When spring finally came after the long and cold winter of 1916 that broke the Russian Empire’s supply system and helped ignite the February Revolution, the swollen Dnieper flooded the low-lying areas of Kyiv and elsewhere along its route. Yet the press, politicians, and later memoirists did not see the flood of 1917 as a calamity. To them it served as a perfect metaphor for the Ukrainian national awakening: indeed, that spring, Ukrainian rallies and parades poured into the streets of Kyiv like never before. The city of imperial administrators and the official church suddenly found itself overrun by crowds waving blue-and-yellow flags. There seemed to be no limit to the national mobilization of Ukrainians. Some one hundred thousand people participated in the first Ukrainian rally in Kyiv in March; the over seven hundred delegates to the First Ukrainian Military Congress in May claimed to represent nine hundred thousand Ukrainian soldiers in the Russian army and navy. However, this mass support evaporated with the disintegration of the front, economic collapse, and the Bolshevik invasion. In the bloody struggle for Ukraine that followed, the national governments were never able to mobilize or maintain such mass armies in the field. Instead, the story of the Ukrainian Revolution became a story of heroic sacrifices of the few, while the enthusiastic crowds of the spring of 1917 acquired the disparaging moniker of “March [1917] Ukrainians”—those who went with the flow of the revolution, but disappeared in the days of defeat.

Present-day independent Ukraine does not celebrate the anniversaries of any events from 1917 because the fall of the monarchy produced neither a Ukrainian state nor a Ukrainian army—nor indeed
a Ukrainian nation. These things would have been possible only if patriotic activists had had the time to reach out to the masses and mold them into modern citizens and members of the Ukrainian nation. But the persecution of Ukrainian culture under the tsars did not afford Ukrainian activists this opportunity. The brief window of relative freedom after the 1905 revolution allowed the intelligentsia to only start forming a communication network and making tentative inroads into rural areas. The one daily Ukrainian newspaper in the Russian Empire, Rada (1906–1914), could not generate enough subscriptions to cover its publishing expenses, and it survived on subsidies from a small group of wealthy supporters. The Prosvita cultural societies in the countryside opened in great numbers after 1905, but only one of them (in Katerynoslav, now Dnipro) survived beyond 1911. The name and model of Prosvita came from the Habsburg Empire, where the Ukrainian intelligentsia had used this cultural network for decades to educate the peasantry. There were enough subscribers in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to support the entire political spectrum of Ukrainian newspapers and journals; however, that empire did not collapse in 1917.

The year 1917 in the Ukrainian lands of the former Russian Empire marked the gradual delineation of identities: territorial, linguistic, and political. The creative revolutionary energy of the first democratic spring soon translated into the consolidation of a modern Ukrainian identity based on the principle of ethnicity. Accordingly, the Ukrainian Central Rada requested from the Russian Provisional Government autonomy for the nine provinces in which Ukrainian peasants constituted the majority. After prolonged negotiations, in which the Russian side revealed its deep unease about giving up the Ukrainian South—“But you are cutting us off from the Black Sea!”—the Provisional Government grudgingly agreed to five provinces. The Ukraine that had previously existed in the imagination of a few patriotic intellectuals began to acquire administrative contours.

No less shocking to the Russian public was the reversal of imperial hierarchies marked by the introduction of a new term, “national minority,” as applied to themselves. A perceptive Russophone Jewish lawyer in Kyiv, Aleksei Gol’denveizer, noted the first use of this term in July 1917 during the new round of negotiations between the Central Rada and a delegation of the Provisional Government. Seeing himself
as a member of the Russian public, Gol’denveizer recorded the “grave impression” the transfer of power to the Ukrainian authorities made on him. But the reversal of the imperial hierarchies also meant recognition of cultural and political rights of the newly minted “minorities.” The July 1917 deal with the Provisional Government included quotas that would ensure their representation in the Small Rada. In one of his brochures aimed at explaining the Ukrainian agenda to the wider public, the chairman of the Rada, Mykhailo Hrushevskyi, promised to provide minorities with all the cultural rights that the tsarist monarchy had denied the Ukrainians.7 The Ukrainian government created a ministry of nationalities with deputy ministers for the Jewish, Polish, and Russian minorities, and eventually went on to establish the world’s first ministry for Jewish affairs, which was headed by a succession of Jewish politicians. Tragically, this unprecedented attempt to imagine the new Ukraine as a land of equality and minority rights was overwritten by the reports of violent Jewish pogroms in 1919, a significant share of them committed by warlords affiliated with the same Ukrainian administration.8

The modern, ethnicity-based, and democratic approach to imagining the new Ukraine was grounded in the notion of popular sovereignty. Yet the forms of national life developing during the Ukrainian Revolution owed much to the historical tradition of Ukraine as the land of Cossacks. For its manifestos, the Central Rada adopted the name that the Cossack hetmans had used for their decrees, universality, and the grassroots movement of so-called Free Cossacks sprang up in many provinces along the Dnieper River. At the same time, the content of the universals was explicitly modern, addressing the Ukrainian people or even the “toilers,” and their preambles employed the rhetoric of socialism and national self-determination rather than historical rights. For instance, the opening of the First Universal read, “Ukrainian people! Nation of peasants, workers, toilers!” The Free Cossacks, likewise, soon became a salaried militia that was mistrusted by the socialist politicians of the Central Rada because of its conservative sympathies.10

The notion of a united revolutionary front with Russia survived until the very end of 1917. Reacting to the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd, the Central Rada in its Third Universal proclaimed the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UNR), but in federation with some hypothetical future
democratic Russia: “Without separating from the Russian Republic and maintaining its unity, we shall stand firmly on our own soil, so that our strength may aid all of Russia, so that the entire Russian Republic becomes a federation of equal and free peoples.” At the start of peace talks with the Central Powers in Brest-Litovsk, the delegations of Soviet Russia and the UNR not only dined together (all the participants did until Trotsky put an end to this), but their members visited each other in the evening for “friendly conversations.” At first, Trotsky recognized the Ukrainian delegation precisely because he saw it as representing a united revolutionary front against the counterrevolutionary Central Powers.

The Bolshevik invasion shattered this mode of imagining the postimperial situation as an anti-imperial, socialist commonwealth. In January 1918 the first blood was spilled in clashes with Bolshevik detachments advancing on the Ukrainian capital. The martyrdom of the young Ukrainian volunteers at Kruty in late January would later become the symbol of resistance to the Bolshevik onslaught, but at the time it was the prolonged bombardment of Kyiv by Red troops and their mass terror in the occupied city that shocked contemporaries. The Reds hunted down not just tsarist officers, but also members of the Central Rada and the Ukrainian army; indeed, anyone who spoke Ukrainian in public. The prominent Ukrainian Bolshevik Volodymyr Zatons’kyi nearly got shot on the street because his card, identifying him as a minister in the Soviet Ukrainian government, was in Ukrainian. Fortunately, he also served in Lenin’s All-Russian cabinet and was able to produce another ID in Russian, which bore Lenin’s personal signature.

The brutal Red commander Mikhail Murav’ev ended up denounced by his own commissars and arrested, with Lenin himself called to testify (of course, the Soviet leader’s testimony is missing from the file), but he suffered no serious consequences. His ruthless methods suited Moscow’s immediate purpose: to capture Ukraine and requisition grain and other foodstuffs for Russia’s cities. On 15 January 1918 Lenin sent a desperate telegram to his chief military commander in Ukraine, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko: “For god’s sake, take most energetic revolutionary measures to send bread, bread, and bread again! Otherwise Piter [Petrograd, formerly St. Petersburg] may perish. Special trains and detachments. Collection and stockpiling. Accompany
trains. Report daily. For god’s sake!”15 Tellingly, Lenin bypassed his own puppet government in Ukraine, the People’s Secretariat, in taking direct control of the land’s economic exploitation.

As Hrushevsky wrote, the Bolsheviks’ war on the UNR “untied the moral knots” that had made separation unthinkable.16 That started happening in the days before Kruty and the Bolshevik storming of Kyiv. On 12 (25) January 1918 the Small Rada passed the Fourth Universal proclaiming Ukrainian independence. However, the Rada backdated this proclamation to 9 (22) January, the intended convocation day of the Ukrainian Constituent Assembly, which was to take over decisions on such weighty issues. Contemporaries did not appreciate the full significance of this manifesto, in part because of the desperate military and political situation, which also derailed the elections to the Constituent Assembly. The Bolshevik troops advanced from several directions, both from Russia and from the front, while the workers of Kyiv prepared their own rebellion. Moreover, the authors of the universal themselves stressed their pragmatic motives in proclaiming independence. Before tabling the Fourth Universal in the Small Rada, Hrushevsky explained that it was necessary in order “to allow our government to complete the peace process and to defend our country from various incursions.”17 Vynnychenko seconded this explanation in his memoirs: “Without proclaiming ourselves an independent state, we did not have the full right to conclude a peace.”18 The universal itself did not speak about the historical tradition of statehood, but instead promised the demobilization of the army and the abolition of private ownership of land—both burning social issues of the day, on which the Ukrainian socialists tried to compete with the radicalism of the Bolsheviks’ promises.19

Indeed, the historical significance of the Fourth Universal is the product of ensuing events. The meaning of the Ukrainian 1918 started to be defined in March 1918, when the Central Rada returned to Kyiv. On Hrushevsky’s proposal, the Rada organized a state funeral for the heroes of Kruty, who became martyrs for Ukrainian independence.20 At the time of their death back in January some contemporaries, like Dmytro Doroshenko, blamed the tragedy on the ineptness or treason of the military commanders. Doroshenko was also convinced that Kruty opened the path to Kyiv for the Bolsheviks rather than stopping them.21 Present-day historians also note the strategic miscalculations of
the Ukrainian military command, which left the Bakhmach direction unprotected, thus leading to the last stand at Kruty. Yet it was the youth and innocence of these patriotic students—rather than the officer cadets and the Free Cossacks, who also fought there—that made Kruty a powerful symbol of civilian martyrdom for the national cause. The Ukrainian Revolution was now a war of independence against Russia.

The German and Austrian occupations that followed the Brest Peace highlighted the difficulty in constructing the Ukrainian Revolution as a linear process. An argument can be made that the protection of the Central Powers offered a window of opportunity for the Ukrainian and other national projects; but there are equally compelling reasons to see the de facto German control as interrupting the development of a native revolutionary process. With near-complete unanimity, patriotic Ukrainian contemporaries rejected Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky as a German puppet, conservative aristocrat, and “Little Russian,” who, in their opinion, lacked sincere commitment to the national idea. Yet, some modern historians speak approvingly of the civic dimension of the Skoropadsky project, his concept of Ukraine built on loyalty to the state rather than on shared language and culture. In any case, the restive peasants passed their own verdict on the Ukrainian monarchy. When Andrea Graziosi argues that the German occupation in some sense “protected” the Ukrainian peasantry from brutal Bolshevik requisitioning, he is not whitewashing German policies, but underscoring that the true face of Bolsheviks remained by and large unknown in the Ukrainian countryside. This explains why the Bolsheviks could still command some support in Ukraine as late as 1919.

Present-day Ukraine does not mark on a state level any anniversaries of Skoropadsky’s Ukrainian State, but neither does it condemn it as a diversion from the UNR model. The media, museums, and memorial plaques consider the 1918 Hetmanate an important part of the Ukrainian Revolution. Yet there is one important dimension of the Ukrainian 1918 that professional historians cannot overlook. Ukrainian historians argue against the portrayal of the Ukrainian Revolution as “civil war,” both because the Bolsheviks used this term to cover up their invasion and because Soviet historiography prescribed the reductive interpretation of the Ukrainian Revolution as but a regional aspect of the Russian Civil War. But they make one exception by acknowledging that the Directory-led rebellion against Skoropadsky contained the
features of a civil conflict, because it was the struggle of Ukrainian peasants against a Ukrainian government.25

Interestingly, Ukrainian intellectuals of the 1920s used that same conflict of late 1918 to defend the specificity of the Ukrainian Revolution, which they saw as combining the features of social and national liberation. This is the subtext of the famous episode from 1929, when Ukrainian writers argued with Stalin about Mikhail Bulgakov’s play Dni Turbinykh (The Days of the Turbins). Ukrainian writers and arts officials astonished the Soviet leader by objecting to the portrayal of the Ukrainian rebels against Skoropads’kyi as brutal and uncultured nationalists. They saw the rebellion as a just struggle of the Ukrainian masses against the restoration of the ancien régime, the uprising that brought together the Bolsheviks and the UNR forces. Indeed, the writers’ identification with the Ukrainian Revolution was even more encompassing, as indicated by their comments in defense of Petro Bolbochan, a colonel in the UNR army, whom Bulgakov maligned in the play under the transparent name of Otaman Bolbotun.26

As the Directory entered Kyiv on a snowy day in December 1918, its leaders already knew about the forthcoming event that would come to define the Ukrainian meaning of 1919. The disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the last months of World War I led to the proclamation in Lviv of the Western Ukrainian People’s Republic (ZUNR), so named in imitation of the earlier proclamation of the UNR. The emergence of the second Ukrainian republic in the Habsburg lands underscored the Ukrainian Revolution’s unique features as a transnational project that would not fit into the narrow conceptual borders of the Russian Revolution and Civil War. At the same time, it underscored the challenges as well as the benefits of a transnational nation-building project. The ZUNR delegation originally departed for Dnieper Ukraine to seek arms and funding from the Skoropads’kyi regime,27 yet it was the Directory that ended up providing the funds and promising (but not really delivering) military assistance.

If a modern Ukrainian identity was only just being formed in former tsarist Ukraine during the Ukrainian Revolution, it was already sufficiently entrenched in the Habsburg Eastern Galicia. The Ukrainian activists there could boast of decades of legal political experience, as well as the peasantry’s access to schools, Prosvita reading rooms, and cooperatives. Partly because of this, the Ukrainian national movement
in Eastern Galicia was overall politically more moderate, developing as it did through legal channels and in competition with Polish nationalism. For this reason, legitimist Ukrainian leaders in Galicia looked askance at the chaotic nature of politics on the shores of the Dnieper, where left-wing radicals seemed to be in charge. As Oleh Pavlysyhyn shows, the conservative leaders of the ZUNR such as Levhen Petrushevych objected to any union with Dnieper Ukraine, but they did not really have a choice. The decades of national mobilization had inculcated in ordinary Ukrainians of the Habsburg Empire the ideal of uniting the two Ukraines, and younger Ukrainian military commanders such as Dmytro Vitovs’kyi felt that the way World War I ended on the Eastern Front had created an opening for radical geopolitical solutions. In addition, the lack of food supplies and ammunition put the Ukrainian Galician Army in a difficult position against the more numerous and better-supplied Poles.

The historic Zluka, or Union, of the UNR and ZUNR was thus forced as much by pragmatic considerations of the moment as it was by the ideological tenets of the Ukrainian national movement. Similarly to the proclamation of the Fourth Universal a year earlier, the solemn ceremony on St. Sophia Square in Kyiv on 22 January 1919 took place with the distant roar of Bolshevik guns in the background. In a speech he gave from the balcony of a nearby building after the parade, Symon Petliura chastised the citizens for being willing to shout “Glory!” but not to join or supply the Ukrainian army.

Even the threat of losing Kyiv again did not bring together the representatives of the two republics. Following the instructions of the Ukrainian National Council in Galicia, the ZUNR delegation requested that the administrative incorporation of the “Western province” into the UNR be postponed until the convocation of the All-Ukrainian Constituent Assembly. In the end, it never happened because in the fall of 1919 the desperate military situation, typhus epidemics, and the lack of supplies forced the two governments to join each other’s sworn enemies. The Galicians subordinated their troops to the White general Anton Denikin, while Symon Petliura concluded an agreement with Poland.

The project of state unity failed in 1919, but retroactively, the Zluka became an important symbol. For the generation of young officers from the Sich Riflemen, most of them former Galician POWs who came to
prominence during the revolutionary struggles in Dnieper Ukraine, it stood for the opportunity that was offered by the war and imperial collapse, but which was forfeited through the lack of organization and national consciousness. Under the leadership of Colonel Ievhen Konovalets’, these people came to constitute the core of the Ukrainian Military Organization (1920) and its successor, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (1929). Yet many Galicians also stayed in Soviet Ukraine, where the political leadership made the Galician irredenta an important part of its anti-Polish drive by secretly supporting Ukrainian cultural institutions on the other side of the border. Indeed, during the early 1920s Konovalets’ himself applied for Soviet funding but was refused. Instead, Stalin hijacked the nationalist agenda for his expansionist aims by creating during World War II what Graziosi calls “Great Ukraine”—a polity that, in the long run, became influenced by nationally conscious Galicia rather than assimilating it.

As Roman Szporluk has shown, during the postwar period Soviet apprehension about the nationalist guerrillas, who continued the cause of Konovalets’ and his generation, led to the preservation of Ukrainophone press and the gradual Ukrainization of Galician cities. Although the official Soviet version of the state union was encoded as the “Golden September” of 1939, when the Red Army entered Eastern Poland, the term Zluka returned in the last years of the Soviet Union in the form of the human “chain of unity” on 21 January 1990, linking Ukrainians across the country. This symbolic return of the year 1919 marked the assertion of Ukraine’s sovereignty and its refusal to support the Soviet project. As Serhii Plokhy demonstrates, that refusal was a crucial factor in the Soviet collapse.

Finally, the Soviet project of constructing a Ukrainian republic within the Soviet Union was itself an attempt to merge the different meanings of 1917, 1918, and 1919. A polity “national in form and socialist in content” was, of course, an oxymoron from the start. The Ukrainian SSR was bound to suffer through the built-in tensions between the anti-imperialist legacy of the Ukrainian Revolution and neoimperialist impulses of the Bolshevik state. In this sense, the ideological and cultural wars of the 1920s were the continuation of the Ukrainian Revolution and the attacks on the Ukrainization in the early 1930s—the beginning of its end. As Anne Applebaum, echoing Graziosi, suggests, with the Ukrainian question reimagined by
the Bolsheviks as a peasant question, the Holodomor of 1932–1933 marked the true end of the Ukrainian Revolution, Stalin’s final settling of accounts with the Ukrainian nation.36

Yet the Ukrainian 1918 and 1919 remained a symbolic resource. Ukrainian diaspora communities took over from the postrevolutionary émigrés the task of establishing the meaning of the revolution and preserved it until it could be transmitted back to Ukraine. There, too, Ukrainian dissidents tried to reach out to the legacy of the Ukrainian Revolution through the mediation of the Soviet 1920s, as can be seen in Ivan Dziuba’s *Internationalism or Russification?* (1965). In 1992 the last president-in-exile of the UNR, Mykola Plaviuk, transferred the insignia of his office to the first president of independent Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, thus establishing a symbolic continuity between these two polities.37 However, independent Ukraine was not proclaimed in 1991 as the restoration of the UNR. The continuity with the Ukrainian Revolution became important after 2014, when Russian aggression forced the redefinition of the Ukrainian state’s identity. Independence-day parades started featuring surviving or recreated banners of the UNR army, and the first movie about the Battle of Kruty was finally made.

These recent developments held a deeper significance than simply reaching toward the suitable past and countering Russian claims about the illegitimacy of Ukraine’s borders. In many ways, the consolidation of Ukrainian identity after 2014 repeated the roadmap of 1917–1921. The revolution itself was only the start of this process, both in 1917 and 2014.

Notes


5. Volodymyr Vynnychenko, Vidrodzhennia natsiï, vol. 1 (Kyiv and Vienna: Dzvin, 1920), 168 (all translations are mine unless otherwise noted).


20. Tsentral’niy derzhavnyi arkhyv vyshchychykh orhaniv vlady ta upravlinnia Ukrainy, fond 1115, opys 1, sprava 11, arkush 7.


