

Ukrainian National Communism in International Context

Olena Palko

IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings, Vol. XXX ©
2011 by the author

Readers may redistribute this article to other individuals for noncommercial use, provided that the text and this note remain intact. This article may not be reprinted or redistributed for commercial use without prior written permission from the author. If you have any questions about permissions, please contact the IWM.



Abstract: *In this paper I analyze national communist ideology in Ukraine during the early 1920s. Ukrainian national communism is argued to be one of the earliest attempts in European intellectual history to adapt Marxist theory to local conditions and to make the national state an area for socialist revolution. The main argument of this paper is that Ukrainian national communism influenced from below the implementation of Soviet policy in the early 1920s, and especially after 1923. My analysis is divided in three sections, in which I discuss, respectively, the historical context in which Ukrainian communism emerged, its political representation, and the Soviet reaction to it. One of my conclusions is that Ukrainian communism was not a deviation from Marxism-Leninism, but an original quest for an appropriate local model for implementing Marxism. From this point of view, Ukrainian national communism at the beginning of 1920s should be seen as another case of the worldwide perception and development of Marxism rather than merely a part of the ideological history of the USSR. I also argue that after Ukraine had become a part of the USSR, it was the advocates of Ukrainian national communism who implemented Bolshevik policy in Ukraine until the early 1930s and contributed to its popularity and effectiveness.*

Introduction

National communism is a variant of Marxist theory known and encountered worldwide. The notion refers to an approach within world communist movement whose aim was to find a national way to socialism without imitating patterns set in other countries.

According to the conventional view national communism is a variation of Marxism which appeared in communist-ruled Eastern Europe, particularly in Yugoslavia, after the conclusion of World War II. The term was most popular in the period from the end of 1940s to the 1980s; in those days national communism was perceived as an alternative to the Soviet-rule totalitarian model in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

The rationales for the nationally oriented policies of Eastern-European communist parties can be traced both to the rules provided by the Second International (1889–1916) and partly to the necessity of coping with nationalist movements existing before World War One. At that time Russian communists were the first to create their own specific approach to communism as something that could be achieved in one country. After the October Revolution of 1917 the national communist experiment on an immense scale began in the

former Russian Empire. At the same time, Ukraine introduced its own approach to national communism. My argument will be that Ukrainian national communism, in turn, contributed to the formation of the Soviet model.

This paper analyses national communist theory in Ukraine during the early 1920s. The significance of Ukrainian national communism is due to the fact that it was one of the earliest attempts in European intellectual history to adapt world Marxist theory to local conditions and to make a nation state the area of socialist revolution. Furthermore, Ukrainian national communism influenced from below the implementation of the Soviet policy in the early 1920s, especially Soviet nationalities policy after 1923.

This paper is divided into three sections in which I discuss, respectively, the historical context in which Ukrainian communism emerged, its political representation, and Soviet reactions to its activities.

The framework of Ukrainian national communism

Ukrainian national communism cannot be perceived as a full-fledged ideology or a rigorously elaborated political theory. It is rather an ideological standpoint or orientation within a powerful socialist movement. It coincided with mainstream socialism in purpose and strategy of political struggle, but not in tactics. The idea of national frames for socialism, national vanguard party and national proletariat as its basis were perhaps its most distinctive features.

What is called Ukrainian national communism can be understood in two different ways. On the one hand, it was a certain political orientation, typical for communist and left-socialist parties in Ukraine before Ukraine became part of the USSR in 1922. Those political parties were already in place after 1918 and competed with the Bolshevik Communist Party for influence within the territory of Ukraine and the representation of its interest in the international arena. To a certain extent such an orientation was shared by the members of the Bolshevik Party, but only in the early (“pluralistic”) years of its activity. On the other hand, national communist orientation was a deviation within the Russian communist party (later, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) without any connection to views held by socialist parties present in Ukraine before 1918. That orientation could be discerned throughout Soviet history. It was quite popular in Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and was a significant political force, which defended Ukrainian independence in 1991.

This paper touches upon the problem of national communism in its “genuinely” Ukrainian, not Bolshevik, variant, i.e. the first of the two meanings described above. My research is limited to the period of 1918-1925, when that orientation was embodied in the programs and activities of several political parties. The year 1925, when Soviet Communist Party seized total control over Ukraine, set an end to Ukrainian national communist parties, to political pluralism, and to Ukraine’s sovereignty.

Ukrainian national communism emerged from the revolutionary process of 1917-1922, which can be considered the most intensive period in the history of Ukraine. After the February Revolution of 1917 in the Russian Empire the national inspirations and political separatist movements gained strength in the borderlands. Ukraine at that time, after being part of a great empire, began to form its own way in state-building through the series of revolutionary movements of different political orientations. The process led via the formation of an independent Ukraine in 1918 to Ukraine's finally becoming part of the USSR in late 1922.

The national revolution in Ukraine in 1917 began with the formation of a national legislative authority – the Ukrainian Central Council (*Tsentral'na Rada*). Almost all its members were of socialist orientation. The most significant voice in that Council belonged to Ukrainian Social-Democratic Working Party (*Ukrainska Sotsial-Demokratychna Robitnycha Partii*, *USDRP*) which was founded in 1905. That party upheld Marxist ideology and represented the rights of the Ukrainian working class and peasantry in the Second International. From its founding the Central Council popularized the idea of federalist union with democratic Russia and defended the autonomous status of the state.

That mainstream idea changed after the October Revolution, when Bolsheviks took power in Russia. The Bolshevik invasion of Kiev in January 1918 caused the proclamation of an independent and sovereign Ukraine. The main confrontation occurred between Bolsheviks, who tried to reinforce their authority over that territory, and Ukrainian national forces still defending their state's independence. Constant political struggle continued in Ukraine till 1921. After the failure of the Ukrainian revolution of 1917-1921 many of its former supporters found cooperation with Bolsheviks the only possible way to defend the existence of a Ukrainian national state. Almost all leaders of Ukrainian Social Democratic Working Party became adherents of the new Bolshevik order and the Russian communist party, but maintained an illusory belief in its internationalist orientation.

Bolshevik policy introduced by Lenin regarding the national question created the illusion of national self-determination. After 1913, Lenin wrote a great deal about national state building and the opportunities which Soviet authority could guarantee for oppressed nations. The main slogan of the Bolsheviks was “free federation of democratic socialist states”. It was in this idea that almost all Ukrainian socialists had put their faith.

At that time there also were attempts to criticize Lenin's position on the national question. One of those attempts was undertaken by a member of the Ukrainian Social-Democratic Party, Lev Yurkevych (1884 – 1917). His opinion of the political events of that time was influenced by older generations of Ukrainian social democrats. Yurkevych mostly lived in emigration and in his numerous writings he disputed with Lenin and his comrades.

In 1915 he published the pamphlet “Jesuit Policy” (*Yesuits'ka polityka*) and in 1917 “Russian Social Democrats and the National Question” (*Rosijski sotsial-demokraty ta natsionalne pytannia*) in which he explained what Lenin's thesis of “national right to self-determination” would imply for Ukraine. Yurkevych considered Russian centralization policy to be very dangerous for Ukrainian state-building. He depicted Russian Marxists as chauvinists in their attitude towards Ukrainian national aspirations.

He claimed that the national policy in Russian variant was just a despotism and enslavement.[1] He also interpreted Lenin's idea of national self-determination as assimilative.[2] Based on those contentions he demanded a democratic federation of the Russian empire in which a separate social-democratic party would represent the interests of the Ukrainian working class.

Lev Yurkevych foresaw the future of Ukraine and other republics in a loose federation ensured by the Bolsheviks. The first years after the October Revolution in Russia were marked by attempts at working out the best way to build a strong centralized government. At the same time the Bolsheviks tried to expand control of a newly formed state-power over the entire territory of the former Russian Empire by means of a one-party system and membership in a newly created international organization – the Third Socialist International, or Comintern, which was to unite all socialist parties under the governance of a single party.

The Communist International formed by force in 1919 became a convenient instrument through which to secure Bolshevik influence over the newly emerged communist parties and movement on former imperial territory. That international organization was to replace the Second International, which failed in 1914. The Second International was primarily accused of representing the reformist way to socialism. That approach was called social democratic and was opposed by the communist approach which prevailed in Bolshevik Russia. The newly formed Communist International was open to all socialist parties representing all nations, which defended the future proletarian revolution. Lenin believed that the new organization of that kind would help spread the Russian revolution across Europe. The early 1920s proved the failure of such beliefs. Before 1921 that organization turned out to be yet another tool of Soviet authority and control. It was of utmost importance that according to the 18th plank of the “ Terms of Admission to the Communist International” [a]ny party seeking affiliation with it must have called itself the Communist Party of the country in question.[3] By that condition the difference between the communist parties and the socialist parties, which had “betrayed the banner of the working class” was finally set. After that time the Russian communist party became the leading force within that International and conducted decision-making process for all its members.

After 1919 Soviet authorities spread their influence over most of Ukraine. Before the communists seized total power in Ukraine, there had been a period of a relative freedom of discussion within newly formed Ukrainian Communist Party of Bolsheviks (KP(b)U). This party, founded in April 1918, was the outpost of the Russian Soviet party and united different workers' organizations throughout Ukraine. Nevertheless, it was the main organ for soft penetration of Ukrainian politics by the Soviet authority. To strengthen the Soviet rule in Ukraine Lenin appointed Mykola Skrypnyk, who had been the head of Ukrainian Soviet government in 1918, as the first leader of that party.

Mykola Skrypnyk (1872 – 1933) was perhaps one of the most ambiguous figures in Ukrainian communist movement. Born in Ukraine, he soon moved to Petrograd, where he became one of the most active leaders of Bolshevik party and Lenin's trustful comrade. In 1918 he was one of the fighters for CP(b)U. In 1919–1920 he took a leading role in the

Secret Police, or *Cheka* (The All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage) and was in charge of suppressing national movements in Ukraine. In 1920, he returned to Ukraine, where he held many significant posts in the Soviet government. Taking into account his career path, it is very hard to believe that in 1920 he became one of the fighters for Ukrainization and for the recognizing the rights of Ukrainian Soviet Republic. Skrypnyk fought ardently against Russian chauvinism implemented by Stalin after 1924. He spoke about economical exploitation of Ukraine and the importance of Ukrainian language and culture. But he always remained a loyal communist. In 1933 he committed suicide after having been discharged and criticized by Stalin.

National communist orientation within the Ukrainian Communist Party of Bolsheviks (CP(b)U)

The CP(b)U at the first years of its activity was quite open to discussion regarding the future socialist order in Ukraine. The first Bolshevik to adopt a nationally oriented communist position after the founding of CP(b)U was Vasyl Shakhrai (1888 – 1919), the Commissar of military affairs in the first Ukrainian Soviet government in 1918. He then emigrated to Russia where he completed a series of articles summarizing his experience of Soviet state building in Ukraine. In the latter half of 1918 Shakhrai wrote a pamphlet “Revolution in Ukraine” (“*Revoliutsiia na Ukraini*”), in which he argued that the national question had to be solved together with the social one. He saw it as just a myth that socialism would automatically solve the former problem. True to his beliefs, in 1918 he resigned from his post in the Soviet government. After that he was forbidden to hold any state posts and worked as a teacher in Ukraine before he was executed in 1919.

Another party member who contributed to the definition of national communism was Sergiy Mazlakh (1878 – 1937). He also was a party leader and held certain important posts in the Ukrainian government. After 1919, however, he, too, was expelled from the party. In 1937 he was arrested and executed under the charge of Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism.

In January 1919 Vasyl Shakhrai and Sergiy Mazlakh, at the time both in the exile in Saratov, published the book *Concerning the Moment: What Is Happening in and to Ukraine*, (“*Do khvyli: Shcho diiet’sia na Ukraini i z Ukrainoiu?*”). That book can be deemed the program document of Ukrainian national communism. That pamphlet depicted the contradiction between Lenin’s claims and policy in national question and also drafted certain ideas regarding appropriate political and economical structure of the new Ukrainian state. The authors spoke about the revolution in Ukraine, which in their opinion should be both national and social, leading to the foundation of a social order that could only be secured in the framework of a national state. They argued against Lenin’s policy and his ambiguity in the national question. Finally, they concluded that the independence of Ukraine did not contradict the principle of international revolution. On the contrary, the division of Ukrainian proletariat on national grounds could only weaken the fight for the socialist cause.

Vasyl Shakhrai and Sergiy Mazlakh suggested that the pro-Russian CP(b)U should be replaced by a self-standing Ukrainian Bolshevik party that would affirm the Ukrainian language, culture and independent statehood. In their opinion there was no political force in place in Ukraine which could achieve those goals. Analyzing the political situation in Ukraine, they argued, after Marx, that the bourgeois political parties did not need the independence because capital had no borders. Communist parties –CP(b)U in particular – stood for political consolidation with Russia, whereas national ones did not take into account the interests of the working class. The authors wanted to synthesize all those approaches of different political orientations in one party program defending social interests in independent Ukraine.

Based on solid data analysis, the authors proved Ukraine's economical capacity for Ukrainian independence.[4] They exposed the economical exploitation and the appropriation of all goods by Russia. Ukraine, they believed, had everything which was necessary for its existence and could cooperate with other countries on an equal basis in the economic sphere. This was another reason for the Ukrainian communist party to become a member of Communist International in its own right and only through the latter to cooperate with other self-standing communist parties.

Vasyl Shakhrai and Sergiy Mazlakh strived to show that only totally separate authorities and parties could really benefit from reciprocal cooperation. Their idea, then, was not to diverge from Lenin's party but to cooperate with it for mutual profit. They believed Bolsheviks had to understand that it would be better for international communism if Ukraine became independent.[5] In their essay Vasyl Shakhrai and Sergiy Mazlakh simply wanted to demonstrate all these theses in a manner convincing to Lenin's supporters.

In their appeal to Lenin the authors referred to the Communist Party program of 1919, where the right for national self-determination had been proclaimed. The right to form a separate communist party and to unite in a free federation with the RSFSR and other SSoviet republics was a logical conclusion thereunder. But the reality of Soviet policy implementation proved to be completely different. That is why the main question asked of Lenin in that pamphlet was how that proclamation was to be understood.

Vasyl Shakhrai and Sergiy Mazlakh also pointed to the contradiction between being a member of Russian communist party (and its Ukrainian branch) and defeating the rights of Ukraine. They demanded an answer as to whether it was possible to be a Ukrainian and a Soviet communist at the same time. In late 1919, in his "Letter to Ukrainian workers and peasants after the defeating of Denikin," Lenin indirectly addressed those questions. He wrote that in Ukraine there was still no unified position about the Ukrainian-Russian relationship. For Russian communists it was just a question of time. But Lenin claimed that there could be no contradictions in the question of the socialist future and the proletarian struggle.[6] In such an evasive way Lenin presumed that there could be different ideas of Ukrainian statehood which would be definitely determined only by the workers of Ukraine themselves.

Another national communist orientation within CP(b)U in the early years of its formation was represented by the organizational bureau of the federalist group in CP(b)U. It was formed in summer 1919 by Grygoriy Lapchynskiy and his followers. Grygoriy Lapchynskiy (1887 – 1938) was one of the leaders of the Ukrainian Bolsheviks. In 1917 he was one of the leaders of the first Ukrainian Soviet government. But after 1919 he changed his position to be more nationally orientated and became the leader of the federalist wing in the CP(b)U. He stated that there could not be a single communist party for Ukraine and Russia, as they are two different types of state with different economical and social bases and, as a result, different interests and needs. He proposed that Ukraine should be connected with other Soviet republics only by a loose federation providing for cooperation in the significant spheres of politics and economy.

The federalist idea of a new party was based on the envisaged union of all Ukrainian communist parties with an aim to defend the interest of all of Ukraine. That separate party would belong to the Communist International representing the interests of workers and peasants of Ukraine. Grygoriy Lapchynskiy criticized the Russian communist party for its chauvinistic policy and its desire to conserve their dominant position with a view to annex Ukraine. For those statements Lapchynskiy was expelled from the party. In 1920 he became the member of Ukrainian Communist Party (*UKP*) further defending his ideas. After the dissolution of the UKP his membership in the CP(b)U was reinstated. For ten years he held certain important posts in the Soviet government. In 1935 he moved to Russia, probably to avoid repressions then launched in Ukraine. But despite that he was arrested in 1936 and died in prison in 1938.

National communist orientation within the Ukrainian Communist Party of Bolsheviks (CP(b)U)

The CP(b)U at the first years of its activity was quite open to discussion regarding the future socialist order in Ukraine. The first Bolshevik to adopt a nationally oriented communist position after the founding of CP(b)U was Vasyl Shakhrai (1888 – 1919), the Commissar of military affairs in the first Ukrainian Soviet government in 1918. He then emigrated to Russia where he completed a series of articles summarizing his experience of Soviet state building in Ukraine. In the latter half of 1918 Shakhrai wrote a pamphlet “Revolution in Ukraine” (*“Revoliutsiia na Ukraini”*), in which he argued that the national question had to be solved together with the social one. He saw it as just a myth that socialism would automatically solve the former problem. True to his beliefs, in 1918 he resigned from his post in the Soviet government. After that he was forbidden to hold any state posts and worked as a teacher in Ukraine before he was executed in 1919.

Another party member who contributed to the definition of national communism was Sergiy Mazlakh (1878 – 1937). He also was a party leader and held certain important posts in the Ukrainian government. After 1919, however, he, too, was expelled from the party. In 1937 he was arrested and executed under the charge of Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism.

In January 1919 Vasyl Shakhrai and Sergiy Mazlakh, at the time both in the exile in Saratov, published the book *Concerning the Moment: What Is Happening in and to Ukraine*, (“*Do khvyli: Shcho diiet’sia na Ukraini i z Ukrainoiu?*”). That book can be deemed the program document of Ukrainian national communism. That pamphlet depicted the contradiction between Lenin’s claims and policy in national question and also drafted certain ideas regarding appropriate political and economical structure of the new Ukrainian state. The authors spoke about the revolution in Ukraine, which in their opinion should be both national and social, leading to the foundation of a social order that could only be secured in the framework of a national state. They argued against Lenin’s policy and his ambiguity in the national question. Finally, they concluded that the independence of Ukraine did not contradict the principle of international revolution. On the contrary, the division of Ukrainian proletariat on national grounds could only weaken the fight for the socialist cause.

Vasyl Shakhrai and Sergiy Mazlakh suggested that the pro-Russian CP(b)U should be replaced by a self-standing Ukrainian Bolshevik party that would affirm the Ukrainian language, culture and independent statehood. In their opinion there was no political force in place in Ukraine which could achieve those goals. Analyzing the political situation in Ukraine, they argued, after Marx, that the bourgeois political parties did not need the independence because capital had no borders. Communist parties – CP(b)U in particular – stood for political consolidation with Russia, whereas national ones did not take into account the interests of the working class. The authors wanted to synthesize all those approaches of different political orientations in one party program defending social interests in independent Ukraine.

Based on solid data analysis, the authors proved Ukraine’s economical capacity for Ukrainian independence.[4] They exposed the economical exploitation and the appropriation of all goods by Russia. Ukraine, they believed, had everything which was necessary for its existence and could cooperate with other countries on an equal basis in the economic sphere. This was another reason for the Ukrainian communist party to become a member of Communist International in its own right and only through the latter to cooperate with other self-standing communist parties.

Vasyl Shakhrai and Sergiy Mazlakh strived to show that only totally separate authorities and parties could really benefit from reciprocal cooperation. Their idea, then, was not to diverge from Lenin’s party but to cooperate with it for mutual profit. They believed Bolsheviks had to understand that it would be better for international communism if Ukraine became independent.[5] In their essay Vasyl Shakhrai and Sergiy Mazlakh simply wanted to demonstrate all these theses in a manner convincing to Lenin’s supporters.

In their appeal to Lenin the authors referred to the Communist Party program of 1919, where the right for national self-determination had been proclaimed. The right to form a separate communist party and to unite in a free federation with the RSFSR and other SSoviet republics was a logical conclusion thereunder. But the reality of Soviet policy implementation proved to be completely different. That is why the main question asked of Lenin in that pamphlet was how that proclamation was to be understood.

Vasyl Shakhrai and Sergiy Mazlakh also pointed to the contradiction between being a member of Russian communist party (and its Ukrainian branch) and defeating the rights of Ukraine. They demanded an answer as to whether it was possible to be a Ukrainian and a Soviet communist at the same time. In late 1919, in his “Letter to Ukrainian workers and peasants after the defeating of Denikin,” Lenin indirectly addressed those questions. He wrote that in Ukraine there was still no unified position about the Ukrainian-Russian relationship. For Russian communists it was just a question of time. But Lenin claimed that there could be no contradictions in the question of the socialist future and the proletarian struggle.[6] In such an evasive way Lenin presumed that there could be different ideas of Ukrainian statehood which would be definitely determined only by the workers of Ukraine themselves.

Another national communist orientation within CP(b)U in the early years of its formation was represented by the organizational bureau of the federalist group in CP(b)U. It was formed in summer 1919 by Grygoriy Lapchynskiy and his followers. Grygoriy Lapchynskiy (1887 – 1938) was one of the leaders of the Ukrainian Bolsheviks. In 1917 he was one of the leaders of the first Ukrainian Soviet government. But after 1919 he changed his position to be more nationally orientated and became the leader of the federalist wing in the CP(b)U. He stated that there could not be a single communist party for Ukraine and Russia, as they are two different types of state with different economical and social bases and, as a result, different interests and needs. He proposed that Ukraine should be connected with other Soviet republics only by a loose federation providing for cooperation in the significant spheres of politics and economy.

The federalist idea of a new party was based on the envisaged union of all Ukrainian communist parties with an aim to defend the interest of all of Ukraine. That separate party would belong to the Communist International representing the interests of workers and peasants of Ukraine. Grygoriy Lapchynskiy criticized the Russian communist party for its chauvinistic policy and its desire to conserve their dominant position with a view to annex Ukraine. For those statements Lapchynskiy was expelled from the party. In 1920 he became the member of Ukrainian Communist Party (*UKP*) further defending his ideas. After the dissolution of the UKP his membership in the CP(b)U was reinstated. For ten years he held certain important posts in the Soviet government. In 1935 he moved to Russia, probably to avoid repressions then launched in Ukraine. But despite that he was arrested in 1936 and died in prison in 1938.

Parties of national communism in Ukraine

Until the beginning of 1920s Russian communists did not elaborate any common platform or single view on the role of Soviet parties in the borderlands and greeted the political pluralism then in place. Therefore, after 1918, a range of political parties with national communist orientation came into existence in Ukraine. The members of those parties believed in the opportunity to build a socialist state of their own and to become an equal party in the international fight for world communism. The followers of that ideology

or political program were representatives of both sides –adherents of the newly organized Soviet party and old nationalists who believed in Lenin’s slogan of national self-determination.

James Mace, one of the most important Western researchers of this phenomenon, distinguishes two periods in the development of Ukrainian national communism: (1) till 1925, the main feature of which was the imaginary political pluralism, and (2) till 1933, when the remains of nationally oriented political representatives were physically or mentally swept away.[7]

In the period of 1919-1925 several communist parties besides the CP(b)U can be counted in Ukraine. The first period of the intellectual development of this doctrine was marked by the great popularity of socialism among newly formed political parties. In his analysis of Ukrainian left movement at the beginning of 20 th century, Ivan Majstrenko, a Ukrainian Diaspora researcher in Ukrainian communism, claims that after the CP(b)U the most powerful and influential party was the Ukrainian Communist Party of *Borot’bysts* (*Ukrains’kacomunistychna partia borot’bystiv, UKP(b)*), founded in 1919.[8] At first, it was the left oriented fraction among Ukrainian socialist-revolutionary party and only after the union with the part of the Ukrainian social-democrats the party renamed themselves Ukrainian Communist Party of *Borot’bysts* (*UKP(b)*). That party was headed by Oleksandr Shumskyi (1890 – 1946) who left a significant trace in Ukrainian politics and culture.

In 1919 the leaders of Ukrainian Communist Party of *Borot’bysts* appealed to the Comintern to admit them as the representatives of Ukrainian communism. Their arguments were that the Bolsheviks did not represent the interest of Ukrainian peasantry and were alien to all Ukrainians. According to the *Borot’bysts* leaders, the main mistake of the Russian CP(b)U was not to take into account the social structure of Ukraine in the 1920s. The majority of Ukrainian society at that time belonged to the peasantry and not the proletariat. Consequently, the Bolshevik politics resonated only in urban areas, while the *UKP(b)* could gain popularity throughout the country. This was the main reason why the Bolshevik policy was perceived as hostile on the major part of Ukrainian territory.

The statute document of this political party, the Memorandum of *UKP(b)*, stated that the main reason for unpopularity and hardships in building socialism was the fact that the process amounted to attempted Russification of Ukraine. The idea was that in Ukraine an antagonism existed between Russian cities and workers and Ukrainian rural areas the peasantry. Therefore, for the fast Sovietization of Ukraine it was vital for the opposition to cease, which in turn meant that the Bolsheviks would be well advised to support Ukrainian culture and language, that is to speak to Ukrainians in their own language. The main idea of the memorandum of the *UKP(b)* was to raise the cultural and educational level of Ukrainians, which would allow them to become equal partners in social building of the state.

The main idea of the party program was that Ukraine was a self-standing social body with its own economic and political organization. That was why no standardization in political implementation could be accepted. Soviet Ukraine had to be replaced by an independent

Ukrainian socialist republic with its own party and army. Ukraine had to form a separate sovereign SoSoviet republic, an independent member of the future federation of Soviet Republics.[9]

The *Borot'bysts* gained popularity among much of the rural population. Lenin appreciated their influence in Ukraine and successfully forced negotiations with the *Borot'bysts* regarding their merger with the CP(b)U in 1920. He thereby not only neutralized a strong rival but he also made its leaders the representatives of the Soviet state. The best example of further activity of national communist leaders within CP(b)U could be Oleksandr Shumskyi, who became a member of the Bolshevik party after 1920.

Even though a loyal communist, Oleksandr Shumskyi represented that faction of the party which opted for distance from the Russian Communist party of Bolsheviks (RCP(b) and cooperation only on the platform of the Third International. Oleksandr Shumskyi held many important posts in Soviet government but his work as a minister of education was most significant. Eventually, Shumskyi came to play perhaps the most important role in the implementation of national policies within the Ukrainian Soviet Republic during the 1920s. His policies, considered part of the mainstream during the early 1920s, were subjected to scrutiny after 1926, when "shumskism" became a common denomination in references to allegedly nationalistic policies and national deviations. Shumskyi denied the accusations, but the year 1926 marked the beginning of his gradual decline that ended up with his death in 1946.

Founded in 1920, the Ukrainian Communist Party (*Ukrains'ka Komunistychna Partia, UKP*) became the most consistent and theoretically grounded group of proponents of Ukrainian national communism. That party united those members of the Ukrainian Communist party of *Borot'bysts* who after its unification with CP(b)U remained true to national communist orientation. Summarizing the history of Ukraine, *UKP* called itself the heir of Ukrainian social-democracy and revolution and on that basis the only genuine and indigene socialist party in Ukraine. The *UKP* aspired to gather all kinds of communist orientation as the central socialist force in Ukraine. That party stood for the national revolution under social slogans and for the conversion of Ukrainian national republic into the sovereign Ukrainian Soviet one. At the beginning of 1920 this party was the most consistent in its critic of the economic exploitation of Soviet Ukraine by the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

All those ideas were represented in an article "From democracy to communism" ("*Vid demokratii do komunizmu*") written by the party leader Andriy Richytskyi (1893 – 1934). He began his reflections with the year 1914 and its impact on international socialist movement. He describes the circumstances for the crisis of international socialism. World War One proved the incapability of the Second Social International to fight with national movements. All that, he stated, caused the split between communism and social democracy. Then the author depicts the strength of Communist International which proved to be the one and only continuator of the Marxist struggle for proletarian revolution. After that Andriy Richytskyi proceed to the place and role of Ukrainian communist parties and their relations with Russian communism.[10]

On that basis he highly valued the attempt of Vasyl Shakhrai and Sergiy Mazlakh in their contribution to depict the difference between Ukraine and Russia and to distinguish main trends in Ukrainian communism. Andriy Richytskyi stated that in Ukraine the conflict between Russian external and Ukrainian internal communism occurred. Based on orthodox Marxism, he believed that communism cannot be forced on by external influence. In his view the only way to solve that contradiction was to absorb those Russian elements and to create a national communist party. The struggle of Russian communist party for influence in Ukraine was harmful not only for the Ukrainian, but also for the world socialist movement. The only possible way so was to create a new independent party which would unite all left-winged elements in Ukraine – Ukrainian Communist Party, which had to gain its equal representation in Comintern.

In 1920 the program of the Ukrainian Communist Party was adopted, in which some of the main ideas of Ukrainian communism were set forth. It was proclaimed that both national and social emancipation was the key question for the party and proletarian revolution could be forced only by a state-organized nation. Such revolution, carried out only by a single nation, would touch upon the national and class consciousness. The main idea was that Ukrainian revolution had to be a national one at first, since Ukraine was economically exploited by imperialist Russia. And only after that one the social revolution should follow, fighting for social equality within Ukraine. That was why the aim of *UKP* was to launch a revolution which would be national and communist at the same time. The only possible way to achieve this goal was to build an economically and politically independent state – Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic, maintaining close ties with other Soviet republics.[11]

In spite of the fact that *UKP* was quite popular at the beginning of the 1920s, it was hard to conduct its policy with the Russian communists constantly gaining importance. In 1923 within the *UKP* the “left wing” fraction was formed, who argued for the merger with CP(b)U. The *UKP* did their best to remain independent but, overcome by the great force of CP(b)U, passed the appeal to Comintern concerning its possible dissolution on the condition that the independence for Ukraine would be granted. The deceptive promise was given and consequently the members of *UKP* were allowed to join the CP(b)U. After that its members belonged to those who helped to carry out the national Soviet policy.

All the programs of the above-mentioned parties can be summarized by listing several distinctive postulates common to all of them:

- Independence of the Ukrainian socialist republic;
- Separation and independence of Ukrainian communist party representing the interests of Ukrainian working class and peasantry;
- Equal membership within the Communist International;
- Political and economic cooperation with other sovereign socialist republics;
- Free development of Ukrainian language and culture as the only possible base for a sovereign state.

Those were the demands, which were so crucial for Ukrainian national communism. Bolsheviks reacted to them in their own peculiar way. They guaranteed the fulfillment of all those Ukrainian communist ideas, but within the newly formed USSR. Ukraine obtained the status of a separate republic in free federation with other Soviet republics. Certain visible political autonomy was given to Ukraine, especially in the form of a right to implement internal policy in its territory. Together with administrative reform Bolsheviks began to introduce new national policy, called korenization (*Korenizatsija*).

This policy was passed in 1923 from Moscow and meant the nativization within newly merged Soviet republics. Among the goals of that policy was development of national economics and harmonization of the relations between the Soviet regime and local population. For those reasons the native languages were reinstated into all spheres of public life and the development of national culture became an issue of the greatest importance. *Ukrainisacija* was the Ukrainian variant of that policy.

The main purpose of that policy was to get national rank and files involved in the party system, so as to allow the Soviet party to gain popularity in borderlands. The visible concessions given to national culture and language aimed to prevent the development of national separatist movement in those lands and finally to enroot the Soviet model of government all over the USSR.

Terry Martin among other reasons to ensure such an affirmative national policy marked out some statements of Soviet official about *Korenisacija*. So the idea was to make Soviet power, which up to the 1923 had remained Russian power, a really international one, to make it evident that, according to Stalin's idea, "Soviet power and her organs are the affair of their own efforts, the embodiment of their desires."^[12]

It was only because of its premature character that the RCP(b) allowed such national activities with the only aim to enroot in Ukraine. The ostensive support for national orientation in communist parties was a part of Soviet tactics aimed to achieve total control over the whole country. All that political pluralism was nothing but a travesty of democracy. By 1925 all parties of national communistic orientation had been prohibited, dissolved or merged with CP(b)U. But Soviet system still was not very stable in Ukraine. That was the period of the political struggle and power consolidation in Ukraine as well as in the USSR, which was just formed at the end of 1922.

The short period between 1925 and 1933 was the time of deceptive implementation of program demands of nationally oriented social parties. That was the time of rapid development of Ukrainian national politics, economy, and culture. But despite all that it was just a myth that Ukraine had managed to secure a measure of national liberation within the Soviet framework; a myth which nevertheless led a number of prominent Ukrainian communists to believe that their national communist views had been legitimized.

In Ukraine a strong belief in the existence of a Ukrainian socialist state based on national culture led to consistent criticism against Russification tendencies that became evident in the early 1930s. In response to that criticism Ukrainian leaders of the CP(b)U, who were

loyal communists, were all accused of Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism. Death was the most common sentence for the Ukrainians during the political purges of the 1930s and 1940s. Those political goals which were not achieved by a certain courtesy and loyalty before 1929 were afterwards realized by force and violence. Ukraine became a firm part of the USSR only in the 1930s as a result of the totalitarian policies of a one-party system.

Despite being such a “bloody experiment” Ukrainian national communism became historical proof that it was in fact possible to take up political fight against the Soviet Union. The attempts of Ukrainian parties in 1920 were crushed by the enormous strength and yearning for power, which was the particular feature of early Soviet leadership. Ukrainian national communism was suppressed not because of its ideological immaturity, but because of its unequal status and chance in the struggle against the much stronger enemy.

The history of Ukrainian communism in 1918-1925 can be viewed as an attempt to develop and to implement communist theory for a separate state and to accommodate Marxist ideas to local circumstances. It did not contradict Marx's vision of building communism, but in fact did become the opposition to the Soviet model as a result of the impact of social, political and cultural factors briefly discussed above. As the borderline political theory, national communism combined ideas of both national and social liberation. Ukrainian national communism was based on the idea to use communist ideology for building sovereign independent state in which social and national interests could be jointly followed. The main purpose of the activity of political parties of national communist orientation was the idea of socialist order. But the main difference was that according to national communists it should be achieved within one separate state whereas according to Marx's well-known thesis the proletariat had no borders.

As a rule, the representatives of all those parties truly adhered to the vision of the communistic future of Ukraine with its postulates of humanity and classlessness. They all believed in national independence and state sovereignty of Ukraine, which could be legitimized based on the Marxist theory. The distinctive feature of national communism was the contention that social liberation was to follow national liberation and it was to become the foundation of the proletarian revolution. But national communists also cooperated politically with the Bolsheviks, which after 1925 caused their annihilation. Therefore, against its own will, national communism led not to political independence, but to total political and economical dependency.

This paradox makes it hard to judge the phenomenon of Ukrainian national communism in a definitive manner. On the one hand, national communism was a romantic attempt of those who really believed in socialist future to build a classless state in cooperation with other free proletarian republics. On the other hand, however, it turned out to be a political betrayal of all those who fought for independent Ukraine. The mistake of the Ukrainian national communists was that they did not take into account the enormous power of the Bolsheviks and their desire for a centralized state, which became evident as early as 1903 after the split with Mensheviks and was expressed in numerous articles and appeals made by Lenin.

Ukrainian national communism can be estimated as a separate approach within the world socialist movement. It was not a deviation from Marxism-Leninism as the later variations of Ukrainian national communism, but a search of appropriate local model to implement Marxism. From this point of view, Ukrainian national communism at the beginning of 1920s must be considered not as a part of ideological history of the USSR but as a distinct case to be examined in the light of the worldwide perception and development of Marxism.

Olena Palko graduated from the Taras Shevchenko National University in Kyiv, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Political Sciences. Since November 2009 she has been a postgraduate student in political sciences at the Kuras Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies at the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences. Among her main fields of interest are national communism and the history of Marxism in the early twentieth century and its implementation in Ukraine.

Notes:

1. Lev Yurkevych, "Yesuits'ka polityka," in *Tysiacha rokiv ukrains'koi suspil'no-politychnoi dumky*, ed. Taras Gunchak and Roman Solchanyk (Kyiv 2001), 6:187.
2. Yurkevych, "Rosijski sotsial-demokraty ta natsionalne pytannia," in *Tysiacha rokiv*, 6:225.
3. Vladimir Lenin, "Drafts to the II Congress of Communist International," *Collected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1961), 41:210.
4. Sergiy Mazlakh and Vasyl Shakhrai, *Do khvyli: Shcho diiet'sia na Ukraini i z Ukrainoiu?* (New York 1967), 110.
5. *Ibid.*, 117.
6. Vladimir Lenin, *Stati i rechi ob Ukraine* (Kyiv 1936), 344.
7. James E. Mace, *Communism and the Dilemmas of National Liberation: National Communism in Soviet Ukraine, 1918-1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 17.
8.  Ivan V. Majstrenko, *Borot'bism: A Chapter in the History of Ukrainian Communism* (New York 1954), 26.
9. "Memorandum Ukrains'koi Kommunistychnoi partii Borot'bystiv," in *Tysiacha rokiv*, 7:399.

10. Andriy Richytskyi, “Vid demokratii do komunizmu”, Chervonyi prapor, December 1919–January, 1920: 4-5.

11. “Programa U.K.P., uhvalena Pervym ustanivchym Z’izdom U.K.P. 22-25 sichnia 1920 roku,” in *Tysiacha rokiv*, 7:405.

12. Terry Martin, “An Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism,” in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 74.

Preferred citation: Palko Olena. 2011. Ukrainian National Communism in International Context. In: *Disappearing Realities. On the Cultural Consequences of Social Change*, ed.

A. Dwyer, and M. Buchole, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows’ Conferences, Vol. 30.