

The Ukrainian Experiment: State-Building in Practices (1917–1922)

Workshop of LaBex-EHNE Paris, the GHI in Paris and the IKK Jena

Between the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1905, social revolt and war seemed to be preconditions for the making of a nation.¹ In Eastern Europe, where the Great War merged into an amalgamation of conflicts from late 1917 onwards, the two ideas which had become the major political claims in the long 19th century – social revolution and nation-building – gained momentum and mobilized the masses. But the Bolshevik revolution seemed to put the triad of revolution–war–nation to an end, since it was aiming not only to break the chains of the imperial system, but also to transgress and overcome the boundaries of national communities, while national movements bedeviled the communist idea as a deadly thread to their cause. The image of an eschatological battle – as epitomized in the Polish-Soviet War of 1919/20 – dominated the Bolshevik and nationalist propaganda of the time.²

It is therefore not surprising that until lately, historiography tended to structure the total re-organization of Central and Eastern Europe during and after the First World War along the front lines which seemed to separate national and social revolutionaries, treating their respective goals as irreconcilable. Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron were amongst the first to question this dichotomy when they stated over a decade ago: “It is quite valid to focus, on the one hand, on the contingent and conflictual aspects of Soviet state formation (especially, but not solely, in relation to the Ukrainian, Belorussian, and other peripheral lands) and, on the other, on the means whereby the newly independent states of Eastern Europe entrenched and consolidated power. It is equally valid to question the extent to which historians should distinguish between state-building processes in the ‘nationalizing’ states of Eastern Europe and the ‘revolutionizing’ Soviet state”.³ Recently, other historians have followed this line of argumentation. Their works pay tribute to the fact that in reality, in their struggle for predominance, the national and social revolutions of 1917–1922 often were not only inter-related, but mixed with each other, producing short-lived hybrid alliances which in the hindsight avoid clear classification according to national or social agendas.⁴ This ambiguity is owed to the obvious fact that throughout history, state-building in theory always differed from state-building in practices.

¹ Ute Planert and Ewald Frie, ‘Revolution, Krieg, Nation. Ein universelles Muster der Staatsbildung in der Moderne?’, in Ewald Frie and Ute Planert (eds.), *Revolution, Krieg und die Geburt von Staat und Nation. Staatsbildung in Europa und den Amerikas 1770–1930* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), pp. 1–19; Dieter Langewiesche, ‘Dreiklang Revolution, Krieg und Nation? Annäherungen’, in *ibid.*, pp. 257–265.

² Jochen Böhrer, ‘Generals and Warlords, Revolutionaries and Nation State Builders. The First World War and its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe’, in Jochen Böhrer, Włodzimierz Borodziej, and Joachim von Puttkamer (eds.), *Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe's First World War. Eastern Europe's First World War* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2014), pp. 51–66.

³ Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell, ‘Population Displacement, State-Building, and Social Identity in the Lands of the Former Russian Empire, 1917–23’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 4 (2003), pp. 51–100, here: p. 71.

⁴ Stephen Velychenko: *A Comparative Study of Governments and Bureaucrats, 1917–1922* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); *idem, Painting Imperialism and Nationalism Red: The Ukrainian Marxist Critique of Russian Communist Rule in Ukraine, 1918–1925* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2015); Malte Rolf, ‘Die Revolution von 1905 und der Wandel der Nationsbilder im Russischen Reich’, in Frie and Planert (above, n. 3), pp. 193–210; Jörg Baberowski, ‘Gewalt als Machttechnik. Revolution und Staatswerdung an der asiatischen Peripherie der Sowjetunion’, in *ibid.*, 211–246.

The Ukrainian experiment between 1917 and 1922 is a paramount example of of state-building in practices under the conditions of war and civil war. It produced a variety of ephemeral state structures: an ‘All-Ukrainian’ Central Council (*Rada*), a People’s Republic, a People’s Republic of Soviets, a Ukrainian Puppet State (*Hetmanate*) at the mercy of the Central Powers, and a Ukrainian government-in-exile in Paris. In the end, Warsaw and Moscow bluntly divided Ukraine between them, incorporating the western part (the former Austrian province of Galicia) into the Polish Second Republic and the eastern part into Bolshevik Russia.⁵

Nevertheless, as Serhy Yekelchuk has aptly puts it, “Ukrainian statehood mattered. For the first time in modern history, eastern Ukrainians had a territorial entity with borders closely corresponding to the ethnic boundaries of Ukrainian settlement. A part of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian republic nonetheless provided a symbolic national homeland for generations of Soviet Ukrainians”.⁶ Thus, the ambiguity of the nationalizing and the sovietizing state prevailed even after the consolidation of postwar Central and Eastern Europe.

Taking Ukraine as a case study, the workshop firstly questions the traditional view of state building in the wake of the Great War as pursued by either nationalist or socialist zealots. It rather sheds light on the grey zone of negotiation, cooperation, and interdependence of these two major movements of the time. By doing so, it focuses less on political or military leaders and more on the bureaucratic elites which were charged to put the theory of state building into practice. It addresses secondly the civil wars that simultaneously waged in Central Europe and in post-imperial Russia as the scenery of state building in the region, and explores whether in the Ukrainian case, paramilitary violence of the White and the Red Army against civilians – most and foremost Jews – was a common constitutive feature of the various efforts of state building.

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⁵ Serhy Yekelchuk, *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 67–84; Mark von Hagen, ‘The emergence of Kyiv as Capital of Revolutionary Ukraine, March-July 1917, with a Focus on the War and Soldiers’, in Guido Hausmann, Angela Rustemeyer, and Andreas Kappeler (eds.), *Imperienvergleich. Beispiele und Ansätze aus osteuropäischer Perspektive* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 377–402; Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917–1920* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999); Abraham Revutsky (ed.), *Wrenching Times in Ukraine: Memoir of a Jewish Minister* (St. John’s, Newfoundland, Canada: Yksuver Publ., 1998); Wolfram Dornik and Peter Lieb, ‘Misconceived *Realpolitik* in a Failing State. The Political and Economical Fiasco of the Central Powers in the Ukraine, 1918’, *First World War Studies*, 4/1 (2013), 111–24; Stephen Velychenko, *State Building in Revolutionary Ukraine: A Comparative Study of Governments and Bureaucrats, 1917–1922* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

⁶ Yekelchuk, *Ukraine* (above, n. 5), p. 85.

11.12.17 (18:00-21:00) Keynote

18:00-18:45 Mikhail Minakov (Frankfurt on the Oder/Kiev):

Keynote 'Modernizing Ukraine: Revolutions and Distopias in the 20th Century'

Revolution is the event of launching new beginnings in the public sphere, and thus modernity is being constructed through revolution. In the 20th century, Ukraine has gone through a series of revolutions: in 1917/22, 1932/39, 1945/49, 1953/56, 1989/91; however instead leading to modernization, they had – after shortlived progresses – the reverse effect. In my lecture I will review the logic of socio-political experimentation in 20th century Ukraine and the revolutionary practices in Eastern Europe.

18:45-19:30 Discussion

19:30-21:00 Reception

12.12.17 (09:30-18:00) Workshop 'The Ukrainian Experiment: State-Building in Practice (1917-22)'

09:30–10:00 Welcome / Introduction (Jochen Böhler, Jena/Paris, François Xavier Nerard, Paris)

10:00–11:00 Panel 1: The Look 'from Above' and 'from Below' (Chair: Mikhail Minakov, Frankfurt on the Oder/Kiev)

- Iryna Vushko (New York): Ukrainian Nationalism and State Building
- Dimitri Tolkatsch (Freiburg): The Ukrainian Peasants and State Building
- Discussion

11:00–11:30 Coffee/tea break

11:30–12:30 Panel 2: 'The Left' (Chair: François Xavier Nerard, Paris)

- Serhiy Hirik (Kiev): The Borotbists and Ukrainian State Building
- Eric Aunoble (Geneva): Constructing a Revolutionary State. The Example of Soviet Ukraine in Early 1919
- Discussion

12:30–14:00 Lunch break

14:00–15:00 Panel 3: Violence (Chair: Jochen Böhler, Jena/Paris)

- Stephen Velychenko (Toronto): "You Can Get a Lot Further with a Kind Word and a Gun than with just a Kind Word." Violence, Propaganda, and State-Building in Revolutionary Ukraine
- Thomas Chopard (London): Anti-Jewish Violence in the State-Building of the Directory (Ideology and Practices)
- Discussion

15:00–16:00 Panel 4: Failed Concepts (Chair: Corine Defrance, Paris)

- Jakob Mischke (Vienna): Scientific state-building: "Stanislav Dnistrijanskyj's concepts for an Ukrainian state in Eastern Galicia
- Immo Rebitschek (Gießen): Pavel Skoropadskyj's Failed Efforts of Ukrainian State Building
- Discussion

16:30-17:00 Coffee/tea break

17:00-18:00 General Plenary Discussion

18:00 End of Workshop