The Chaotic Struggle for Ukrainian Territory in the Early 19th Century

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Introduction

World War I marked a vital turning point for many European powers, most notably France, England, Germany, and Russia. Historians study the impact of the Great War on these countries more than the impact on the smaller, surrounding territories. Yet, the timeline and power structures in Ukraine took more powerful turns than these nations. Ukrainian fighters split between Austria-Hungary, for the Central Powers, and the Imperial Russian Army, part of the Triple Entente. As Russia collapsed, the battles turned away from the Great War and moved internal, as Ukraine fought for independence while militaries in Russia conducted a civil war.

Mykhailo Hrushevsky first announced an attempt to create an independent state of the Ukrainian People's Republic [1]. Years of political instability followed the declaration, with constant fighting between militaries in Eastern Europe, including parts of Poland, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. Various groups declared power in the land, but none lasted until 1922 when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) declared Ukraine one of their states. The conflict devasted the land now considered Ukraine, leaving many dead and then falling into famine after the conflict.

The early 20th Century marked a pivotal time in Ukraine's history, characterized by a struggle for self-determination through revolutionary upheaval, armed conflicts, and competing political factions amidst the backdrop of World War I and the Russian Revolution. From 1914 to 1922, Ukraine struggled to assert its autonomy amid the chaos of war because of the shifts between political factions, including Bolsheviks, nationalists, and foreign powers.

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[1] Olena Palko and Constantin Ardeleanu, *Making Ukraine* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 11.

Ukraine Before World War I

The Great War started in July of 1914, and prior to the start, European nations did not

consider Ukraine an independent political entity or state. The Russian empire controlled the

territory that now makes up modern Ukraine, with a portion of the western land controlled by the

Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Congress of Vienna of 1815 created the border between the two

Empires. Ukrainian Nationalism rose in the late 19th century, and in 1914, it matured enough that

it could significantly influence the future of the region. Figure 1 shows the borders in Eastern

Europe, include the borders of modern-day Ukraine and a shaded region of the Ukrainian

speaking territories within Austria-Hungary. Larger parts of the western area of the Russian

Empire also spoke the language, but the figure does not shade them.

Figure 1: Majority Ukrainian-Speaking Provinces in the Russian Empire, June 1, 1914 [2].

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[2] George Liber, *Total Wars and the Making of Modern Ukraine, 1914-1954* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), XXVII.

Rise of Ukrainian Nationalism

Russia and Austria largely ignored Ukraine, a rural area, in the 19th century. The Industrial Revolution brought urbanization and modernization to the area, which, along with romanticism, inspired a Ukrainian Nationalist movement "committed to national rebirth" [3], led by intellectuals Taras Shevchenko and Mykhailo Drahomanov. Ukrainian Nationalism is the promotion of Ukrainian history, culture, and ethnicity of Ukraine while pushing for its distinction as independent. The movement mobilized many people, but still did not reach a majority of people in the Ukrainian land. Mykhailo Hrushevsky took the movement further, separating the Ukrainian identity from the Russian and the Polish. He famously wrote *Ukraine's Struggle for Self-Government* in 1918 as part of his endeavor to unite Ukrainians:

> The study of ethnography, and dialects, the research into the life of the people, the renaissance of the Ukrainian language and literature, such as we see at the end of the eighteenth century and especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, brought together the intellectual classes. This movement removed the lack of sympathy between nobles and people, which had been one of the causes of the political weakness of the Ukrainian upper classes, in addition to the national decadence and the Russianization during the eighteenth century [4].

Hrushevsky saw Ukrainian Nationalism as a class issue, where bringing together typically divided classes can bring back Ukrainian culture and create a political entity.

Russia responded to the movement by restricting Ukrainian language use, a vital part of growing their culture [5]. They stopped enforcing the discriminatory law after the unrest from the Russian Revolution of 1905. Later, in March 1914, thousands of Ukrainians demonstrated in

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[3] "Topic 1. Introduction to History of Ukraine and General Information about Ukraine," History of Ukraine, n.d., 24-25.
[4] Michaelo Hrushevsky, "Ukraine's Struggle for Self-Government," (The New York Times, February 17, 1918).
[5] "Introduction to History of Ukraine", 24-25.

Kiev and Kharkov, which expressed support for the movement without it being a "socially integrated mass movement" yet [6]. When the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917, Ukrainian Nationalism took advantage of the vulnerable time and the Central Rada formed, headed by Hrushevskyi. In January 1918, the Central Rada declared Ukraine independent, officially starting their struggle for self-determination [7].

Ukraine During World War I

The war split the people living in Ukraine into two sides: about 3.5 million people fought for the Imperial Russian Army, while about 250,000 people fought for the Austro-Hungarian Army [8]. Historians later estimated that 450,000 men from Ukrainian-speaking areas died in the Russian Army, while around 120,000 from Austria-Hungary [9]. Stuck between opposing factions, Ukrainian villages commonly took crossfire and faced property destruction, as well as casualties, without having much stake in the outcome. Once the Russian Revolution began in 1917, the attention moved away from the Great War. The importance of World War 1 to the Ukrainian people did not lie in the borders created, but the fact that it destroyed Ukrainian land and people despite them not fighting for their own interests. This further developed their lust for independence so that they would not be dragged into war in the future.

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[6] Liber, 34.
[7] Palko and Ardeleanu, 22.
[8] "Introduction to History of Ukraine", 25.
[9] Liber, 43.

The Ukrainian – Soviet War

Prior to detailing the unfolding events between 1917 and 1921 called the Ukrainian War of Independence or the Ukrainian – Soviet War, the groups in power must be defined because each party did not last long, and the timeline of events can be hard to follow:

- Ukrainian Nationalist Powers
    1. Central Rada of the Ukrainian People's Republic: March 1917 – April 1918
    2. The Ukrainian State (The Hetmanate): April 1918 – December 1918
    3. The Directory of the Ukrainian People's Republic: November 1918 – November 1920
- Ukrainian Soviet Powers
    1. Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets: December 1917 – March 1918
    2. Second Ukrainian Soviet government: November 1918 – August 1919
    3. Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic: December 1919 – 1991

These governments have similar names, so when deciphering between each of them, correct naming conventions must be used. Further, the Soviet and Ukrainian Nationalist backed regimes overlap because they often did not recognize each other's rule. In the next sections, these states will be further explored.

1917 – March 1918: Declaring Independence and the Rise of the Central Rada

In February 1917, Russians protested the monarchy in power, creating an uprising in Petrograd which started the Russian Revolution. To take advantage of the inner turmoil in Russia, a small group of Ukrainian Nationalists established the Central Rada on March 7, 1917 in Kiev as part of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR). They became the body attempting to win rights for Ukrainians and claimed authority over a 450,000 square kilometer area [10]. In June 1917, they declared a model of Ukrainian autonomy that followed the 17th Century Cossack

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[10] Liber, 57.

Hetmans, original leaders of the Ukrainian Nationalist movement. In this model, they defined

Ukrainians as peasants and workers, and claimed that they had the right to self-determination,

while affirming their allegiance to the Russian state [11]. In the following months, the Bolsheviks

gained power and demonstrated disapproval of the Central Rada by claiming that the Rada were

outlaws, as noted in Lenin's *Manifesto to the Ukrainian People*: "This ambiguous policy, which

has made it impossible for us to recognize the Rada as a plenipotentiary representative of the

working" [12]. He alleged that the Rada were voicing support for the workers without materially

helping them. Coincidingly, the Ukrainian group made counter moves, including a declaration of

independence from their leader, Mykhailo Hrushevsky. The declaration concluded, "Until that

time, we call upon all citizens of the independent Ukrainian People's Republic to stand in

vigilant defense of the freedom and rights won by our people and to protect their fate with all

their might from all enemies of the peasants' and workers' independent Ukrainian Republic" [13].

As noted previously, Hrushevsky voiced support for peasants and workers and targeted them for

unification. Despite their attempt at uniting the Ukrainian people, the Central Rada could not

gather enough support for military force against the Bolsheviks [14].

March 1918 – November 1918: The Central Powers and the Ukrainian State

As the Bolsheviks gained power in Ukrainian territory while the UPR lacked support, the

Central Powers joined the fight. The Central Powers negotiated an alliance with the UPR in

February 1918, then immediately sent in troops to drive out Bolshevik forces and take back Kyiv

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[11] Liber, 59.

[12] Vladimir Lenin, "Manifesto to the Ukrainian People" (Marxists Internet Archive, 1972).

[13] Volodymyr Vynnychenko, "Ukrainian Declaration of Independence," (Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, 2015).

[14] Liber, 67.

in March [15]. Soon after, the Bolsheviks signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Central

Powers which established two important agreements. Firstly, it ended fighting on the Eastern

Front: "Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey, for the one part, and Russia, for the

other part, declare that the state of war between them has ceased" [16]. Secondly, it established a

border between Russia and Ukraine where Russia recognized the UPR: "Russia obligates herself

to conclude peace at once with the Ukrainian People's Republic and to recognize the treaty of

peace between that State and the Powers of the Quadruple Alliance. The Ukrainian territory will,

without delay, be cleared of Russian troops and the Russian Red Guard" [17]. This opened the

Ukrainian land to forces outside of Russia. In April of 1918, the Germans disbanded the Central

Rada and backed a coup that established the Ukrainian State, also known as the Hetmanate,

which opposed the Bolsheviks and existed until December of 1918 [18]. This government favored

landowners and did not have support from Ukrainian activists, but still established an organized

administration and spread Ukrainian language.

November 1918 – 1919: The Fall of Germany, the Creation of the Directorate, and the Bolsheviks Rise

The defeat of Germany in World War I changed the tides in Ukraine. The Treaty of

Versailles declared an end to World War I, which meant "The German military forces shall be

demobilized and reduced" [19]. Thus, German forces left Ukraine, signifying an end to the

Hetmanate regime, and left an opportunity for a new group to take control. The Directory of the

Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) formed, a new Ukrainian Nationalist organization,

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[15] Liber, 68.

[16] "The Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918" (The Avalon Project), Article I.

[17] "The Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918", Article VI.

[18] Palko and Ardeleanu, 179.

[19] "Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles)", (Census.gov), Part 5.

identifying as Ukrainian socialists with the goal to restabilize the territory. In January of 1919, they "proclaimed the unification of all Ukrainian territories in East Central Europe" [20], hoping to unite Ukrainian land, including the west, after the fall of the Hetmanate. Coincidingly, the Bolsheviks annulled the Brest-Litovsk treaty because they no longer needed to succumb to the Central Powers, and they immediately invaded Ukraine, hoping to retake political control of the area. The Directory began war with the Bolsheviks in December of 1919 [21]. Much stronger than the Directory, the Bolsheviks outlasted the new Ukrainian power, overrunning both Kyiv and Kharkiv and sweeping away the Directory by February. 1919 proved the most chaotic year of the war, with nine different armies competing for control over the Ukrainian territories [22]. Ukrainian Nationalists lost authority and anarchists began to rise, but in the end, the Bolsheviks proved to be the outlasting force.

1920 – November 1921: The Final Battles

The Ukrainian militaries now had an uphill battle to fight and put in last efforts to gain power in the region. In early 1920, the UNR unsuccessfully attempted an underground operation called the First Winter Campaign [23]. In a more overt action, the UNR allianced with Poland, a former adversary, in the Treaty of Warsaw of 1920, who recognized the independence of Ukraine after Poland received a portion of land in Western Ukraine [24]. The alliance proved initially successful, reaching Kyiv by May 1920, but the Bolsheviks eventually defeated them. Poland signed the Treaty of Riga in 1921, ceasing relationships with the UNR and recognizing

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[20] Liber, 69.

[21] Stephen Velychenko, *State Building in Revolutionary Ukraine*, (University of Toronto Press, 2011), 120.

[22] Liber, 70.

[23] Wolfram Dornik, Gus Fagan, H. V. Kas︠ianov, and Peter Lieb, *The Emergence of Ukraine* (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2015), 121.

[24] "Warsaw, Treaty of", (Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine).

the Soviet government in Kyiv, ending the war between Russia and Poland. This also declared official borders between Poland, Russia, and Ukraine [25], with Russia benefitting the most in the land redistribution.

The Aftermath

In 1921, matters relatively stabilized as Soviet Ukraine and Poland split the territory of modern Ukraine, with Poland getting the smaller, western regions, which can be seen in Figure 2. A few small parts also went to Czechoslovakia and Romania. The Ukrainian government did not have power after the communist party centralized in Moscow and gained full support over the land, and therefore, they followed Moscow's rule. In December 1922, Soviet Ukraine joined the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) after the Bolsheviks officially took control of Russia. The coalition preceded a period of Ukrainization, where the original Ukrainian Nationalist goal of spreading Ukrainian culture, language, and history took place, which gained support from former Ukrainian Nationalist leaders [26]. When Soviet Leader Vladimir Lenin instituted the New Economic Policy, he attempted to increase general production, with a lot of agricultural growth in Ukraine. They depended on Ukrainian land for food, proving its utility [27]. The early 1930s then brought hardship, with a famine crushing the USSR, including those in Ukraine. Despite the famine, war did not arise again as it did in the years during the Russian Civil War.

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[25] "Treaty of Peace Between Poland, Russia, and the Ukraine, Signed at Riga," (Ungarisches Institut Munchen, 1921), Article II.
[26] Dornik, Fagan et al., 320
[27] Dornik, Fagan et al., 344

Figure 2: Eastern Europe map after World War I [28].

Conclusion

With the ongoing war in Ukraine, its history must be studied for modern leaders to understand where the territory and land originated. Though Ukraine has existed for centuries, the years from 1917-1922 proved vital in developing it. In his 2000 book, *Ukraine: A History*, Orest Subtelny best describes the disorder of this period:

> In 1919 total chaos engulfed Ukraine. Indeed, in the modern history of Europe no country experienced such complete anarchy, bitter civil strife, and total collapse of authority as did Ukraine at this time. Six different armies-– those of the Ukrainians, the Bolsheviks, the Whites, the Entente [French], the Poles and the anarchists – operated on its territory. Kyiv changed hands five times in less than a year. Cities and regions were cut off from each other by the numerous fronts. Communications with the outside world broke down almost completely. The starving cities emptied as people moved into the countryside in their search for food [29].

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[28] Ishaan Tharoor and Gene Thorp, "How Ukraine Became Ukraine", (The Washington Post, 2024).

[29] Orest Subtelny, Ukraine: A History (University of Toronto Press, 2000), 359

The war should never be romanticized. When analyzing history, this paper analyzed the war by researching the governments and the leaders in power after the February Revolution: the Ukrainian People's Republic, the Hetmanate, the Directory and the pro-Bolshevik Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Through many political transitions, the Ukrainian backed regimes never lasted more than a few years. Despite the paper focusing on military groups and leaders, the war most vitally impacted the lower-class, and their history should not be overlooked. Some historians, typically aligned with the Soviets, view the Bolshevik victory as liberating Ukraine from militaries in Central Europe, while other historians, typically aligned with the Ukrainians, view it as a failure to assert autonomy over other powers in the region. Either way, the destruction in the land of modern-Ukraine and conflict between opposing states devasted populations between 1917 and 1922, and the bouncing of political factions perpetuated the destruction and war.

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