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Nationality Issue in Proletkult Activities in Ukraine

Kwestia narodowości w działaniu Proletkultu na Ukrainie

STRESZCZENIE

W artykule zwrócono uwagę na społeczne i polityczne uwarunkowania funkcjonowania proletariackich organizacji edukacyjnych z lat 20. XX w. w kontekście narodowości, mianowicie badanie ram politycznych określających status ukraińskiego języka i kultury na Ukrainie. Kwestia narodowości stała się kluczowa w działaniach Proletkultu – proletariackiej organizacji kulturalnej, edukacyjnej i literackiej w strukturze Komisariatu Ludowego, której celem był szeroki i wszechstronny rozwój kultury proletariackiej stworzonej przez klasę robotniczą. W przeciwieństwie do Rosji organizacje Proletkultu na Ukrainie nie zostały znacznie rozszerzone i przestały istnieć, ponieważ język narodowy i kultura nie były brane pod uwagę, a kontakt z chłopami i miejscowymi mieszkańcami nieproletariackiego pochodzenia był ograniczony.

Słowa kluczowe: Proletkult; pracownik; kultura; język; polityka; organizacja

SUMMARY

The article highlights the social and political conditions under which the proletarian educational organizations of the 1920s functioned in the context of nationality issue, namely the study of political frameworks determining the status of the Ukrainian language and culture in Ukraine. The nationality issue became crucial in Proletkult activities – a proletarian cultural, educational and

literary organization in the structure of People's Commissariat, the aim of which was a broad and comprehensive development of the proletarian culture created by the working class. Unlike Russia, Proletkult organizations in Ukraine were not significantly spread and ceased to exist due to the fact that the national language and culture were not taken into account and the contact with the peasants and indigenous people of non-proletarian origin was limited.

Keywords: Proletkult; worker; culture; language; politics; organization

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary social transformations require a detailed, critical reinterpretation of the experiences of previous generations. In his work *Lectures*, Hegel wrote that experience and history taught that peoples and governments had never learnt from history and did not act in accordance with the lessons that history could give. The objective study of Russian-Ukrainian relations require special attention that will help to clarify the reasons for misunderstandings in historical context, to consider them in establishing intercommunication and ensuring peace in the geopolitical space.

The period of interest is 20–30 years of the 20th century – time of intensive cultural development, showing tendency to democracy, creativity, and diversity. However, it remained tendentiously presented by official Soviet pedagogical science when the complex and ambiguous process was adjusted to well-known results in advance (Sukhomlynska 1996, p. 7). The article proposes the study of the Russian-Ukrainian relations considering the activities of Proletkult (1917–1932) – proletarian cultural, educational and literary organization which was a constituent of People's Commissariat and the aim of which was a broad and comprehensive development of proletarian culture created by the working class.

Among Russian researchers studying Proletkult we should mention M. Gorbunov, N. Yudin, L. Nikolayeva, M. Levchenko, L. Bulavka, A. Karpov and others. In Ukraine, there is a few holistic studies of Proletkult organization's activities. Nevertheless, the issues of Russian-Ukrainian relations were not investigated in the works of researchers mentioned above that can be treated as a gap in historical and pedagogical science.

MATERIAL STATEMENT AND GROUNDING OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

Russian revolutionary social democracy during 1917–1920 realizing social and political transformations was following the Imperial mentality. It resulted in the fact that Ukraine received the status which was tantamount to cultural autonomy in the “united and indivisible” space of the Soviet Federation. The war and

revolution were not the time for Ukraine to unite its people; they remained divided within two states.

However, even under these conditions, the revolution created a sense of novelty, raised awareness of liberation from the old world and its limitations. Complex persistent questions arose and the main ones were such as which direction the Ukrainian culture should follow, what standards this culture should be based on, and what kind it should be in general. It was the time of searching and hope. Inspired by a sense of their own mission and growing audience, the writers, artists and scientists plunged into the creation of a new cultural universe with a great passion. In the field of education, the global goal was also formed: the future of socialism was a new Soviet person.

During social upheavals (World War I, February Bourgeois Democratic Revolution and October Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the civil war, National-Democratic Revolution in Ukraine, which caused the possibility to create a Ukrainian state, and a bitter defeat of Ukrainian National Republic), an intensive process of domestic cultural space self-organization developed together with the attempts of the institutionalization and structuring of modern Ukrainian culture under own state leadership. These processes occurred in difficult circumstances and were influenced by both internal and external factors. It is necessary to mention S. Kulchytskyi's (2013) work in which the author stated that: The Ukrainian Central Council must be remembered to act within the political space of Russia, which as an Entente member waged exhausting war against Central countries for more than two years. The Ukrainian revolution was a part of Russian but not an independent phenomenon. Although Ukraine formed its own political government, which began a national state-making process, its territory became the place of confrontation between Russian revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces. The opposite parties fought not only against each other, but tried to strangle Ukrainian liberation movement (Kulchytskyi 2013, p. 60).

With the Soviet power establishment, the cultural processes in Ukraine occurred in the context of centralized policies of the Communist Party declaring the equal rights of all states or the members of newly formed federation in its normative documents. The Bolshevik leaders tried to control the process so that the ethnic revival would not be transformed into national, that is to say, Ukrainians would enjoy the development of their language and culture without claiming to be independent from the centre of all other national states (Kulchytskyi 2013, p. 83).

A week after the October Revolution, on 15 November 1917, the Declaration of Russian Peoples' Rights was published and signed by the Chairman of the Soviet of People's Commissars V. Ulyanov-Lenin and the People's Commissar of Nationality Affairs Y. Dzhugashvili-Stalin. The document emphasized that the first all-Russian Congress of Soviets in June 1917 had proclaimed the right of Russian peoples for free self-determination, and the second Congress of Soviets

clearly and strongly confirmed this inalienable right. According to the decisions of these Congresses, the Soviet of People's Commissars (SPC) formed the following principles for its activity including nationality issues:

- 1) equality and sovereignty of Russian peoples;
- 2) the right of Russian peoples to free self-determination, including secession and formation of independent states;
- 3) abolition of all national and national-religious privileges and restrictions;
- 4) free development of national minorities and ethnic groups inhabiting the territory of Russia (Kulchytskyi 2013, p. 184).

The reaction of the SPC to national countries sovereignty was offensive. On 31 January 1918, the third all-Russian Congress of Soviets adopted the Declaration of Rights of the Working and Exploited People. Its first item consisted of two parts and was insidiously simple:

- 1) Russia was proclaimed the Republic of Soviets consisting of workers', soldiers' and peasants' deputies. All the power in the center and locally belongs to these Soviets.
- 2) the Russian Soviet Republic was formed as the Federation of National Soviet Republics on the basis of voluntary uniting of free nations.

The heads of Soviets would state that the Central Soviet used the national phrases and led an equivocal bourgeois policy, not recognizing Soviet power in Ukraine. As a result, the contradiction between the declared statements and the real situation could be seen (Kulchytskyi 2013, p. 185).

Among the four items describing national relations in the Program of the Russian Communist Party (of Bolsheviks) (RCP(B)), the first is relevant to our study as, according to it, "policy of different nationalities proletarians and half-proletarians' cooperation was the basis for a joint revolutionary struggle against landowners and the bourgeoisie" (Kulchytskyi 2013, p. 187). Such cooperation resulted in discrimination of the rights and freedoms of the Ukrainian proletariat by the Russian proletariat, because the Russian language and culture were considered as progressive, proletarian, and leading, and the Ukrainian language was treated as peasant, a nationalist manifestation, and, therefore, was unsuitable for building the culture of future – proletarian culture.

The fourth item clarified who was in power to express the nation's will of separation. The working class was considered as a main doer in the process of transition from bourgeois to Soviet democracy (Kulchytskyi 2013, p. 187). In the context of ensuring national equality proclaimed in the normative regulations, the thesis of the fourth item can be again treated as contradictory. The Russian language was considered as a proletarian one on the contrary to the peasant Ukrainian language, so the discrimination of national culture was clearly seen in real life.

However, despite the official policy, the development of the national liberation movement after the civil war gained undeniable momentum and it was im-

possible to control it. It provoked Lenin's resolution "On the Soviet Government in Ukraine" adopted on the Plenum of the Central Committee of the RCP(B) in November 1919. The resolution obliged all members of the Party to encourage free development of the Ukrainian language and culture. It stated the following:

Despite the fact that the Ukrainian culture (language, school, etc.) has been repressed by tsarism and exploiting classes of Russia for centuries, the Central Committee of the RCP(B) makes it obligatory for every Party member to remove any barrier to free development of the Ukrainian language and culture using all possible means. The RCP(B) members should accept workers' right to learn the native language and speak it in all Soviet institutions on the territory of Ukraine, strongly oppose the attempts to push the Ukrainian language aside by artificial means and, *vice versa*, try to transform the Ukrainian language according to the requirements of the Communist education for the working masses (Lenin 1974).

Despite such a situation, the state policy on the national culture was continuing as the government was afraid of the Ukrainian language acquiring the status of original at both state and all-Soviet levels. The actions taken were only the means of distraction of public attention from establishing the dominance of the Russian language and culture.

In Bolsheviks' surrounding, the Ukrainian culture was considered as having a single meaning – a creation of bourgeois nationalists on the basis of their romantic and reactionary works – and it strongly affected the formation of the proletarian culture concept. After all, the situation that prevailed in the early 20th century in Ukraine was characterized by the existence of deep contradictions between the autochthonous village and assimilated city population, between the Ukrainian peasantry and the Russian or Russified proletariat. Among the memoirs about the Ukrainian revolution there is a reasonable thought of V. Zatonkyi: "Ukraine as a country did not exist for «Soviets» and the parties of the city proletariat, for both the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks (temperate members of the Party) as it did not exist for urban working class" (Zatonkyi 1929). Only with time, as a result of some confrontations, was it possible to change (to some extent) the views of the Party and Soviet staff, and the declared Ukrainian Soviet statehood gradually began to acquire the relative recognition, the Ukrainian language and culture were given almost official status (Parakhina 2012, p. 23).

The Central Committee of the RCP(B) approved the decision of the tenth Party Congress (8–16 March 1921). The resolution of the Congress "Regular Tasks of the Party on Nationality Issue" stressed that the task of Bolsheviks was to help "the working members of not Russian peoples" to develop and strengthen their court, administration, the economic bodies, governments where the native language was used and which were staffed by local personnel who knew the life and psychology of the local population, and to encourage the press, school, theater,

clubs and other cultural institutions to use native language in their development (“The tenth Congress of the RCP(B)”, 1963, p. 603).

According to the Directives on Ukraine’s nationality issue dated October 17, 1922 and adopted by the Plenum of the Central Committee of the RCP(B), it was supposed to be “complete and absolute equality of the Ukrainian and Russian languages, a strong opposition to any artificial Ukrainization or Russification” and, at the same time, the elimination of barriers that could stop the natural development of the Ukrainian culture or that prevent the Ukrainian peasantry from accessing to the Russian culture; additionally, the struggle against all aspirations to make the Ukrainian language the means of separation and opposition of the Ukrainian workers and peasants to the Russian ones had to be conducted (Kasianov 1992, p. 150). This illusion of the “equality” of languages was part of the Soviet government’s deliberate policy as the national liberation movement in Ukraine was raising, and although Bolsheviks had not many supporters among the intelligentsia, they pretended to support any efforts aimed at highlighting the equality of the Ukrainian and Russian culture and language to make the Party opposition weaker. Under this illusion of equality, the Bolshevik theory of culture meant the destruction of “nationally limited” cultures.

The same idea was supported by Lenin who pointed to a **negative role of national cultures** in social progress: It is possible for social democracy to proclaim directly or indirectly the slogan of national culture. Such a slogan is misleading, since all economic, political and spiritual spheres of human life are internationalized by capitalism. The international culture, being systematically created by the proletariat of all countries, cannot include any “national culture” but embrace exclusively its democratic and socialist elements (Lenin 1972).

In 1923, “contradiction between two cultures” started to be actively supported. The Secretary of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party (of Bolsheviks) (UCP(B)) D. Lebed speaking at the Party conference in Kyiv, said: Theoretically, we know that the contradiction between two cultures is inevitable. Due to certain historical circumstances in Ukraine the culture of the city is Russian, the culture of village is Ukrainian; to set the task to actively make the Party and the working class Ukrainian means to accept low culture of the village instead of the higher culture of the city (Kasianov 1992, p. 75).

In the early 1920s, the so-called theory of contradiction between two cultures was actively discussed by the Party leadership. The Russian culture was considered as the leading one (because the speakers were of proletariat origin) and the Ukrainian culture was underestimated. This theory was proposed by Lebed who in the article “Some questions of the Party Congress” wrote that: To set the task to Ukrainize the Party and, therefore, the working class, will now be reactionary for cultural movement as nationalization, that is the artificial implanting of the Ukrainian language in the Party, means for the current political, economic and cultural

relationships between the city and the village to accept low culture of the village but not the higher culture of the city (Kasianov 1992, p. 75).

These views were supported by some members of the Party apparatus and some ordinary members who understood the necessity of the entire government structure being Ukrainized. Lebed's opponents realized that in the country, where 80% of the population was of Ukrainian origin, the government members had to speak the Ukrainian language. At the seventh Conference of the UCP(B) (1923), on the issue of "two cultures", H. Rakovskyi stated that the government could not be neutral towards the Ukrainian culture and had to know it and help it to develop. M. Skrypnyk, V. Zatsynskyi and others argued the "Lebed theory" too. As a result, Lebed's points of view did not become the ideological directives and official policy but they certainly reflected the attitudes of a significant part of Russified members in state apparatus (Kasianov 1992, p. 75).

A decisive step towards the implementation of the policy of Ukrainization was made at the twelfth Congress of the RCP(B) in 1923. It was after this Congress that Ukrainization was officially proclaimed as an obligatory task for all Party members. In June 1923, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR adopted the Decree "On measures to ensure equality of languages and on assistance in development of the Ukrainian language".

It was quite often believed that the proletarian culture was national and international, thus, everything created for this culture had to be in the Russian language; the culture of Ukrainian peasants was bourgeois and, therefore, it was not appropriate to apply the Ukrainian language there. In the last decade of the Imperial period, three social strata were distinguished – peasants, urban intellectuals and the proletariat that influenced the development of three approaches to national culture, respectively.

Urban intellectuals were the most privileged part of the population under Russian cultural influence; they supported state policy as the dependence from Russian culture was historically caused by education, state public service, and ideological subordination. After the revolutionary changes, this part of population was oriented to entire and indivisible Russia, total hegemony of Russian culture as a unifying factor in the Soviet country. They were quite often inimical to national manifestations, and to the pursuit of national interests in so-called colonies of the Soviet Union.

The peasants were associated with folk traditions and customs which developed over the centuries. The revolution in 1917 became a kind of signal for avoiding total subjugation in general and oppression of language in particular. Peasants' hostility towards the city was clearly manifested during the civil war, which actually was economic destruction that provoked the intensification of struggle for national identity. As native speakers and experts in national traditions, the Ukrainian peasants were the main supporters of the national revolution. However, as a result

of different class contradictions, they mainly paid attention to rather the social and economic than national and political slogans of the revolution. Being mainly of Russian origin, the working class and the bourgeoisie on the contrary remained indifferent to the slogans of the national revolution (Kulchytskyi 2013, p. 214).

The social origin of the proletariat was heterogeneous. The greater part of people was peasants by birth, consequently in terms of their national origin they were almost indistinguishable from the village natives. Such people worked in urban areas, therefore, they became a subject of cultural influence of the urban intelligentsia and were introduced to the Russian culture or, in other words, they were “industrialized”. In Ukraine, Russian people lived mostly in cities and the process of national liberation movement was slower. P. Khrystiuk wrote: “Since the beginning of the revolution in Ukraine the city inhabitants have adopted either a hostile or neglect attitude towards the Ukrainian Renaissance” (Khrystiuk 1921, p. 19).

The Communist ideology envisaged the unification of all society groups for socialist construction without considering the nationality issue. In Ukraine, during that revolution period, the vast majority of workers had a typical attitude to the nationality issue: A working person, especially an employee, “should be an internationalist”, he should not consider the issue of language and culture as something important, as it was a matter of the bourgeoisie, although nobody could interfere with any person’s free usage of language as it was in tsar times. It was impossible to prevent some states in former Empire from developing their own national social order and even from forming separate and independent states. Everything a conscious worker should be interested in had to be a social struggle against the landlords and the bourgeoisie. Therefore, in order to win that struggle, Russia should better remain the only country where the working class united by socialist slogans can fight against their enemy, and it is revolutionary internationalism, inherent in the working class in the period of revolutionary and destructive struggle against the former order (Lapchynskyi 1927, p. 247).

The modern researcher M. Parakhina (2012) noted that the heterogeneity of the ethnic composition in the Ukrainian society, disparity between the rural and urban residents’ cultural levels, population’s low literacy rate, shortage of professional staff, insufficient material base, lack of funding, influence of Russian culture and the need to oppose to great Russian chauvinism are the factors which formed significant barriers to creating Ukrainian culture in the 1920s. The situation was complicated by the fact that Russification policy in Ukraine, having been implemented for several centuries, resulted in the fact that the cities were not Ukrainized. However, the village residents preserved their ethnic and national culture: language, tradition, and the so-called local coloring.

Nevertheless, the theory of two cultures which was also called “Lebed’s theory” was rejected after 1923, when the government adopted the policy of “Ukrainization”. The theory of two cultures after 1925 spurred active discussion in lit-

erature and subsequently this issue turned from “literary” into political one and covered a range of urgent problems and prospects of development in the Ukrainian culture as a whole (Parakhina 2012, p. 33).

The process of Ukrainization began to fail in 1926. The reason for it may be found in Stalin’s letter which was written to L. Kaganovych on 26 April 1926. When analyzing measures taken by Education People’s Commissar of the Ukrainian SSR on Ukrainization, Stalin stated serious errors: He confused the Ukrainization of Party and other staff with the Ukrainization of the proletariat. Moreover, he stated that there was a necessity and opportunity to Ukrainize the Party, state and other apparatus personnel who served the population. But it was impossible to Ukrainize the proletariat by government force. We could not allow the Russian working masses to abandon the Russian language and recognize the Ukrainian culture and language as their own. It contradicted the principle of national freedom development. This would not be national freedom but a form of national oppression (Stalin 1949).

M. Skrypnyk, an ardent defender of Ukrainization, tried to solve the problem of culture formation taking into consideration clear Marks’ and Lenin’s attitudes. He emphasized that there were only two ways of creating the national culture – proletarian and bourgeois. The priority of class interests over national one was the basis Skrypnyk’s paradigm of the culture was built on (Stalin 1949). It was strongly believed that in the new state, which the proletariat brought a victory to, had to be a new (proletarian) culture. The proletariat formed the vast majority of the urban population who was Russian-speaking, therefore, proletarian culture had to be Russian.

It was obviously assumed that the Ukrainian culture, the roots of which were rural, would gradually be absorbed into Russian one. The culture that was traditionally identified with the countryside suddenly gained other vector of development, which led not only to aesthetic searches but also caused mental changes. Under these circumstances, the notorious theory of the “contradiction between two cultures” was widely spread in the Republic, its **essence was discovered** in the fact that “proletarian Russia” was opposed to “peasant Ukraine”, and on this basis the conclusion was drawn that “Ukrainization” was not necessary because the Russian (urban) culture would finally prevail over the Ukrainian (rural) culture.

Most of public figures who were oriented to national freedom took into account the customs and traditions of the Ukrainian people and believed that the formation process of proletarian culture should involve not only workers and city dwellers, but also peasants. It could only be possible if there were no contradictions between the city and the country, with the towns opened to the villagers. Indeed, this was the only way to create a distinctive national art: to go out of the depths and to come to the people, understand their feelings and their original

views of beauty, genuinely love the surrounding nature (Burachek 1920, p. 81).

Regarding nationality composition of the population on the territory of Ukraine within the studying period, interesting statistic data and qualitative analysis can be found. In Ukraine, the same phenomenon could be seen everywhere: more than 92% of Ukrainians were farmers, 4–5% of them were workers, and others were artisans, small traders and service intelligentsia. Ukrainians cultivated land but fishing, trade, science, culture and public administration were not the areas in which Ukrainians could be found. Among capitalists there were only Russians, Jews, Poles and others. The city as a center of culture was not Ukrainian (Soldatenko 1999, pp. 170–171).

The issue of the Ukrainian language was solved by its ignoring or by considering it as a means for creating proletarian but not national culture. Such a situation caused many arguments, controversial opinions, and what was most important, in our opinion, became the main reason for the Proletkult decline in Ukraine.

Proletkult was established in Russia in 1917. In Ukraine, these organizations were formed in 1919 when Soviet power was established. The main forms of educational work were clubs for workers, studios, proletarian universities, Proletkults for children, etc. Cultural and creative activities were realized in studios in such fields as literature, theatre, music, and visual arts.

The Proletkult movement became widespread in Russia, but on the territory of Ukraine it was not so popular. The main reasons for this were the dominance of the Russian language over Ukrainian; in fact, workers who were non-Ukrainians had access to different organizations, but for the peasants – indigenous people – such access was not available. In Ukraine, Proletkult failed to exist, but became a prerequisite for functioning of such proletarian literary organizations as “Plug”, “Gart”, etc. They tried to continue and to intensify the activities made by Proletkult organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

As a result, the nationality issue, the issue of the Ukrainian language became crucial for Proletkult functioning in Ukraine. Considering the platform of the first All-Russian Conference of cultural and educational organizations, focusing on the creation of proletarian culture as non-national international phenomenon, Proletkult appeared to be in opposition to the development of national liberation movement, manifestation of national consciousness. Proletkult organizations could not exist under pressure of the national liberation struggle, on the one hand, and official policy of the Soviet government and the Communist Party, on the other. Although some members of All-Ukrainian Proletkult had strong intention to Ukrainize its activities, Proletkult ideas were not supported by domestic scientists, artists, and public figures. The fact that the Presidium and All-Ukrainian

Proletkult Council consisted mostly of Russian members should be paid attention to as it is obvious that All-Russian Council determined the content and direction of the activities performed in the Ukrainian organizations.

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