1917: Ukraine’s First Bid to be Independent

The Red Revolution created space for independence in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and – for a time – in Ukraine

This February marks the 100 year anniversary of an event that

transformed Europe, brought the US into WWI, and nearly led to the destruction of capitalism. While it seems farfetched from the perspective of our western-dominated consumer-capitalist world order, a union between workers and soldiers—February Revolution, in Petrograd (now St. Petersberg)—toppled Russia's Tsar Nicholas II and terrified the US and Europe.

These events also led to a (briefly) independent Ukraine. After it declared independence, Ukraine was embroiled in its first war for sovereignty and self-governance.

Military background

It's impossible to imagine an independent Ukraine or the Russian revolution that made independence possible without WWI. Contemporary discussions of the feasibility of leftist organization or revolution in Europe or the US often overlook the importance of that extraordinarily damaging war to Lenin's success.

And it didn't take *much* war—the workers and soldiers of Petrograd rejected Moscow's authority after a bit more than two years of fighting. Consider by contrast that Germany would not surrender until 1918, and only after pushing Great Britain and France to the very brink of their own capitulation. Germany and Austria-Hungary differed from Russia, of course, in that both of them incorporated democratic mechanisms into their governance—whereas the Russian government was barely changed from that which had resisted Napoleon in 1812.

Critically, too, Russia was not directly attacked by Germany or Austria-Hungary—from the outset, those nations were fighting a war of self-defense, where Russia was the aggressor. Its largely-disenfranchised citizens did not see throwing millions of lives away in the name of "alliance" and land grabs as a good exchange.

Fighting in WWI was bloody, dramatic, industrial. As a country whose industrial base was more thoroughly exploited than others, the blood Russian soldiers shed told more deeply. Brusilov’s Offensive—a battle that lasted from June to September of 1916 that ended in major Russian gains, still entailed millions of killed and wounded on both sides. More than any other battle, Brusilov's offensive was responsible for creating the conditions necessary for an independent Ukraine in both Austria Hungary and Russia.

As Russia's social order frayed, Germany and Austria-Hungary held on along the Western Front, scored important victories against the Romanians and Italians, and slowly fell back along the Eastern Front. While Russia advanced into Austro-Hungarian Galicia (part of modern-day Ukraine), trading heavy casualties for territory, its ctizens grew increasingly disgusted with the war. This disgust took different forms for the Russians, Fins, Estonians, Ukrainians, and Poles fighting for the Russian military.

It also wrecked Austria-Hungary's military and strained their society to the limit. These conditions were perfect for granting constituent populations greater political power and autonomy within Austria-Hungary. So long as groups were working against Russia and Russian interests, they were permitted to go about their business.

So it was that Russia traded battlefield success for social stability. The empire was teetering on the brink of revolution, and when workers and soldiers revolted in Petrograd, the Tsar abdicated his throne. He was replaced by a Soviet-friendly government led by Alexander Kerensky.

This could have been the end of Russia's problems. Seeking to follow up on victories in 1916, however, and eager to propitiate military committments to France and England, Kerensky pushed the Russian military further. Despite making some progress at the beginning of an offensive operation, when

the Germans and Austro-Hungarians counterattacked and the Russians began taking heavy casualties, the offensive halted, then turned into a rout. Rather than unifying his country and quieting social unrest as Kerensky had hoped, the military failure resulted instead in the total collapse of Russian morale.

By June of 1917, moderate socialists declared the “Ukrainian People’s Republic” in Kyiv. In October of 1917, Kerensky's government collapsed, and he was forced to evacuate in front of Bolshevik forces. Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March of 1918, bringing Russia's role in WWI to an official end.

Social Background

Ukraine experienced a wave of nationalist sentiment during the 19th and 20th centuries. Many Ukrainians believe that this understanding of themselves as Ukrainian dates back to their national literary and artistic icon, Taras Shevchenko. Shevchenko wrote in Ukrainian in the mid-19th century about a Ukrainian nation. Publishing in Ukrainian was forbidden in Russia then, as was doing anything that could be construed as advocating for autonomy or independence.

A counter to the “Ukrainians were waiting for a hero to unite them” narrative can be found with Russian historians, who claim that Ukrainian nationalism (like the language) was an invention of the Austro-Hungarians, a 19th-century example of one nation attempting to destabilize another. On its face, it sounds reasonable—Russia has distinct ethnicities, and using them as a lever to undermine Moscow’s authority would be a brilliant plan. It’s also what the Russian empire did with the Kingdom of Serbia, which helped lead to WWI.

There are problems with the Russian reading of history. If

Austria-Hungary invented Ukrainian in the mid-late 19th century, then why did Russia ban Ukrainian in the early 19th century? Why was Taras Schevchenko's poetry, written in Ukrainian, perceived as a powerful tool of subversion to Russian interests? One can't "invent" a language overnight, nor can one compel people to read or speak a language in sufficient numbers to make rebellion, resistance, or alternate identities feasible. The popularity of Shevchenko's poetry and the threat with which it was viewed by the Russians offers powerful testimony against some Russians' claim that Ukraine was a Russian-speaking part of Russia with no sense of itself as having a history or culture separate from Russia.

Furthermore, Austria-Hungary is rarely mentioned in histories as a net exporter of intrigue—the empire's strengths included administration, bureaucracy, and multiculturalism, but its weaknesses included modern force projection and subterfuge. There was no legion of Austro-Hungarian spies flooding into its neighbors to undermine or destroy native sovereignty.

Still, there is some truth to the Russian claims. Austria-Hungary did not have the same laws restricting publication of books in minority-ethnicity languages as did Russia. So the poetry of Taras Shevchenko was free to spread and germinate outside Russia's borders, in a way that it wasn't inside Russian-occupied Ukraine. The free spread of powerful anti-Russian ideas did, then, occur in Austria Hungary—but not because it was part of an Austro-Hungarian plan. Rather, anti-Russian ideas spread because there was a group of people, Ukrainians, with their own distinctive language and culture, and it spread because there was a nearby nation-state that offered Ukrainians freedom of speech, thought, and identity, as well as political opportunity. Austria-Hungary may have given Ukrainians reason to hope for independence, but it did not do so deliberately.

Russia exiled Taras Shevchenko and denied that Ukrainians were

a people apart from Russians, while referring to them separately as “Little Brothers” and banning the publication of any literature in the language most “Little Brothers” spoke. Still, the idea spread among Ukrainians that they were a group apart from Russia. This was true for Austria-Hungary as well. Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and western Ukraine all lay within Austria-Hungary’s borders (to say nothing of Austria and Hungary).

Austria Hungary was great at letting people be themselves, but not as good at getting them to cooperate to defeat their neighbors, which is why that Empire isn't there any more

It is worth pointing out here that an expansion of this idea, self-determination, used so effectively as a tool against the Austro-Hungarians, ultimately resulted in the destruction of the British, French, Belgian, Spanish and Portuguese colonial

empires.

So while the Allies were encouraging western Ukraine (then called Galicia) to understand itself as separate and distinct from Austria-Hungary, the Austro-Hungarians (who had always seen ethnic minorities as entitled to their own languages and cultures so long as they did not interfere with governance, conscription, or the collection of taxes) were permitting Ukrainian identity to germinate and spread in their own territory. Those western Ukrainians, who saw themselves as part of an entirely different nation that, historically, had extended far into Russia, cooperated with Ukrainians living under Russian occupation.

Political Background

At the same time that the Brusilov Offensive was breaking the Russian military's morale, wrecking Austria-Hungary's military capacity to fight, and outraging Russia's industrial population against the Tsar, many populations were preparing to declare themselves independent. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania all date their modern independence to 1917 or 1918.

The Allies – Great Britain, France, and (as of April 1917) the USA–were in a bind. Ostensibly supportive of Russia as a military ally, they were hostile to Russia's absolutist monarchy and what they perceived as its unenlightened social order. Supporting movements that promised ethnicities independent, sovereign nations apart from Russia would be in accordance with their ethical logic, but would also assist Germany, their enemy.

While the Allies were deliberating how to respond to Russia's political situation, Russia was engulfed in flames. Before the Allies could mount an effective campaign to support Russia's Tsar, he abdicated his throne. His successor, Alexander

Kerensky, attempted to work with the Allies by continuing Russia’s participation in WWI on the side of the Allies, and ordered an offensive that was turned back by the Germans, who then overran Ukraine and Belarus.

Aftermath

Ukraine's ambitions for an independent state unraveled swiftly after 1917. The provisional Ukrainian governments in Kyiv and in Lviv were both willing to work with the Germans at first. That changed when they learned that Ukrainian independence was not part of Germany's plans for the region, and Germany began cracking down on Ukrainian politicians and nationalists. If Imperial Russia was unable to contain Ukraine’s ambitions for a State, several German divisions had no chance. Nationalism continued to spread, and while the minor German occupying force was enough to enforce a superficial subjection to German rule, it also bought Ukraine time to organize while the Central Powers fought it out with the Allies. It wasn't enough: after Germany’s defeat in 1918, a republic in the West of Ukraine was defeated by a joint French/US/Polish force. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian republic based in Kyiv was steamrolled by the Red Army.

Ukraine did not become legally independent from the USSR until 1991, and continued its status as a de facto Russian proxy until 2014. It is a strange accident that it should have taken nearly 100 years, but in fighting against Russia’s latest invasion, Ukrainians may have finally achieved that for which many of them had hoped 100 years ago—a real nation of their own.