

War and Revolution in Ukraine, 1914–1920. 4th URIS Workshop

Veranstalter: Network of Ukrainian Research in Switzerland (URIS), Department of History, University of Basel

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This workshop was initiated by the „Ukrainian Research in Switzerland“ (URIS) program; its objective was to bring together scholars from different countries and backgrounds who work on related topics, to exchange ideas, share work in progress and point the way for new research. The URIS workshop took occasion of the centenary of the withdrawal of the Central Powers from Ukraine and the subsequent overthrow of Hetman Skoropads'kyi in late 1918 in order to reexamine the history of war, occupation, revolution, diplomacy, and state building in Ukraine during World War I, as well as the various upheavals and conflicts to which it gave rise.

The first paper was presented by OLENA BETLIH (Kyiv / Lviv). In her talk, she examined the urban experience of Kyivans during World War I and the subsequent civil war and analyzed the agency of the city inhabitants. Based on the theoretical framework of Henri Lefebvre's *Right to the City* (*Le droit à la ville*), Betlii's objective was to grasp the different practices of appropriation of urban space in said period. There are two essential questions to this approach: „Who had the right to the city?“ and „Who decided the development of the city?“ The collapse of the imperial order in the course of the two Russian revolutions in February and October/November 1917 and the subsequent civil war opened the possibility for different ethnic and social groups in Kyiv to take up agency and to shape the urban space according to their specific needs and agendas. An important factor in this process was the demobilized and uncontrolled forces of the Imperial Russian Army roaming through the streets of Kyiv. The city was heavily contested in the civil war, which led to the formation of civil self-defense groups that wanted to protect their houses

and lives. In short, war-time Kyiv serves as an ideal case study, comprising various questions of decision-making and the agency of ordinary city inhabitants.

In the second paper, FABIAN BAUMANN (Basel) raised the question whether there was a „Generation of 1917“ and if such a categorization is fruitful for the study of Ukrainian nationalism in the early 20th century. The assumption of such a generation is still very present in many studies on the subject but is nevertheless highly contested. Baumann listed some of the short-term and long-term factors as well as the retrospective narratives on which advocates of a generational approach usually base their arguments: the expansion of higher education in Ukraine around the turn of the century, the Ukrainian „national education“ in activists' families, the constitutional liberties after 1905, and the mobilizing factor of the war experience and the geopolitical situation after the Bolshevik coup in 1917, to name just a few. Baumann finally came to the conclusion that even though there were undeniable long-term factors, the emergence of a „Generation of 1917“ can only be traced to the years around 1917 (considering World War I or the civil war). Baumann also warned against retrospective narratives that distract from the contingency of history.

In his paper CHRISTOPHER GILLEY (Durham) reexamined the question of responsibility for the pogroms under the rule of Simon Petliura in 1919/1920. There is an ongoing historiographical debate about this issue, which also contains a sensitive political dimension, for Petliura is considered to be a national hero in present-day Ukraine. Any accusation against him is therefore considered to be an offense against the *Ukrainska Narodna Respublika* (UNR) or the Ukrainian national project as a whole. Gilley approached his subject from three different perspectives: Petliura's personal responsibility, the UNR's responsibility as a whole, and the individual responsibility of the local warlords, the so-called *otamany*. He concluded that anti-Semitic worldviews were mainly present on the ground – among local peasants and soldiers who committed pogroms – but there was no anti-semitic policy directly promoted by the government. How-

ever, Gilley emphasized the fact that Petliura – even though he didn't order the violence himself – shared a similar worldview and used similar justifications as the people who committed the pogroms, linking the Jews to „Bolshevism“ and accusing them of disloyalty to the Ukrainian state. The pogroms did certainly not take place on behalf of the UNR's leadership, but one should nevertheless examine the conditions of possibility in which the anti-Semitic violence spread.

TREVOR ERLACHER (Basel / Chapel Hill) provided insight into a case study that he is currently working on. In his paper, Erlacher presented the life and works of Dmytro Dontsov, one of the key figures of the Ukrainian nationalist movement. Dontsov, who started out as a Marxist only to become a fierce nationalist in the course of World War I and the Bolshevik coup, is considered to be one of the main advocates of Ukrainian integral nationalism. In his texts, Dontsov drew extensively on the works of German philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. In general, he considered Germany to be a role model for Ukraine and proposed a German-led *Mitteleuropa* in which Ukraine would play an important role as a fortress of Western civilization against Russian „barbarism“ and Asian „despotism“. Dontsov located Ukraine in the center of an age-old civilizational fight between the East and the West and anticipated a final battle between Russia and the „German world“. The case of Dmytro Dontsov offers an interesting personalized insight into the development of the Ukrainian national movement, illustrating the discursive evolution from a federalist to a separatist approach. Rejecting the ideas of the Ukrainophiles of the 19th century, Dontsov demanded a reorientation of the Ukrainian national movement based on the principles of „war“ and „willpower“.

BORISLAV CHERNEV (Exeter) reconstructed the negotiations of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference in detail and re-evaluated common historiographical notions in Soviet and Russian literature that portray the Ukrainian side as traitors and puppets of the Central Powers. In his talk, Chervnev argued that the Ukrainians had an agency of their own and knew how to play the diplomatic

game. At Brest-Litovsk they pushed their agenda and were considered to be full participants of the conference by their German and Austrian counterparts, not just mere spectators. For example, the Ukrainian delegation made claims for territorial gains at the expense of the Central Powers (Chelm region and East Galicia), playing on the internal troubles that were weakening the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time. The Central Powers – and especially Austria-Hungary – were in desperate need for Ukrainian food deliveries, which gave Kyiv a certain leverage in the negotiations at Brest-Litovsk.

WOLFRAM DORNIK (Graz) presented on a related topic, examining the actual outcome of the Ukrainian food deliveries that were agreed on by the Central Powers and the Ukrainian delegation at Brest-Litovsk. Dornik paid special attention to the city of Graz, where the food supply was especially bad in early 1918 and where the public therefore reacted enthusiastically to the so-called *Brotfrieden* with Kyiv. However, Dornik stressed the fact that the Central Powers failed to establish a fully working supply chain that would transport as much food as possible from Ukraine to the starving people in Germany and Austria (Hungary was less affected by the general food shortage and thus better supplied). The administrative failure of Berlin and Vienna was not the sole reason though, for the Ukrainian side did not fulfill its treaty obligations. There would have been enough grain in Ukraine to feed the Central Powers, but Ukrainian peasants preferred not to sell it to their Western „partners“. Dornik sees three reasons for this behavior: The Ukrainian rural population saw the German and Austro-Hungarian troops as occupying forces and were therefore unwilling to cooperate with them. Secondly, the prices on the black market were considerably higher than the fixed sum that the Central Powers agreed to pay, which led the peasants to sell their grain elsewhere. Last but not least, the Ukrainian central administration in Kyiv did not have the means to execute their power outside the capital. However, it is still unclear how much grain was actually transported from Ukraine to Austria, for no records of exact numbers are recorded. Dornik concluded that the famine

in Austria and Germany, together with the outbreak of the Spanish flu in 1918, served as a catalyst for the collapse of the Habsburg and Hohenzollern empires.

ERIC AUNOBLE (Geneva) presented his current research project in which he analyzes the involvement of the lower classes in the formation of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party in Ukraine between 1918 and 1921. While traditional historiography tells the institutionalization of the Bolshevik movement as a story of leaders, Aunoble challenges this view by examining the role of the „masses“ in this process. In order to do so, he presented a great quantity of archival documents about and by members of the lower classes who participated in the Bolshevik project. In his talk, Aunoble presented several micro-historical case studies of individual Ukrainian Bolsheviks on the ground. His research project aims at producing a social portrait of Ukrainian communists along the categories „Class and Occupation“, „Gender“, and „Nationality“.

HANNA PEREKHODA (Lausanne) outlined the parameters of a research project that is going to be her Master's thesis. In her talk she spoke about the establishment of the short-lived Soviet Republic in the Donbas area (DKSR) in February 1918. The DKSR is still a blind spot in both Western and Post-Soviet historiography and has only recently reappeared on the mental maps of the Donbas people in the context of the current separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine. The establishment of the DKSR in 1918 was accompanied by a controversy within the Bolshevik movement about the question of how to territorialize Communism – a controversy that has also been reflected in historiography. While Soviet literature argued that Lenin rejected the DKSR, present-day Ukrainian literature claims Lenin approved it. Perekhoda thus aims at examining the establishment of the DKSR and the controversy that went along with it more closely.

The last talk was delivered by DMITRI TOLKATSCH (Freiburg), who challenged the portrayal by traditional historiography of the Ukrainian peasants in the revolutionary period as „dark masses“. This popular image of the Ukrainian peasantry – an apolitical group without agency – is lacking

in complexity, according to Tolkatsch. He stressed the fact that historical work on this subject is biased insofar as there are no written sources *by* the peasants themselves but only sources *about* them. This raises the question of how to reconstruct the peasants' experience. Tolkatsch pleaded for a methodological deconstruction of these sources in order to elaborate the inside perspective of the peasants. Landowners complaining about expropriations, for example, indicate the formation of a self-governing peasant community in a certain area. Descriptions by the central administration's bureaucrats in the field are equally useful, as they reflect the reality on the ground. While these reports give the impression of a total chaos in the Ukrainian countryside, from the perspective of the peasants the loss of central authority meant an opportunity for self-organization. In short, Tolkatsch advocated for a closer analysis of the bottom-up state-building (or rather community-building) projects of the Ukrainian peasantry.

Conference Overview:

Olena Betlii (Kyiv / Lviv): The Right to the City: Kyiv Stories of World War I and Revolution

Fabian Baumann (Basel): Was there a „Generation of 1917“? Generational Change and Political Radicalization in the Ukrainian National Movement

Christopher Gilley (Durham): Beat the Jews, Save... Ukraine. Antisemitic Violence and the Ukrainian State-Building Projects during the Civil War

Trevor Erlacher (Basel / Chapel Hill): The *Götterdämmerung* of Ukrainophilism: Dmytro Dontsov, Ukrainian Nationalism and the Entangled Eastern Front, 1914-1918

Borislav Chernev (Exeter): The Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference and Ukraine

Wolfram Dornik (Graz): What Arrived in Graz? Hope and Reality of the Results of Austro-Hungarian Exploitation of Ukraine in 1918

Eric Aunoble (Geneva): Lower Classes' Involvement in the Making of the Communist

(Bolshevik) Party of Ukraine 1918-1921: A Research Project

Hanna Perekhoda (Lausanne): The Bolsheviks in Eastern Ukraine and Their Competing State Projects (1917-1918): On the Emergence of the Donets-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic

Dmitri Tolkatsch (Freiburg): Reconsidering the „Dark Masses“ of the Ukrainian Peasantry

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