Ireland and Ukraine’s Struggle for Independence, 1916–23

written by Conor Kostick, Vladyslav Starodubtsev | March 8, 2024



Crowds at the Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, during the 1920 general strike.



Crowds in Kyiv rally to the Central Rada, summer 1917.

Conor Kostick, Irish writer and historian based in Dublin, and Vladyslav Starodubtsev, a social activist and a historian from Kyiv, answer questions about the period and compare the experiences of the left in that era.

For Ukrainian readers, the discussion is published here.

Ireland and Ukraine 1: What was the challenge facing your respective nations?

CONOR KOSTICK: Ireland had been the first colony of the British Empire and throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, British control over Ireland had been enforced with considerable brutality, not only in the repression the catholic religion of the majority of the inhabitants of Ireland, in making the use of the Irish language illegal, and in the exclusion of the majority from political power, but economically, Britain had suppressed the emergence of Irish industry in all but the northeast corner of the country, and, in the years 1847-53, had overseen an avoidable famine that reduced the Irish population through death and emigration from over 8 million to 3 million.

In 1916 the leading figures of the British Government were adamant that while Ireland might be allowed a level of 'Home Rule', it must not have independence. They were prepared to be ruthless in preventing a breakaway. At the height of the War of Independence, 1918-1921, Britain adopted a policy of 'Reprisals', burning towns and killing activists with a specially recruited fascistic force, the 'Black and Tans'. Their thinking was expressed by a key figure, Sir Henry Wilson, who said that Britain must get a grip on Ireland or risk losing territory all across the empire. Towards the end of the war, Winston Churchill, a member of the government, had a plan drawn up for the re-occupation of Ireland by 100,000 troops.

An additional challenge was internal. The business elite of the northeast corner of Ireland, around Belfast, were running the largest shipyard in the world, along with associated industries like ropeworks and engineering. They were loyal to their source of wealth, the British Empire, and formed the Unionist Party as well as a mass-movement sectarian organization, the Orange Order, to make sure that nationalists would not force them into an independent Ireland.

VLADYSLAV STARODUBTSEV: Ukraine was a divided nation between two empires: Austria-Hungary and Russia. In the huge territories of Ukraine, Ukrainians were the poorest strata of the population, denied education and self-governance, and being actively assimilated. The Ukrainian language was repressed, and Ukrainians only recently de jure were 'freed' from serfdom but in fact, still lived under not-so-different conditions of exploitation. At the same time, the Russian state in the East and the Polish elites tried to realize a settler-colonialist project. Urban centers were used to control the Ukrainian population. In 1919 (a few years after the revolution) Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, was only 23% Ukrainian, and 42% Russian, with an absolute majority of the rural population being Ukrainians—with none of the access to education, representation, and power that the urban centers provide. Ukrainians were a peasant nation, without its landlord or capitalist classes, divided, and actively assimilated and colonized. Small political circles existed, mainly focused on cultural work—giving peasant education, learning the language, and spreading Ukrainian culture, but were actively persecuted. Ukrainian cooperative movement too was blooming and focused on 'economic self-defense' against poverty, as well as was engaged with Ukrainian culture and literacy organizations. First political parties were formed. The Austria-Hungarian dual monarchy was far more liberal than the Russian monarchy, so Ukrainians could realize their ambitions there at least semi-legally. That defined a more robust development of political life in the West. In 1890 in Western Ukraine—a Ukrainian Radical Party was formed, and in Central-Eastern Ukraine—a Revolutionary Ukrainian Party in 1900. Activists of those parties were active in cultural societies, co-operatives, and illegal trade union and peasant movements.

Ireland and Ukraine 2: What were the various strands of nationalist politics in the period?

CK: The main nationalist party before 1916 was the Irish Parliamentary Party. A party of landlords and business elites, it advocated a limited form of independence: local government powers within the empire. This party committed themselves to helping Britain win the Great War, in the hope of a reward afterwards.

More radical but much smaller, Sinn Féin was founded by Arthur Griffiths in 1905 and while not necessarily being in favor of a complete separation from the empire, it was popular for championing Irish culture in the face of British domination. A huge public enthusiasm to recreate the Irish language was shown by the turn-of-the-century with the Gaelic League growing to 100,000 members and similar numbers joining the Gaelic Athletic Association, to revive Irish sports. The backbone of these movements and Sinn Féin were the Catholic middle class and intellectuals.

Within Sinn Féin—and sharing its social base in the revived Irish nationalism of the middle class—were the secret society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The IRB planned to rise up against Britain as soon as the opportunity arose, which they believed was the case as a result of war. In this they were helped by the development of an Irish volunteer national army from 1913, which although largely followers of the IPP and therefore supporting Britain during the war, split with about 13,000 soldiers refusing to help Britain and instead preparing for a rising against the empire.

Then there was working-class nationalism, which although largely channeled behind either the IPP or Sinn Féin, did find a voice in James Connolly, Ireland's most significant socialist leader.

The women's movement, seeking votes for women and equality more generally, trusted to independence to secure their goals and—excepting the Unionist women of the north—a lot of key activists for independence were women members of Cumann na mBan, a movement along the lines of Sinn Féin but for women only.

VS: In Western Ukraine, the Ukrainian Radical Party, the first Ukrainian party in existence was formed.

Ukrainian Radical Party in its program declared:

> "*We are striving to change the way of production following the achievements of scientific socialism, i.e. we want a collective organization of labor and collective ownership of the means of production*" "*In political affairs, we want full freedom of the person, speech, union and associations, conscience, provision for each person, without distinction of sexes, the most complete control on all issues of political life in matters that affect only that person; the autonomy of communities, municipalities, regions and provision of every nation with opportunities for the fullest cultural development.*"

The ideology of the Radical Party was comprised of non-marxist socialism, federalism (decentralization), feminism, constitutionalism, and romantic nationalism akin to the one expressed by Italian republicans such as Mazzini and Garibaldi. An important part of Radical Party appeal and ideology was oriented towards specific problems of peasant organization, which they learned from different agrarian movements in the world, including the Land League in Ireland.

The second Ukrainian party was the Revolutionary Ukrainian Party, which was formed in the Russian-controlled part of Ukraine. It had a wide socialist appeal, but in the end, the social-democratic (Marxist) faction won the internal party struggle and kicked out all the non-marxist members. Thus, the party renamed itself to the Ukrainian Social-democratic Workers Party. It was a completely illegal underground party, it struggled both against the Russian Social-democratic Workers Party, which was against Ukrainian national demands, peacefully fighting for the influence in Ukrainian land; and against the tsarist secret police, who constantly were developing new and more modern methods to fight against agitators. In 1905 USDWP had its first revolutionary experience, participating in revolutionary soviets and strikes.

After the revolution of 1905 and following the reaction, the non-partisan Society of Ukrainian

Progressives was formed to defend against the rising tide of Russian nationalism. The main members of society were moderate progressives and a minority of members of the Ukrainian Social-democratic Workers party.

All influential parties of the Ukrainian Revolution (with one prominent exception—still which was strongly connected to the Revolutionary Ukrainian Party—Ukrainian Party of Socialist Revolutionaries) were formed from these two parties.

Ukrainian Radical Party split into three: the Ukrainian Social-democratic Party—an Austro-Marxist party; the Ukrainian Radical Party—a non-marxist Socialist Party, and the Ukrainian National-democratic Party—a progressive center-to-center-left national-democratic party. They become the leading parties of the revolution in the Western Ukraine.

The Revolutionary Ukrainian Party accepted the Marxist platform and became USDWP. Non-marxist socialists in the Russian-controlled part of Ukraine formed their party only in 1917, based on the so-called 'narodnik' and agrarian-socialist, federalist ideology. The new party was called Ukrainian Party of Socialist Revolutionaries, and it became the biggest party in Ukraine. The majority of the Society of Ukrainian Progressives formed a Socialist-Federalist Party—a moderate progressive group, socialist in name only, and similar to an ideology that later would be described in the US as "New Dealers."

Ireland and Ukraine 3: What role did the left play in the fight for independence?

CK: The working class played a vital role in Ireland's eventual part-escape from the empire. Four huge general strikes took place in this period and there were hundreds of factory occupations that, inspired by what they thought was happening in Russia, called themselves soviets and flew red flags. Thanks to mass boycotts, especially on the railways, Britain found it extremely difficult to govern Ireland or stamp down hard on the flying columns of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the volunteers who had become the official army of a national parliament that had set up in 1919 in defiance of Britain.

Had it been a straight battle between British forces plus Unionists against the IRA, Britain would have won easily, but with no one paying taxes to the empire, no one attending British courts, and boycotts refusing to deliver food or help the administration of the imperial administration, Ireland was able to sustain a guerilla struggle and ultimately force a serious negotiation upon the British government.

VS: Ukrainian Central Rada, a revolutionary provisional government formed in Russian-controlled Ukraine, was completely formed by the left-wing forces. The biggest part of the Rada were Soviet deputies and peasant union representatives, national minorities, and two Ukrainian parties that changed each other in the 'ruling seat': the Ukrainian Socialist-Revolutionary Party and the Ukrainian Social-democratic Worker's Party. In the course of the revolution, by these forces, the Ukrainian People's Republic was formed:

> *With your strength, will, and word, Ukrainians on Ukrainian land became free in the People's Republic. The old dream of our parents, fighters for workers' freedom and rights, came true (…)*
>
> *We, the Ukrainian Central Rada, elected by congresses of peasants, workers, and soldiers of Ukraine, we cannot stand for that, we will not support any wars, because the Ukrainian people want peace, and the democratic peace should be as soon as possible (…)*

> *At the same time, we call the citizenry of independent Ukraine, we call on the People's Republic, to steadfastly stand guard over what has been gained [To defend] the will and rights of our people and to defend our destiny with all our might against all the enemies of the Peasant-Worker Independent Republic.*
>
> — 4th Universal of Ukrainian Central Rada

Against the Ukrainian People's Republic Bolsheviks mounted imperialist aggression, starting the expansionist war while Ukrainians were agitating for 'peace without occupation and contributions.' Where the Bolshevik forces came, they organized mass violence, and more often than not repression and centralization. Local Ukrainian Soviets became party-controlled, and cooperatives nationalized, as something that posed a threat to the Leninist idea of one-party rule and the Russian state.

Ukrainian socialists, students, cooperators, peasants, and workers of all sexes, organized massive resistance against the Bolshevik invasion but faced an unequal struggle, where they were left alone.

Western Left organized campaigns against the Ukrainian People's Republic, already idealizing Russian bolshevik-imperialist conquest of countless colonies of the Russian Empire, grain requisition from minorities, national-cultural and political repressions, and one-party dictatorship as a spread of a "socialist revolution." Entente embargoed Ukraine, preventing supplies for civilians suffering from epidemic and hunger, as well as ammunition and shells for the army. Poland invaded Western Ukraine, and Romania moved to occupy the small Ukrainian region of Bukovyna. Even the French army organized a naval invasion in Crimea. Ukrainian Revolution was left alone against imperial and colonial forces from all sides, with nearly no weapons and ammunition, a state apparatus and army built from nothing in a matter of a year without proper officers or experienced government workers, with a complete lack of control of urban centers and lack of education. In such conditions, Ukraine showed deeply phenomenal resistance, and fought from 1917 until 1921, with Ukrainian left-wing forces, peasants, and workers organizing partisan movements and independent revolutionary republics even after the collapse of the Ukrainian People's Republic itself.

Ireland and Ukraine 4: What different left traditions and parties were there at this time?

CK: The biggest left tradition active in Ireland was syndicalism. The Irish Transport and General Workers Union was modeled on the Industrial Workers of the World and at its peak had 100,000 members. Transport union organizers led mass strikes and 'soviet' takeovers. Unfortunately for the left, the two main figures in building the ITGWU were absent during these critical years. James Connolly had been executed following his leadership of the Easter Rising of 1916, a failed insurrection largely driven by the IRB. Jim Larkin, founder of the ITGWU had been jailed in America.

After the Russian Revolution, a small Communist Party was created but it was tiny and nearly irrelevant.

There was a Labour Party, which was to become a reformist party of the Second International type and is mainstream in Europe today. During the war of independence, it wasn't really distinguishable from the ITGWU, being mostly the ITGWU executive and others running for election in the name of Labour. In the north, mostly in Belfast, was the Independent Labour Party, a radical social democratic party that was quite influential until smashed by a unionist pogrom in 1921.

VS: The Ukrainian revolution didn't have a right wing, as Ukrainian identity was seen as mostly the identity of the Left, while the Right was the one associated with Russian rule and monarchy. The governments of the Ukrainian People's Republic were nearly always ⅘ Radical Socialist and ⅕ non-socialist, usually still in some way left or progressive. Thus, the biggest differences were between

the factions of the Left.

In the Ukrainian People's Republic (in Western Ukraine there was a separate Western Ukrainian People's Republic) the biggest party was the Ukrainian Party of Socialist Revolutionaries. From 1918 it adopted a Soviet\Syndicalist program and agitated for the creation of a democratic, independent Soviet Ukrainian republic. A smaller, but more intellectually influential was the Ukrainian Social-democratic Worker's Party. Its radical wing supported the Soviet government type, while its moderate, democratic-socialist wing supported a Parliamentary socialist government, giving the Soviets a place to co-govern locally, but not to form a government solely on their basis.

The influence of the Socialist-Federalist Party was minuscule, it never was even close to forming a government.

Both the Ukrainian Social-democratic Worker's Party (USDWP) and the Ukrainian Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (UPSR) had their radical splits. UPSR split into UPSR (*Borotbist faction*) and UPSR (*Central Current*). Both UPSRs adopted the Soviet platform but differed concerning foreign policy towards Bolsheviks. *Borotbists* thought that there was still a possibility to convince the Bolsheviks to abandon their imperialist project, while Central Current was staunchly anti-Bolshevik. A similar split occurred with USDWP but also on the ground of the Soviet or Parliamentary system.

The Ukrainian People's Republic then was moving in a confusing direction—adopting a half-soviet, half-parliamentary government system. Its economy was nearly fully co-operative with a state sector acting on proto-Keynesian principles and with a substantial degree of worker's control

Split parties tried to create a 'Third center'—a communist-independentist (Borotbists and radical social-democrats then renamed themselves to Ukrainian Communist parties)—fighting Bolsheviks, and being neutral towards their more moderate ex-party comrades. They even temporarily organized a union with the Anarchist militia of Makhno. Later, communist-independentists abandoned the idea of a "third center" and decided to join the Bolsheviks. However, that decision ended tragically. Their parties were dissolved, a huge majority of their membership repressed (usually not physically repressed. Such repressions against communist-independentists will follow later) as "nationalists" and only the most loyal to Bolsheviks were allowed to be incorporated into a one-party state.

At the same time, in the Russian Bolshevik party (there was no Ukrainian Bolshevik party) existed a Ukrainian communist-independentist faction. Its members were kicked from the party after comparing Lenin's style of government with one of Louis XIV, "L'état c'est moi" and criticizing the Russian chauvinism of Bolshevik policies in Ukraine.

In the Western Ukrainian People's Republic, the National Democratic Party formed a government, with the Radical Party being the second in command, and the Social-democratic Party as the third. As a government existed in a spirit of deliberation, a right-wing social-catholic party also was to co-govern, having 1% of the government seats (which was still a lot more than its real influence—which was less than 1%). Government forces were proportionally represented somewhere as 60\30\9\1. 60% of National-democrats, 30% of Socialist-Radicals, 9% of Social-democrats and 1% of Social-Catholics.

National Democrats in the process of Revolution moved their platform to the left. Being influenced by the British Labour Party, they changed their name to the Ukrainian People's Labour Party and adopted a moderate-socialist program.

What was different with Western Ukraine, as after the experience of semi-democratic rule, the idea of government based on Soviets was (and usually rightfully so) seen as less democratic than a

parliamentary republic, and even the socialist Radicals discussed how to improve and make more robust socialist parliamentary republic, not the Soviet one. The idea of a Soviet republic was obscure, which provoked lengthy and sometimes heated discussions between the Western Ukrainian People's Republic and Ukrainian People's Republic politicians.

Ireland and Ukraine 5: Did the left succeed in being the voice of the national struggle? If not, why not?

CK: No, unfortunately it failed. It is sometimes argued that no particularly radical result could have come from those years, because rural Ireland was too conservative. It's true that deeply conservative values came from some of the larger farmers. They set up a Farmers Freedom Force, modeled on the KKK in the US and the Farmers Party spokesperson said in parliament there were 'not enough lampposts to hang the agitators from Liberty Hall.' They were met on the left, however, by very radical mass movements of poor farmers and land laborers, who around Waterford created a red army to counter them and who in the west took over large estates and worked them co-operatively. In general, there was no lack of daring and imaginative mass activities from the left at this time, such as general strikes and soviets e.g., the brief time Limerick City was run by workers.

I believe the main reason the left failed to at least come out of these years as a significant force in Ireland (and I think it was within the realms of possibility they could have come to power) is that right-wing social democracy—embodied by Labour leaders Wiliam O'Brien, Tom Foran, and Tom Johnson—set the agenda for the whole of the left and working class militants. They were particularly brilliant at sounding like out-and-out revolutionaries when they needed to, and they had the credibility of being former comrades of James Connolly. It took years for the genuine revolutionaries to realize that these officials were more interested in preserving trade union assets and creating a role for Labour in a new Ireland than revolution. Right wing social democracy gifted the energy of the strikes and occupations to Sinn Féin, who used it to help win a limited form of self-rule at the cost of the partition of Ireland, with the north-east corner broken away to remain in the empire. Sinn Féin had become more conservative, with the southern elite moving over to it *en masse* when it was clear the Irish Parliamentary Party had been destroyed by its support for Britain in the war. Only a radical vision of Ireland could have appealed to northern workers in sufficient numbers to prevent the partition of Ireland. The Sinn Féin version was catholic and socially conservative and when that was all that was on offer, the Independent Labour Party of Northern Ireland were trapped (effectively, they had been betrayed by their comrades in the south settling for a partitioned and Sinn Féin-led Ireland).

VS: The Ukrainian left was the only real force to fight for national independence, but it was facing overwhelming forces of imperialist countries or conflicting projects of national self-determination. Poland immediately waged a conquest against Ukrainian ethnic lands to realize the idea of "Greater Poland," and Bolsheviks under Lenin became a regional counterrevolutionary force against indigenous socialists—in Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia, and Far-East, facing numerous self-determined democratic socialist and progressive republics. The Western forces placed their bets on Poland and the Russian White Army and treated Ukrainians as harmful separatists and radicals.

Russian right-liberal politician Milyukov even compared Ukrainians with "Sinn-Feinites bands," saying that "independent from Russia Ukraine" is as unthinkable as "Independent from Britain Ireland."

Nonetheless, the struggle of Ukrainians did something that no one could imagine. The existence of Independent Ukraine now is a direct achievement of Ukrainian socialists then, who by immense sacrifices put Ukraine and the Ukrainian people on the map. Even Bolsheviks, who spoke of Ukraine as an "Eastern Russian province" in 1917, and Lenin, who agitated for centralism during that period,

radically changed their position, facing massive peasant and workers' rebellions of Ukrainian national movement, agreeing to create a pseudo-republic for Ukrainians and recognize us a separate nationality. The Ukrainian People's Republic became a rallying cry for all the future generations struggling for Ukrainian freedom, however, ravished of its "radical left-wing substance" by the next generations, who associated socialism with the Bolshevik project.

Ireland and Ukraine 6: Having read each other's answers, what do you think are the differences and similarities between the Irish left and the Ukrainian left 1916-1923?

CK: It seems to me that the similarities are that the same kind of left politics was active in both Ireland and Ukraine, except that in the Irish case there was a much bigger influence of syndicalism and less of anarchism (no equivalent to Nestor Makhno). Although both countries experienced tragedy and defeat for the left, a part of Ireland, 26 from 32 counties, did at least get concessions, which ultimately led to the country being fully independent from the empire by the mid-1930s. Perhaps the reason for this was the strength of the nationalist middle class? I get the impression they were much more coherent in Ireland, both culturally and politically. With the Land League of the 1880s leading to much greater land ownership by Irish farmers than by absentee imperial landlords; with an economy that allowed the service industry to thrive in the form of many small businesses; and with a cultural sense of identity stretching back centuries, the nationalist middle class was a substantial force and after the elite nationalists abandoned them and went all in for the Great War, they found their own voice. Poor farmers, teachers, white collar workers and small businesses provided a very strong network of support for Sinn Féin and a guerilla war waged by the IRA. This, plus the ungovernability of Ireland in the face of mass popular protests forced concessions from the empire in the form of a treaty that allowed limited self-government (the concessions were so limited that the national movement split over whether to accept them, with the elite scurrying back to power by being in favor of the treaty and the poorer middle class and working class losing out).

The other very interesting difference is that the Russian empire experienced a revolution that brought people to power who claimed to be socialists and to be fighting for a world transformation to a classless society where all would be equal. This very appealing vista seems to have split the left in Ukraine, because it took some time to appreciate that the Bolsheviks' deeds were not matching their claims. In Ireland there was only one enemy, and that enemy was very clear indeed. The British deployed a fascist-type of hastily created army, the Black and Tans, with a remit to crush every nationalist action via the policy of reprisal. If the IRA burned down a barracks, the Black and Tans burned down a town. If the IRA killed a leading figure of the empire, the Black and Tans killed many activists during raids. Pretty much all of Ireland united in refusing supplies to these people, in not paying taxes to the empire, in not using imperial courts, etc. How much more complicated it must have been in Ukraine, when some of the armies approaching your town offered to side with the working class and help bring about global revolution. You would have to have had farsighted intuitions to out-maneuver the circling imperial powers as well as domestic enemies and the reds. I can imagine the debates among the left parties were extremely bitter.

VS: It seems that Ireland was luckier in terms of geography and facing the enemy—the exhausted British Empire. By sheer sacrifices and immense collaborative work Ireland won concessions that led to the Independence. It seems to me that the relatively compact geography of Ireland, together with one defined enemy that acted brutally were defining features of Irish victory. It was a great national struggle for independence. Unfortunately, conservative identity of big part of Irish population prevented mass left-wing movements to lead struggle for Independence. I think that there were real possibilities for the Left to lead the fight, but only if previous actions would manage to create a distinct and attractive Irish left-wing peasant identity. It is a great difference that in Ireland a big national coalition fought for its independence, while in Ukraine it was purely a left-wing coalition, I

would say a radical left-wing coalition, which is quite huge difference, and highly affected strategy. From the similarities, Ukrainian and Irish socialists practically faced the same problems—of activities in peasant-majority land controlled by the empire, and that unique experience of peasant organization we can see only in Ireland, Ukraine, Mexico and a few more countries. The same mindset was also in creating cultural organization and in connecting national, democratic, and left identities. Ukraine lacked organized syndicalism as a movement, as Ukraine didn't develop a proper trade-union movement to that time.

Ireland and Ukraine 7: Are there lessons from this revolutionary period for today?

CK: The more the working-class movement comes to the fore in Ireland, the more likely that the outstanding issues created by partition will be resolved in a united Ireland that northern people are glad to be part of. The more Ireland slides towards racism, anti-immigrant feelings, and the more it accepts the argument coming from the elite that luxuries like disability rights, a role for trade unions, a transition to sustainable agriculture, etc. are simply not affordable, the less it will appeal to workers in the north, whether catholic or protestant. Although it is likely we will soon see Sinn Féin in power north and south, it's not clear that a 'Border Poll'—a vote for reunification—can be won with pro-market values as dominant in the south.

VS: It is the memory of revolutionary transformations and radical democratic ideas that attract us. Experience of fighters for freedom and visions of the world that could be. The value of such visions for today are immense—they give us ground to stay on and give the platform to think from—and to develop and create a better movement. I hope that experience of both revolutions would be better known. In Ukrainian, we have a few translations of James Connolly, including articles of Kostick himself. It means that there is something to learn and motivate. And the Ukrainian People's Republic of course is the dividing point of Ukrainian history, the strongest moment when Ukrainians stood up. It is remembered as an immense part of our identity. And how the right-wing wouldn't try to wash the Ukrainian People's Republic of all of its "radical socialism," its legacy still lives on.

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