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The Involvement of the Lower Classes in the Making of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine, 1918–1921: A Research Project

The birth of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine is usually described as the making of a bureaucratic apparatus meant to ensure control over Ukraine from the outside. Thus, historians would tell about the development of the *nomenklatura* élite and of its power.¹ Also focusing on the party élite, others would consider the CP(b)U as a stronghold for opposition to Moscow leadership, be it leftist or national.²

However, one must not forget that the CP(b)U was not only a group of leaders but a mass party, too. In late 1917, although it was by far not the main political force in Ukraine, the RSDLP(b) had 33,000 members in the Ukrainian Governorates. During the German occupation, the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine was formally founded in Moscow in July 1918 and claimed some 4,000 underground activists. The membership grew from 9,000 in October 1918 to 23,000 in March 1919, despite the harsh conditions of the Civil war. By 1920 it had become a 75,000 member-strong state party.³

Who were the Party's rank-and-file members? In early 1919, the Party claimed to "prepare and educate leaders and skilled organizers drawn from the Socialist proletariat and the poorest peasantry for all fields of the Commune's economy".⁴ Some poor peasants involved at that time in collective farming responded by asking for Party membership cards and official stamps in order to "unite with all passion with the CP(b)U".⁵ They considered themselves as fully entitled *communists* as they were already *communards*.

¹ V. Lozyts'kyy: Politbiuro TsK Kompartii Ukraïny 1918–1991. Istoriiia, osoby, stosunky, Kyiv, CDAGO-U, Geneza, 2005; M. Doroshko: Nomenklatura, kerivna verkhivka Radians'koï Ukraïny (1917–1938 rr.), Kyiv, Nika Centr, 2008.

² James Mace: Communism and the Dilemmas of National Liberation. National Communism in Ukraine 1918–1933, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1983. About Pyatakov and leftism, see Andrea Graziosi: G.L. Piatakov (1890–1937). A Mirror of Soviet History. In: *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 16 (1992), 1–2, pp. 102–165; Valerii Soldatenko: Georgii Piatakov. Opponent Lenina, sopernik Stalina, Moskva, ROSSPEN, 2017.

³ I.F. Kuras (ed.): Velykyy Zhovten' i hromadyans'ka viyna na Ukrnayini. Entsyklopedichnyy dovidnyk, Kyiv, Hol. red. URE, 1987, pp. 271–274.

⁴ B. Ivanov: Organizuite partiiu, Kharkov, 3-ia Sovetskaia Tipografia, 1919.

⁵ Minutes of the General Assembly of the Communists-Bolsheviks under the name of Kronstadt, 22.04.1919, quoted in: Éric Aunoble: « Le communisme tout de suite ! ». Le mouvement de communes en Ukraine soviétique 1919–1920, Paris, Les Nuits Rouges, 2008; Komunars'ki revoliutsii 1919 roku v

This momentum towards communism emerging from the poorest layers of rural Ukrainian society in 1919 should be compared to other similar processes, such as workers' radicalism in Donbass and Eastern Ukraine in 1917 or individual emancipatory trajectories among other subaltern groups such as women⁶ or Jews. Another question is the fate of these grassroots activists in the course of the four-year civil strife. The way they participated in the construction of the Party, state and Red Army apparatus⁷ in Ukraine left an imprint on Soviet institutions as well as it changed the course of their lives and their social status. Studying how plebeian activists participated in these processes will allow insight into the stakes of the Civil War, the entanglement of social and national matters, but will also shed light on the making of bureaucracy and the implementation of a new authoritarianism.

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Ukraïni. In: *Revoliutsiia 1917 roku: frantsuz'kyy pohliad – 100 rokiiv tlumachen' i reprezentatsiy*, Kyiv, Nika Centr, 2016.

⁶ Éric Aunoble: *Femmes et communistes. Un engagement dans la guerre civile en Ukraine (1918–1919)*. In: L. Colantonio et al. (eds.): *Genre et utopie avec Michèle Riot-Sarcey*, St Denis, Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2014.

⁷ Éric Aunoble: « Communistes, aux armes! » : les unités à destination spéciale (TchON) au sortir de la guerre civile en Ukraine (1920–1924). In: *Hispania Nova* (2015), 13 / *Amnis* (2015), 14, Special issue « Les guerres civiles : réflexions sur les conflits fratricides à l'époque contemporaine. Europe-Amérique ».