a puppet regime is also evidenced by the fact that Lenin appointed Sergo Ordzhonikidze, his close associate, as extraordinary and plenipotentiary commissioner for the Ukraine region. It was he and Antonov-Ovseenko rather than any local “government” whom the head of Moscow’s Council of People’s Commissars gave the task to seize and exploit Ukraine. Lenin’s telegrams to Ordzhonikidze and Antonov, in which he urged that the harshest revolutionary measures be used to send grain supplies to Russia; otherwise, Petrograd would be doomed to die, are a well-known fact. As James Mace argued, obtaining foodstuffs for Russia was the primary motivation behind the Bolshevik aggression against Ukraine; in any case, the Bolsheviks took no steps to resolve the national question in Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> The issue is more complex, though. The establishment of the People’s Secretariat in Kharkiv as a separate Soviet government suggests that for the Bolsheviks, Ukraine was not merely some ordinary part of Russia, comparable to, let’s say, the Tambov Governorate, where no separate government was envisaged, and power was simply seized. It was Marxist orthodoxy which prevented the Bolsheviks from carrying out a simple annexation. The right of peoples to self-determination pushed them to present their armed aggression as an intra-Ukrainian issue, at least to keep up appearances. It also goes without saying that in early 1918, Russian Bolsheviks were not sufficiently ready for the offensive, and the troops they could possibly rely on had not yet been built into a force that was able to take effective control over Ukrainian territory. Therefore, because their local counterparts were too weak to ensure such an outcome, the Bolsheviks sought to find among Ukrainians any forces that they could use in their own interest. They chose to recruit people from the left wing of Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries. Ukrainian delegates who came up to Petrograd for the opening of the Constituent Assembly were truly pampered. Together with

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from Russia under Antonov’s command and who consider everything Ukrainian to be hostile and counterrevolutionary”. Eventually, he managed to draft some part of a Ukrainised regiment to form a small detachment of “Red Cossacks” out of it. The problem was solved. The “Ukrainian” army had emerged. It was only then, in late December 1917, that Antonov-Ovseenko gave the order to attack; Г. Лапчинський, ‘Перший період Радянської влади на Україні’, *Літопис Революції*, no. 1 (1928), p. 171.

<sup>22</sup> П. Христюк, *Українська революція. Замітки і матеріали до історії української революції 1917–1920 рр.*, vol. 2 (Відень, 1921), p. 149.

<sup>23</sup> J.E. Mace, *Communism and the Dilemmas of National Liberation. National Communism in Soviet Ukraine, 1918–1933* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), p. 27.

members of the Bolshevik faction, they were accommodated at Astoria Hotel and amply supplied, as stressed by the author of Russian publications on the Constituent Assembly, Lev Protasov. In his view, the Bolsheviks' conduct could be motivated by the ambiguity of the situation in Ukraine.<sup>24</sup>

While Russians did not have strong military capabilities, Ukrainians turned out to be exceptionally weak. The UPR's leaders chose a long but peaceful path to building their own state, based on national and territorial autonomy. They failed to anticipate the armed conflict and to prepare for it, and had to pay a hefty price for it. On 8 February 1918, the Ukrainian government had to leave Kyiv, which came under heavy artillery fire by Russians. The shelling caused significant civilian casualties and damaged many architectural monuments and historical sites. After taking Kyiv, Muravyov organised a true bloodbath there. Officers and cadets, anyone who looked like a member of the intelligentsia and Ukrainian-speaking individuals, all of them were killed. According to very incomplete statistics established by the investigative committee appointed to determine the consequences of the pogrom, between 2,500 and 5,000 of the city's inhabitants were killed.

Violence perpetrated by Bolshevik troops on the Ukrainian territory – mass killings, looting, drunkenness, rape – were commonplace, as evidenced by the files gathered in the investigation opened against Muravyov. These were the first manifestations of “the Red Terror”, adopted by the Bolsheviks as their official policy. The terror had a major impact on the sentiment among the population, which, initially, under the influence of the Bolsheviks' agitation, leaned to their side but, appalled by the violence they had experienced, began to show defiance. Ludmila Garcheva, who researched the root causes and the course of the first phase of the Bolshevik-Ukrainian war, believes that anti-Bolshevik popular uprisings started as a response to the violence suffered during just a few weeks of warfare and occupation.<sup>25</sup> A number of testimonials have been preserved in memoir literature and archival sources about the struggle of Free Cossacks detachments against the Bolshevik aggression in late 1917 and early 1918 across Ukraine, in Bakhmach, Vinnytsia, Zolotonosha, Katerynoslav, Konotop, Kremenchuk, Odesa, Rivne and in other localities.

Following the peace treaty signed with the Quadruple Alliance on 9 February 1918, the UPR got substantial military support. Kyiv was recaptured on 14 February under pressure from Ukrainian troops and the German army. After only three weeks of residing in the capital, the People's Secretariat evacuated to Poltava. As Serhii Yefremov wrote: “They fled, they sneaked out, quietly, by night, indeed like a thief in the night – one by one. After they had plundered the city beforehand, had sown

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<sup>24</sup> Л.Г. Протасов, *Всероссийское Учредительное собрание. История рождения и гибели* (Москва, 1997), p. 290.

<sup>25</sup> Л. Гарчева, ‘Збройні сили Центральної Ради у лютому – квітні 1918 року’, *Військо України*, no. 8 (1993), p. 107.

anarchy there and had caused extreme misery and famine”, Kharkiv’s ‘people’s secretaries’ vanished from sight”.<sup>26</sup>

On 3 March 1918, in Brest-Litovsk, Soviet Russia signed the peace treaty with the Quadruple Alliance, recognising the independence of Ukraine and committing to opening negotiations on borders. Parleys began in June and lasted until the autumn of 1918, but ended with no tangible outcomes. This was a clear sign that Russia had not abandoned its expansion plans.

## New Waves of Aggression. Final Soviet Occupation of Ukraine

The Bolsheviks began preparations for the offensive in the summer of 1918. In July, near Moscow, the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine was founded as a regional structure of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), fully controlled by the Kremlin. The Central Committee of the CP(b)U was formally chaired by Yurii Pyatakov, but Stalin had an important share in the management of the Ukrainian party.<sup>27</sup> The Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (RCP(b)), i.e. Russia’s ruling party, had recognised Ukraine’s independence but was covertly creating within its structures an organisation tasked to play the role of a Ukrainian political party. The goal was clearly defined as “a struggle for the revolutionary unification of Ukraine with Russia, based on the principles of proletarian centralism within the borders of the Russian Socialist Republic, to create a world proletarian commune”.<sup>28</sup> It is of significance that when rejecting legal means of struggle, the First Congress of the CP(b)U prohibited its basic party organisations from cooperating with Ukraine’s political parties and chose the path of armed insurgency, of course under the slogan of the “revolutionary reunification of Ukraine with Russia”.<sup>29</sup> In fact, it was not a new political party, but rather an illegal subversive organisation set up to seize power in Ukraine. This suggests that the national question was not even formally included on the agenda of the Congress. It is no less indicative that at the time of the Congress, the party had only 4,364 members, meaning that the number had decreased fivefold over a year. Among its members, Ukrainians accounted for a small fraction only.<sup>30</sup>

One of the first organisational moves made by the Central Committee of the CP(b)U was to establish the Central Military-Revolutionary Committee,

<sup>26</sup> С. Єфремов, *Публіцистика революційної доби (1917–1920 рр.)*. У 2-х т., vol. 1 (Київ, 2013), р. 482.

<sup>27</sup> М. Яворський, *Революція на Україні в її головніших етапах* (Харків, 1923), р. 61.

<sup>28</sup> *Первый съезд Коммунистической партии (большевиков) Украины. 5–12 июля 1918 года. Протоколы* (Київ, 1988), р. 127.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> П.Л. Варгатюк, *На шляху до I з’їзду КП(б)У*, в: *Про минуле – заради майбутнього*, ed. Ю.І. Шаповал (Київ, 1989), р. 29. See also Reshetar Jr., *The Communist Party of the Ukraine*, pp. 175–77.

which on 5 August 1918 issued “Order No. 1” to begin a general armed uprising in Ukraine. However, it was a false start as German troops quickly managed to scatter sparse insurgent forces. The defeat prompted the Bolsheviks to halt operations until November, i.e. the end of the First World War on the Western Front. On 11 November, while the armistice treaty with Germany was signed in Compiègne, in Moscow, the Council of People’s Commissars of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) ordered the Revolutionary Military Council of the republic to be ready with an offensive within ten days. Two days later, on 13 November, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the RSFSR denounced the Brest-Litovsk Treaty and stated that it did not recognise Ukraine as an independent state, and on 17 November, by a joint decision of the Central Committee of the RCP(b) and the Council of People’s Commissars of the RSFSR, a body named the Revolutionary Soldiers’ Council of the Army Group of Kursk Direction was established. The Council had Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, Joseph Stalin and Volodymyr Zatonsky among its members.

This is how the Soviet Commander-in-Chief, Joakim Vaciētis (Jukums Vāciētis), explained to the Southern Front commander the reasons for building a new group of troops and its missions: “The political situation calls for a vigorous offensive to be launched against Ukraine in the Kharkiv direction, over the next few days. To this end, troops under the command of Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko have been formed south of Kursk. Please remember that our advance in Ukraine depends fully on how effectively frontline troops under your command will perform”.<sup>31</sup> It should be noted here that Ukraine posed no threat to Russia. This is clear from Vaciētis’s report dated 8 October, addressed to the leaders of Soviet Russia.<sup>32</sup>

The Bolsheviks repeated the gambit that they had used one year earlier: on 27 November, in Kursk, on the Russian side of the border, they formed a sham government – the Provisional Workers’ and Peasants’ Government of Ukraine – and renewed their efforts to seize Ukraine under its cover. The Soviet Provisional Government strikingly resembled its predecessor, i.e. the People’s Secretariat. It was composed of Bolsheviks from both the left and right wings of the party, in conflict with each other. It was not until January 1919 that the strife came to an end when the Central Committee of the RCP(b) appointed Bulgarian Khristian Rakovsky as the head of the Ukrainian government.

Back in 1919, in a publicist pamphlet entitled ‘On the Current Situation in Ukraine’, Ukrainian communists, Vasil Shakhrai (former member of the People’s Secretariat) and Serhii Mazlakh, went on to lambast the nationalist policy of the Bolsheviks,

<sup>31</sup> *Директивы главного командования Красной Армии, 1917–1920. Сборник документов и материалов* (Москва, 1969), p. 196.

<sup>32</sup> Vāciētis purported: “As for Ukraine, it does not constitute any significant element of military operations which are led against us; a threat from Ukraine can emerge insofar as there is a German threat”, *ibid.*, p. 120. Of course, in October 1918, Germans had no plans to attack the Bolsheviks.

asking a straightforward question: “If you are refusing to recognise Ukraine as an independent state, why create the CP(b)U and a separate government? What is this all about?”.<sup>33</sup> The reply came from Lenin himself. It was not intended for public release but for official use only. This is how, in a confidential letter to Vacietis, the Russian leader explained why the new government and other similar structures were established: “The good news is that it prevents Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Latvian or Estonian chauvinists from seeing the incursion of our troops as an act of occupation and creates a friendly mood for marching into the country. If not for this, in the occupied oblasts, our troops would be in an unenviable situation, and the population would not treat them as liberators”.<sup>34</sup> As you can see, in his inner circle, Lenin spoke openly about the occupation of Ukraine by Russian forces.<sup>35</sup>

The Workers’ and Peasants’ Government resided for quite some time in the Russian town of Sudzha (in the Kursk Oblast). Only in January, after Russian troops had taken Kharkiv, did it relocate into the Ukrainian territory. The government had only one task: to create the semblance of existence of a Ukrainian Soviet centre of power. The Kremlin-appointed head of the Council of People’s Commissars of Ukraine, Khristian Rakovsky, made no secret that both his government and the army were a sham. Upon his arrival in Kharkiv, he drafted and distributed the following document for official use:

1. The Provisional Workers’ and Peasants’ Government of Ukraine, established by order of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, shall remain the latter’s body and shall unconditionally implement all its regulations and orders. 2. As a non-independent body of government, The Provisional Workers’ and Peasants’ Government of Ukraine has not created and does not intend to create a separate command. The only reason why the Revolutionary Soldiers’ Council of the Kursk Direction took on the name of ‘the Revolutionary Soldiers’ Council of the Ukrainian Soviet Army’ was to be able to assert the existence of a Soviet army of Ukraine rather than an invasion [of Ukraine] by Russian troops, i.e. to pursue the policy initiated with the establishment of the Provisional Workers’ and Peasants’ Government of Ukraine. This renaming operation was and still is in no way meant to effect any significant change, all the more so considering that the composition of the Revolutionary Soldiers’ Council has not been determined by us

<sup>33</sup> С. Мазлах, В. Шах-Рай, *До хвили (Що діється на Україні і з Україною?)* (Саратов, 1919).

<sup>34</sup> В.И. Ленин, *Военная переписка. 1917–1922 гг.* (Москва, 1987), pp. 102–03.

<sup>35</sup> On 1 January 1919, in Smolensk, the Bolsheviks proclaimed the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, comprised of the Governorates of Grodno, Vitebsk, Smolensk and Minsk. The Provisional Workers’ and Peasants’ Soviet Government was established, with Prime Minister Zmitser Zhilunovich as its head. Jerzy Turonek (Yuri Turonak) points out that the desire to liquidate the BNR was the key driver behind the creation of the BSSR, which lasted only half a month; Ю. Туронак, *Мадэрная гісторыя Беларусі* (Вільня, 2006), p. 73. See also D. Michaluk, ‘Rywalizacja polityczna o Białoruś w latach 1917–1919 między białoruskimi socjalistami a bolszewikami. Powstanie Białoruskiej Socjalistycznej Republiki Radzieckiej’, *Міжнародні Зв’язки України: Наукові Пошуки і Знахідки*, no. 31 (2022), pp. 255–84.



but by the central body of the RSFSR, and it secretly remains the same Revolutionary Soldiers' Council of the Army Group of Kursk Direction, which simply got a different label in Ukraine.<sup>36</sup>

On 1 December 1918, Jukums Vāciētis reported to the Revolutionary Military Council that, for political reasons, “throughout Ukraine, we need to create conditions that will play to the advantage of our military operations. To do so, with the help of political propaganda and the support of small military detachments, we need to redeploy rapidly towards Kharkiv and Donbas, i.e. towards the centres of workers' population and next to Kyiv”.<sup>37</sup> In late 1918, the “Soviet Ukrainian Army” launched its offensive against Ukraine. On 3 January 1919, it took Kharkiv, where the Soviet government was immediately proclaimed, and the next day, the Army Group of Kursk Direction was reorganised to form the Ukrainian Front.

The UPR Prime Minister, Volodymyr Chekhivsky, sent three telegrams to the People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs of Soviet Russia, Georgy Chicherin, querying “What are the Russian troops doing on the UPR's territory?”, and only on 6 January he received a reply by radio that there were no RSFSR military elements in Ukraine and that the Directory was being fought against by the army of the Ukrainian Soviet government – a fully independent authority. At the same time, the UPR representatives got an offer to come to Moscow for parleys. On 9 January, the government in Kyiv agreed to negotiations on condition that the RSFSR ceased hostilities on Ukrainian territory, withdrew its troops, and rejected the demand to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat in Ukraine. Moreover, the telegram rectified the assertion that hostilities were allegedly conducted by the army of the Workers' and Peasants' Government of Ukraine: “In the region of Kharkiv, regular troops of the Soviet Russian army, consisting mostly of Chinese, Latvians, Hungarians and Russians, have been operating”.<sup>38</sup> In response, Moscow rejected the demand for a cessation of hostilities against the Directory.<sup>39</sup> The government of the UPR sent negotiators to Moscow, but discussions on the issue raised by the Ukrainian delegation, i.e. stopping the advance of Soviet troops, were blocked by Russians who proposed instead to sign a treaty on joint counteractions against the expeditionary armies of the Triple Entente, the All-Great Don Army (of the Don Republic) and General Anton Denikin. The delegation came back from Kiev empty-handed. On 16 January, the Directory declared a state of war with Soviet Russia.<sup>40</sup>

After being successful in Moscow and Petrograd, and after taking control over the central part of Russia, the Bolsheviks gained a strategic advantage. Their opponents

<sup>36</sup> *Політична історія України. ХХ століття. У 6 томах*, vol. 2 (Київ, 2003), p. 328.

<sup>37</sup> *Директиви головного командования красной армии*, p. 136.

<sup>38</sup> Центральний Державний Архів Вищих Органів Влади України, ф. 1429, оп. 1, спр. 4, арк. 38–39.

<sup>39</sup> *Робітнича Газета* (14 Jan. 1919).

<sup>40</sup> *Робітнича Газета* (17 Jan. 1919).

were forced away to the periphery. Although their troops were considerably outnumbered by “the Whites”, the latter acted singly, mostly on the defence and did not show much initiative, except in Siberia and the Don, which allowed “the Reds” to manoeuvre their warfare and concentrate them on the most important sections or to advance in locations where enemy forces were less heavy. In late January, Jukums Vācietis reported to Lenin that the area controlled by “the Reds” had doubled in size in the previous four months. The commander-in-chief presented some tempting prospects of further assaults, mentioning Ukraine in particular. Meanwhile, the leadership in the Kremlin was preparing a plan for a revolution that would sweep across the world. Ukraine was to become an important bridgehead in this offensive.

The UPR’s authorities did not have any clearly defined stance towards Bolshevik Russia. In December 1918 and January 1919, the political elites of the UPR were involved in discussions on the political system to be put in place after the Hetmanate had been overthrown. They were hesitant about which option to choose: a democratic or a soviet-based one. If Moscow had sent a clear message that the assault on Ukraine would be stopped if a soviet-based power platform was adopted, it is possible that this option might have prevailed. However, because for the Bolsheviks, any independent Ukraine, even the Soviet Russian one, was unacceptable, no direct reply was given.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, Russian troops advanced further into Ukrainian territories.

In early January 1919, an independent Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USRS) was proclaimed. However, the USRS government, being, as it has already been mentioned, fully dependent on Moscow, did not even try to pursue an independent policy; on the contrary, it obediently followed orders from Russia. Independence, even a fictional one, soon came to an end. In its declaration of 28 January 1919, the government announced:

Because of close historical, economic and cultural ties between Ukraine’s workers and peasants and Soviet Russia, we feel compelled to align the front of the class struggle with the front of the Russian proletariat before everything. We declare the enemies of Soviet Russia to be the enemies of Soviet Ukraine. We have the same political, economic and military duties [...]. All of this has been decisive for the unification of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic with Soviet Russia as a socialist federation whose form will be agreed on by authorised representatives at the All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> In Ukraine, there were many supporters of the Soviet Russian (indeed Soviet Russian [*радянська* in Ukrainian, from the Ukrainian word *пада*], and not Soviet [*советська* in Ukrainian, a term derived from the Russian *совет*]) form of government, which was understood as democratic and based on free elections, rather than on the dictatorship of the proletariat. This form of government had a significant number of proponents among the insurgents, some of whom, after the victory of the uprising against Hetman Skoropadsky, actively embraced the slogan “all power in the hands of the soviets!”.

<sup>42</sup> *Собрание узаконений и распоряжений рабоче-крестьянского правительства УССР за 1919 г.* (Москва, 1943), pp. 46–47.

The Ukrainian SSR carefully duplicated Soviet standards in virtually all spheres of political life, including the constitution.<sup>43</sup>

In late March 1919, the commodity funds of the Soviet republics of Russia and Ukraine were merged and brought under the jurisdiction of a special commission of the Supreme Council of National Economy of the RSFSR. A common economic policy was introduced based on the pillage of Ukraine's economic resources. Of the 37 million tons of coal extracted in the Donbas between January and April 1919, 30 million were sent to Russia.<sup>44</sup> In addition to coal, metals were exported, but above all, food.

From the onset, the Bolsheviks made it clear that they did not intend to share their once-gained power with any of the Ukrainian left-wing parties, which had recognised the Soviet Russian form of government and had done much for its consolidation in Ukraine. Like the previous ones, the Third Congress of the CP(b)U, convened in March 1919, stood against any political arrangements with “petty-bourgeois parties”. Within the political system of the Ukrainian SSR, a special role was to be played by the All-Ukrainian Extraordinary Commission (Cheka), headed by Martyn Latsis (Mārtiņš Lācis), a man sent from Moscow, who came up with the concept of the Red Terror.<sup>45</sup> His actions represent a separate bloody chapter in the history of Ukraine of 1919. “The Red Terror” against “the enemies of the revolution” grew to such unprecedented proportions that the crimes committed in 1918 paled in comparison.

The Red Army also acted as an occupier in Ukraine, terrorising and looting the local population. Soviet archival records include several reports from Ukraine of the following kind: “The 15th Soviet Regiment has turned into a gang, has broken out of the control of its commander, and has been robbing the population [...]. To bring the situation back to normal, the 15th Regiment should be moved to the rear”.<sup>46</sup> The conduct of Bolshevik authorities and their army in Ukraine in 1919 was reprehensible to such an extent that even Soviet historiographers had

<sup>43</sup> Paul Robert Magocsi provides a pertinent summary of the issue: “The Ukrainian Soviet Republic was Ukrainian in the territorial, not the national sense. It was headed by Khristian Rakovsky, a Russophile of Bulgarian-Romanian origin, whose administrative apparatus was dominated for the most part by Russian or Russified Ukrainian Bolsheviks with little or no sympathy for Ukrainian or cultural aspirations”, P.R. Magocsi, *Historia Ukrainy. Ziemia i ludzie*, trans. M. Król and A. Waligóra-Zblewska (Kraków, 2017), p. 673.

<sup>44</sup> Н.И. Супруненко, *Очерки истории гражданской войны и иностранной военной интервенции на Украине (1918–1920)* (Москва, 1966), p. 191.

<sup>45</sup> As the commander of the Cheka of the Eastern Front, in autumn 1918 Latsis announced: “We are not fighting against single individuals. We are exterminating bourgeoisie as a class. In your investigations do not look for evidence to prove that a suspect acted or spoke against Soviet authorities. The first question you should ask him is what class he belongs to, what is his origin, education and profession. These questions should determine his fate. This is the essence of the Red Terror”, *Красный Террор*, no. 1 (1 Nov. 1918).

<sup>46</sup> Центральний Державний Архів Вищих Органів Влади України, ф. 2, оп. 1, спр. 2, арк. 31.

to admit that some mistakes had been made regarding the issue of nationality and the policy towards the peasant population.<sup>47</sup>

Ukraine's reaction to the regime introduced by the Bolsheviks was unequivocally adverse, and the war was declared on it. In the spring of 1919, a spontaneous insurgency movement erupted against the Bolsheviks, led by Ukrainian left-wing parties. In April, those among the Independentists who were in favour of soviets as a form of government established the All-Ukrainian Revolutionary Committee, led by Yuri Mazurenko, Antin Drahomyrets'ky, Andrii Rychytsky and Mykhailo Tkachenko. They urged for a struggle "not against Soviet authority as such" but against the government of Khristian Rakovsky as an "occupying, Moscow-based" power.<sup>48</sup> By April, the insurgent movement had already become massive in scale. The Bolsheviks made special arrangements to outlaw the uprising warlords, but this did not help much. Often, the power of the Bolsheviks went no further than the chief town of a governorate or a district. The troops of Ataman Zeleny reached the suburbs of Kyiv and took control of its north-western districts of Kurenivka and Podil for two days. To fight the insurgents, based on all their armies, the Bolsheviks formed a special Internal Front, strong with 21,000 soldiers. The fighting with the insurgency movement was not much different from regular operations on the frontline. To eliminate Zeleny's units, infantry, cavalry, and artillery were used, and even the Dnieper fleet was engaged several times to shell out rebellious villages. It was Trypillia, the hometown of Ataman Zeleny (his actual name was Danylo Terpylo), which was particularly badly affected.

The Soviet government suffered an exceptionally strong blow from the troops of ataman Nykyfor Hryhoriv. In his proclamation "To the Ukrainian People", issued on 9 May 1919, the Ataman called for the overthrow of the communist rule: "political gamblers have deluded you with their clever tricks and exploited your credulity: instead of land and freedom, they have forcibly imposed on you the commune, the Cheka police and the voracious Moscow commissars".<sup>49</sup> The uprising of Ataman Hryhoriv, which engulfed much of the Southern and Right-Bank Ukraine, put an end to Bolshevik plans for an armed "liberation parade" throughout Europe to provide assistance to the revolution in Hungary.<sup>50</sup> To suppress the uprising,

<sup>47</sup> О. Слущкий, *III з'їзд КП(б)У* (Київ, 1957), p. 80.

<sup>48</sup> А.П. Гриценко, 'Всеукраїнський революційний комітет (Всеукрревком)', in: *Енциклопедія історії України. В 10 т., vol. 1* (Київ, 2003), p. 347.

<sup>49</sup> В. Верстюк, *Махновщина: селянський повстанський рух на Україні (1918–1921)* (Київ, 1992), p. 141.

<sup>50</sup> On 1 May 1919, the Soviet governments of Russia and Ukraine sent a note to Romanian authorities, accusing Romania of oppressing the people of Bukovina. The document was signed by the People's Commissars of Foreign Affairs of the RSFSR, Georgy Chicherin and of the USSR, Khristian Rakovsky. An ultimatum was given to the Romanian government, together with the demand to withdraw Romanian troops from Bukovina within 48 hours. The ultimatum went unanswered. On 6 May 1919, the Provisional Workers' and Peasants' Government of Bessarabia was established in Odesa, with Ivan Krivorukov at its helmet. The government issued a manifesto

the Bolsheviks mobilised some 30,000 troops, which allowed them to disperse insurgent forces but not to liquidate them. On the contrary, the mass insurgency movement, combined with the invasion of the UPR army and the offensive of “the Whites” in the summer of 1919, contributed to the collapse of Soviet rule in Ukraine.

The third conquest of Ukraine was launched in 1920. This time, it was more successful, but the methods changed slightly. To establish Soviet rule in the border areas, puppet “Soviet Ukrainian governments” were put in place,<sup>51</sup> and Russian troops operated under their banner. In the occupied territories, order was set in based on the dictatorship of the proletariat, “war communism” was introduced and terror was in use as the primary instrument to subjugate the society, eradicate any opposition or social groups which did not fit into the Bolshevik world transformation paradigm.

In 1920–21, a million-strong Red Army was stationed in the territory of Ukraine to lay the foundation for Soviet rule. This was an occupational force, as evidenced by the nationalities represented in the party membership, State structures and in the army. According to the 1920 census, among the Red Army soldiers, Russians accounted for 79.5 per cent and Ukrainians for only 5.9 per cent.<sup>52</sup> Russians also predominated in the composition of the CP(b)U, the percentage of Ukrainians in the party's ranks being slightly over 20 per cent, and they staffed the Soviet apparatus of power in Ukraine: in 1920, Communist-Bolsheviks made up 91.1 per cent of the leadership of executive committees in governorates. Lev Trotsky urged

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on the creation of the Bessarabian Soviet Socialist Republic as part of the RSFSR, and on 15 May Red Army troops launched an attack on Bessarabia, forcing the Dniester and marching into the Romanian territory. This marked the beginning of an operation to assist Soviet Hungary, which ultimately ended in failure; В.А. Антонов-Овсеенко, *Записки о гражданской войне*, vol. 4 (Москва, 1933), pp. 47, 280.

<sup>51</sup> In December 1919, when the Bolsheviks entered Ukraine once again, they set up the All-Ukrainian Revolutionary Committee (*Vseukrrevkom*), which for several months played the role of the highest executive and legislative body of government. In the summer, the Galician Revolutionary Committee (*Galrevkom*) was established in Kyiv, proclaimed the Soviet government in the territories of Eastern Galicia, and recognised itself as its supreme body. For the same purpose, the Polish Revolutionary Committee (*Polrevkom*) was formed in 1920 during the Polish-Soviet War. A similar scenario was to be followed during the Soviet aggression against Finland in late 1939. The day after the outbreak of the war, a People's Government was formed in Moscow, headed by communist Otto Kuusinen. On 1 December, the new government proclaimed the Finnish Democratic Republic in the occupied territories, and the following day, on 2 December, the treaty of cooperation and friendship was signed in Moscow between the USSR and the Republic. After the Second World War, successive puppet governments would spring up like mushrooms in territories occupied by the Soviet army.

<sup>52</sup> Л. Гриневич, ‘Динаміка національного складу частин і з'єднань Української військової округи у міжвоєнний період’, *Проблеми Історії України: Факти, Судження, Пошуки*, no. 15 (2006), p. 351.

to subjugate Ukraine and to burn away any dissent with “the branding iron”. His call was snatched up by lower-rank Russian emissaries. One of them, a certain Blachin, sent from Moscow to the Odesa Governorate wrote:

It is enough to teach a lesson once. Just target the blackest localities,<sup>53</sup> and you’re done with the whole district. Further on, you can act unhindered [...] I will do my best to ensure that the 14th army is successful in this operation, and the insurgency in the neighbouring district will be a convenient pretext [...]. There is no need for us to change our policy. Whether it’s about workers or the army, victualling or fighting speculation, in every area the policy for Ukraine should be tight enough to let a stream of nutritious supplies flow to Kharkiv and to Moscow as well.<sup>54</sup>

To Moscow, above all, as it should be added, because back then, Kharkiv was only a transshipment hub. The USSR had never been an independent state, and the question of its independence was disregarded in the 1919 Constitution. The Ukrainian constitution proclaimed the dictatorship of the proletariat, which, under the conditions of the day, meant the rule of the Russian Bolshevik party. Ukrainian scholars regard the USSR only as a quasi-state, remaining under the strict control of Moscow.

The facts discussed above leave no doubt as to the nature of the Ukrainian-Soviet War of 1917–20. Definitely, this conflict cannot be qualified as a civil war. The Russian aggression had a fundamental impact on the course of the revolution in Ukraine. Ukrainian state structures had no time to strike deeper roots, failed to carry out necessary social and economic reforms and complete the political transition. The regime imposed by the Bolsheviks quickly revealed its true nature. Ukraine was seized under the banner of communist slogans. The occupation and efforts to fight it became the key determinants of the history of Ukraine in the twentieth century. As a preacher of the ideas of internationalism, Bolshevism turned out to be an aggressive variant of Russian messianism, imperialism and chauvinism. These did not vanish in post-revolutionary twentieth-century Russia; on the contrary, they have merged into a peculiar conglomerate, together with the ideas of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the struggle against “bourgeois nationalism”, and the manifestations of Western civilisation. In recent decades, this explosive combination has become the official ideology of Russia, which, with its yet another aggression against Ukraine and threats made against the whole world, seeks to prove its power and relevance.

*Translated from Ukrainian into Polish by Maria Harasim-Zelwak and Ola Hnatiuk*  
*Translated into English by Joanna Ruszel*

<sup>53</sup> Localities which were “blacklisted” by the Bolsheviks.

<sup>54</sup> Центральний Державний Архів Громадських Об’єднань, м. Київ, ф. 1, оп. 20, спр. 136, арк. 27.

## Abstract

The paper discusses how the Ukrainian People's Republic confronted the military aggression by Soviet Russia, which began immediately after the Bolsheviks had seized power in Petrograd. While declaratively, the Bolsheviks recognised the right of peoples to self-determination, this did not prevent them from escalating the armed conflict, which, after political ultimatums, quickly transformed into a full-scale war and persisted for several years until the fall of the UPR and the establishment of the Russian occupation regime in Ukraine. The paper intends to present political manoeuvres that the Bolsheviks employed in parallel with hostilities to depict events as a Ukrainian internal class conflict rather than a direct Russian aggression. To this end, and to create the cover for the operations of their army, Russians formed pseudo-Ukrainian Soviet governments in the territories under their control. The Bolsheviks' presence on the Ukrainian territory was marked by the Red Terror, total nationalisation of industry, *prodrazverstka*, i.e. forced confiscation of grain and other produce from peasants, and efforts to introduce collective farming. The paper has been produced based on various Ukrainian and Russian sources, and in reliance on modern historiography, which together help reveal the actual Bolshevik policy towards Ukraine, demystify the existence of a civil war on the Ukrainian territory and classify the conflict as an open Russian aggression with the subsequent occupation of Ukraine and the partitioning of its territory between neighbouring countries. The Ukrainian-Soviet War demonstrated once again the imperialism of the Russian state, whose origins go back to the times of the Golden Horde and which has survived until today. Today's Russia's war against Ukraine, often qualified as a hybrid warfare, in many respects bears resemblance to the events which took place a century ago. While it is evident that history never comes full circle, it is all the same clear that the philosophy of Russian expansion, its xenophobia, the aggressor's behaviour patterns and motives, its attempts at concealing the intentions of invasion with ideological euphemisms, and efforts to restore its world domination, have remained unchanged.

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