HOW TO MAKE KHARKIV WORKERS INTO BOLSHEVIKS: LESSONS FROM THE HETMANATE AND DIRECTORY, 1918

This article concerns workers— a group of people about which one rarely reads these days in the pages of Ukrainian history journals (in Ukraine or abroad). The intent of choosing this subject is not to revive Soviet historiography’s myopic focus on the supposed “vanguard of history,” but to begin in a small way to bring this social group back into the discussion; this is an initial and tentative attempt to draw our attention back to a group that, though certainly not the most numerous in Ukraine’s past, played a very important and tragic role in this country’s twentieth century. The author does not believe that historians will be able to create an inclusive and comprehensive interpretation of Ukraine’s past until we figure out ways to incorporate a multiplicity of contradictory experiences, peoples and identities into our narratives. These workers’ experience of the revolutionary period may not have been similar to those of most of the inhabitants of Ukraine, but it is at least possible that their experiences are as significant (and representative) as those of the leaders of the Central Rada or the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine.

Over the period, 1914-1921, the laboring people of Kharkiv moved from close to the bottom of the tsarist social hierarchy to become the nominal “ruling class” of the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic. They endured the rule of at least eight different governments, each of whose propaganda machines bombarded them with numerous possible identities, from “worker” to “Ukrainian” to “Bolshevik.” These people in turn interpreted and transformed the meaning of such terms to fit their own priorities and understanding of events. And yet, despite the multiplicity of identities to which they were exposed, the evidence suggests that many of those who worked in the factories and shops of Kharkiv came to think of themselves primarily as “workers” precisely in this period, and not only because by the end to be a worker meant to be among the relatively privileged. In the face of repeated, topsy-turvy changes in the rules of local power, these people found great solidarity and support amongst their comrades within their factory, and then with other workers in the same industry, and sometimes across the city. In this article, I will discuss the important role that the German occupation and Hetmanate
government of 1918 played in pushing workers to seek solidarity among their fellow workers within their factory and city.

To understand the occupation's significance, it is important to recall how Soviet power first came to the city in late 1917. As Rex Wade has pointed out, the struggle for Soviet power was "protracted and multisided." Whilst all three main political groupings in the city – non-Bolshevik Russian socialists, Ukrainian socialists, and local Bolsheviks – competed for political dominance, none was willing to take up arms to seize power. From the first news of the coup in Petrograd, Ukrainian and Russian socialists and many of the city's workers strove for compromise. They accepted the Bolsheviks' action of removing the Provisional Government and were very much in favor of "Soviet power," which as they saw it meant a socialist government and local control. As in numerous cities across the former-empire, these socialists and workers sympathized greatly with the attempts of the All-Russian Union of Railway Workers (VIKZhEL) to force the Bolsheviks to create a multiparty socialist government. Even local Bolsheviks remained uncertain that violence was necessary to establish Soviet power, until December 8, 1917, when a Bolshevik expeditionary force arrived to Kharkiv. After some internal disagreements between local Bolsheviks and the expeditionary force's leadership, and after a few violent clashes with pro-Ukrainian troops, "Soviet power" was installed in the city, by which those in control meant Bolshevik power and subordination to Lenin's Sovnarkom.1 For the purposes of this article, what is crucial about this moment is that, though many Kharkiv workers certainly supported the establishment of "Soviet power," as they understood that term, the Bolsheviks had to employ forces from the north, in order to impose their version of "Soviet power" in Kharkiv.

The regime that pro-Soviet forces then set up in Ukraine lasted only a few months. On February 9, 1918 the Ukrainian Central Rada's delegation at Brest-Litovsk signed a separate peace with the Central Powers, and soon afterward invited the latter's armies to assist it in re-asserting its authority in Ukraine.2 As Andrea Graziosi has pointed out, this agreement and the occu-

2. The Brest-Litovsk treaty of February 9, 1918 did not provide for direct German or Austrian military intervention, though the matter was discussed during negotiations and German military authorities were certainly considering it. On February 15 at the German military command's suggestion, delegates from the Central Rada signed an appeal to the Austrian and German peoples, calling for their help in liberating their country. The German Supreme Command responded on the same day, informing the Emperor and Foreign Office that "military assistance would be furnished without delay, and that two German detachments had already been ordered to Pinsk and Rovno." German forces began to march into Ukraine on February 18 and entered Kyiv.