

Olena Syniavska

BOLSHEVIK POLICY IN SOUTHERN UKRAINE IN 1918: ESSENCE, IMPLEMENTATION, AND CONSEQUENCES

ABSTRACT

Based on an analysis of primary sources and historical literature, this article brings to light the policy of the Bolshevik government in the southern region of Ukraine during the final stage of the First World War. Against the backdrop of the political, social, and national changes in Ukraine during the period of the Central Rada, we explore the goals and methods of establishing Bolshevik control over key southern infrastructure objects, along with the attitudes of local elites toward this control and the reasons for the end of the Bolshevik occupation in 1918. We provide evidence for the idea that territorial issues were a cornerstone in both the communication between the Central Rada and the Provisional Government, as well as in the relations between the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) and Bolshevik Russia. Despite the completely opposing trends in Russia's political development during the Provisional Government and after the October Revolution, neither government – Provisional nor Bolshevik – considered Ukraine a unified political and economic entity and regarded the southern region as an integral part of ethnic Russia. In this matter the Bolsheviks essentially continued the policy of the Provisional Government regarding Ukraine's southern region as, in November 1917, the Russian Council of Peoples Commissars, or the Sovnarkom, did not recognize the jurisdiction of the Central Rada over the southeastern territories, which, according to the Provisional Government's Instruction to the General Secretariat, were not included in autonomous Ukraine in July 1917. One manifestation of this policy was the attempt to create Bolshevik republics referred to as "Soviet republics": Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih, Odesa, and Taurida. The establishment of these republics followed different scenarios but had a common characteristic: the Bolshevik governments of these quasi-republics did not formally consider themselves Ukrainian. The main goal of Bolshevik Russia was to maintain control over the Donetsk industrial basin and the Black Sea ports.

KEYWORDS:

regional history, Central Rada, Bolsheviks, southern Ukraine, 1918

OLENA SYNIAVSKA

Ukrainian historian who specializes in the history of Ukrainian lands in the context of the political, social, and cultural history of Central and Eastern Europe in the second half of the 19th to the first half of the twentieth century. In 2022, she worked as a visiting researcher at the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (Regensburg, Germany) as part of a research team in the international research project 'Ukrainian Statehood, Russia and Germany: 1918 and Its Consequences', funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. As part of the project, she primarily studied Ukrainian–Russian relations in 1917–1918. In June 2023, she co-organized a workshop 'Ukrainian Statehood of 1917–1921 in the European context' (Regensburg, Germany).

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7247-3590>

Reflecting on the two types of power at the turn of 1917–1918, Serhiy Yefremov, the Deputy Chairman of the Central Rada of Ukraine (Ukrainska Tsentralna Rada; UTsR), a literary scholar and publicist, observed, “One serves people, the other forces people to serve it; one is grounded on moral authority, the other seeks support at the tips of bayonets”.¹ Yefremov classified Bolshevik power under the latter category, equating it with autocracy, as he believed that Bolshevism shared its roots with the old tsarist regime. The common historiographical view holds that the Bolsheviks were unwilling to recognize the will of the majority of the Ukrainian people, who supported the UTsR and the Ukrainian People’s Republic (hereafter referred to as UNR). Some modern historians challenge this position, arguing that one should speak cautiously about the national consciousness of Ukrainians at that time, and that the UTsR was not ready for state-building.² Clearly, the Bolsheviks’ goal at the time was reintegration of Ukraine into the newly proclaimed Soviet state. To this end, an assault on the newly declared UNR began. In early December 1917, Russian leaders Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky explicitly stated in the *Manifesto to the Ukrainian People with an Ultimatum to the Central Rada* that their aim was to fight against the UTsR, which “under the guise of national slogans has long been pursuing a truly bourgeois policy... not recognizing the soviets and Soviet power in Ukraine”.³

The first step toward this goal was the formation of Bolshevik governing bodies to legitimize their authority in Ukraine. In December 1917, an alternative All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets was held in Kharkiv, where Ukraine was declared a Republic of Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies, and the Central Executive Committee (Tsentralnyi Vykonavchyi Komitet; TsVK) was elected. The TsVK consisted of 41 members, of whom 35 were Bolsheviks, with an additional 20 seats reserved for peasant delegates. In effect, the Bolsheviks seized power on the UNR territory, legitimizing it through the resolutions of the Kharkiv All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets.

The Bolsheviks in Ukraine were not an isolated group; they maintained connections with the leadership in Petrograd and received and carried out directives from the central organs of Soviet power. The TsVK was formed by representatives from a limited number of Ukrainian soviets and did not gain broad support within Ukrainian society. It began its

¹ Serhij Jefremov, ‘Na vistrjach štykiv’, *Nova Rada*, 16 (1918), p. 1.

² Vladyslav Verstjuk and Tetjana Ostaško, *Dijači Ukrajin’s’koji Central’noji Rady. Biografičnyj dovidnyk* (Kyjiv, 1998), p. 9. For a historiographical discussion of the reasons for the defeat of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921, see: Gennadij Korolov, ‘Ukrainskaja revoljucija 1917–1921 gg.: mify sovremennikov, obrazy i predstavlenija istoriografii’, *Ab Imperio*, 4 (2011), 357–72.

³ For the text of this Manifesto and the response by the General Secretariat, see: ‘Vijna z bil’sovykamj’, *Nova Rada*, 202 (1917), p. 2.

activities by reporting to the Bolshevik Council of People's Commissars, or Sovnarkom, sending a telegram announcing the takeover of full power in Ukraine. The telegram also emphasized that, "if fraternal blood is shed in Ukraine, it will not be in a struggle between Ukrainians and Great Russians, but in a class struggle between the Ukrainian working masses and the Rada, which has seized all power".⁴

This article will examine the development of Bolshevik strategy toward Ukraine, partially analysing the Bolshevik attempts to internally legitimize their authority. Also, it will describe the overall state of Ukrainian national power in 1918. In addition, it will analyse the policy of the Russian Sovnarkom in the southern region of Ukraine in order to identify the objectives and means of establishing Bolshevik control over the key objects of infrastructure and explore the reasons for the end of the Bolshevik occupation in 1918. The conceptual basis of the article is the vision of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921, according to which the Ukrainian national movement was activated following the collapse of the Russian Empire, after which it began implementing its own state project.⁵ One of the reasons for its failure is generally considered to be the wars with the Bolsheviks.

The subject of relations between the UTsR and Russian governments during the events of 1917–1921 has been covered in both Ukrainian and foreign historiography. Most studies focus on the territory of the Upper Dnipro Ukraine and the Kharkiv-Kyiv line, while events in the southern region of Ukraine are often addressed only briefly. A notable exception is the works of Ukrainian researchers Vladyslav Verstiuk, Petro Lavriv, and Halyna Turchenko.⁶ A collective study on the interwar period in Ukraine by scholars from the Institute of History of Ukraine at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine stands out for its innovative methodological approaches, including sections on Bolshevik activities in the southern region.⁷

In the context of the full-scale war Russia is waging against Ukraine, there is a growing interest in the issue of the Bolshevik invasion and occupation of large parts of Ukraine during the years of the Ukrainian Revolution. The majority of scholars analyse current events using the principles

⁴ 'Sovetskaja vlast' na Ukraine', *Izvestija Central'nogo ispolnitel'nogo komiteta*, 252 (1917), 2.

⁵ *Narysy istoriji ukrajins'koji revoljuciji 1917–1921 rokiv*, ed. by Valerij Smolij, Hennadij Borjak, Vladyslav Verstiuk and others, 2 vols (Kyjiv: Naukova dumka, 2011–2012).

⁶ Vladyslav Verstiuk, 'The Bolshevik Expansion and Occupation of Ukraine (December 1917 – February 1918)', *AREI*, 2 (2023), 118–45; Petro Lavriv, *Istorija pivdenno-dchidnoji Ukrajiny* (Kyjiv: Spilka, 1996); Halyna Turchenko, 'Impers'kyj projekt "Novorosija": bil'sovyc'kyj variant', *Naukovi praci istoryc'noho fakul'tetu Zaporiz'koho nacional'nogo universytetu*, 39 (2014), 75–83.

⁷ Hennadij Jefimenko, 'Radjans'ki deržavy v Ukrajini (1917–1920)', in *Ukrajina j ukrajinci v postimpers'ku dobu. 1917–1939* (Kyjiv: Akadempriodyka, 2021), 154–82; Stanislav Kul'čyc'kyj, 'Krym u period revoljuciji ta hromadjans'koji vjny: 1917–1920', in *Ukrajina j ukrajinci v postimpers'ku dobu. 1917–1939* (Kyjiv: Akadempriodyka, 2021), 182–98.

of historical comparison, tracing the roots of Russian military aggression against the UNR in 1917–1921.⁸

In foreign historiography, the history of Ukraine's southern region in 1917–1918 is considered mainly within the context of the German and Austro-Hungarian occupation of 1918. Particular attention is given to the relationships between Ukrainian authorities, such as the UTsR and the Hetmanate of Pavlo Skoropadsky, and the Central Powers, as well as the policies of the German military administration in southern cities. Important contributions to this area have been made by the researchers Andreas Kappeler and Włodzimierz Mędrzecki.⁹ The collective historical study *Die Ukraine zwischen Selbstbestimmung und Fremdherrschaft 1917–1922*,¹⁰ edited by Wolfram Dornik, provides a general analysis of Bolshevik policies in Ukraine up to the arrival of Allied forces in 1918.

While studying the establishment of Soviet power in Ukraine in early 1918, Ukrainian historian Hennadii Yefimenko noted that despite the opposition between the Russian Bolsheviks and representatives of the Ukrainian movement, their primary goals were not initially contradictory. The Ukrainian liberation movement sought to protect the national and cultural rights of Ukrainians, while the Bolsheviks agreed – initially, at least – to the creation of a formally national but in essence Soviet Ukraine. Interestingly, in their efforts to gain control over Ukraine, the Bolsheviks employed slogans almost identical to those of the Ukrainian liberation movement.¹¹

Another Ukrainian historian, Vladyslav Verstiuk, noted that the conflict between the Central Rada and the Bolsheviks was inevitable. However, it so happened that Lenin was not particularly focused on Ukraine in early November 1917, as the primary task for Petrograd was establishing control over the army. Once the UTsR shifted from merely declaring its principles to attempting to implement them, the Bolsheviks recognized it as a genuine competitor in the struggle for power.¹² Initially, an ideological war against the Rada began, and the Russian Sovnarkom – through the mouthpiece of the People's Commissar for Nationalities in Russia,

⁸ A telling example in this regard is the collective monograph presented in the format of an imagined dialogue between scholars of the Institute of History of Ukraine at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine and its readers. See: *Perelom: Vijna Rosiji proty Ukrainy u časovych plastach i prostorach mynuvšyny: dialohy z istorykamy*, ed. by Valerij Smolij, 2 vols (Kyjiv: Instytut istoriji Ukrainy, 2022).

⁹ Andreas Kappeler, *Ungleiche Brüder: Russen und Ukrainer vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (München: C.H. Beck, 2017); Włodzimierz Mędrzecki, 'Bayerische Truppenteile in der Ukraine im Jahr 1918', in *Bayern und Osteuropa. Aus der Geschichte der Beziehungen Bayerns, Frankens und Schwabens mit Rußland, der Ukraine und Weißrußland* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), pp. 441–60.

¹⁰ Wolfram Dornik and others, *Die Ukraine zwischen Selbstbestimmung und Fremdherrschaft 1917–1922* (Graz: Leykam, 2011). In Ukrainian translation: *Ukraina miż samovyznačennjam ta okupacijeu: 1917–1922 roky*, ed. by Vol'fram Dornik and others (Kyjiv: Nika-Centr, 2015).

¹¹ Hennadij Jefimenko, 'Radjans'ki deržavy v Ukraini: 1917–1920', in *Ukraina j ukrajinci v postimpers'ku dobu: 1917–1939* (Kyjiv: Akadempriodyka, 2021), p. 155.

¹² Vladyslav Verstiuk, 'Ukrajins'ka narodna hespublika: vid prohološennja do padinnja', in *Narysy istoriji ukrajins'koji revoljuciji 1917–1921 roku* (Kyjiv: Naukova dumka, 2011), I, pp. 218–19.

Joseph Stalin – demanded a referendum in Ukraine on the issue of self-determination.¹³ This was followed by an ultimatum. Since the ultimatum did not gain the expected support from the Bolsheviks and, on the contrary, sparked a wave of protests within the Ukrainian society, Petrograd decided to change tactics. The creation of the TsVK, the People's Secretariat, and the proclamation of Bolshevik power in Ukraine indicated that Russian Sovnarkom was shifting to more active measures.¹⁴

From the very beginning of the UTsR's formation, Ukrainian political leaders had to defend the right of the Ukrainian people to self-determination. The territorial issue was especially pressing. In the early stages of the Ukrainian Revolution, the UTsR proclaimed national-territorial autonomy within the boundaries of the nine Ukrainian guberniyas of the former Romanov Empire. However, according to the Provisional Government's *Instruction* to the UTsR in July 1917, the powers and authority of the Ukrainian General Secretariat were significantly limited. In fact, the Russian government's version of autonomous Ukraine did not include the Kherson, Taurida, Katerynoslav, or Kharkiv guberniyas. Attempting to influence the situation, the UTsR organized the Congress of the Peoples of Russia in Kyiv in September 1917. The final resolution of this congress clearly articulated the idea of creating a federal democratic state, but this goal could not be accomplished.

After the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd in October 1917, the situation worsened. With the Third Universal of 7 November 1917, the UTsR declared the creation of the UNR, which it envisioned as part of the democratic federal Russia – a state that, in reality, no longer existed.¹⁵ Seeking to extend its jurisdiction over Ukrainian territory, the Russian Sovnarkom launched an anti-Ukrainian propaganda campaign, which culminated in the ultimatum and then the start of military actions.

In relations between the Central Rada and the Provisional Government, as well as those between the UNR and Bolshevik Russia, the territorial issue remained one of the key concerns. Despite the entirely opposite political trends during the existence of the Provisional Government and after the October Revolution, both Russian governments – the Provisional and the Bolshevik – could not envision the future Russian state without the southern and eastern Ukrainian lands. In this matter the Bolsheviks

¹³ This is in reference to an interview that Stalin gave to the newspaper *Izvestia VTsIK* on 24 November 1917. In this interview, which was dedicated to Ukraine, Stalin stated that the Sovnarkom would only recognize a government established based on the results of a referendum. He called for the convocation of an All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets and declared that power in Ukraine should belong to soviets of workers', soldiers', and peasants' deputies.

¹⁴ For detailed analysis of the course of events in Ukraine from December 1917 to February 1918, see: Verstiuk, 'The Bolshevik Expansion', pp. 118–45.

¹⁵ 'Tretij Universal Ukrajin's'koji Central'noji Rady', in *Ukrajin's'ka Central'na Rada: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. by Vladyslav Verstiuk and others, 2 vols (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1996), I, p. 398.

essentially continued the Provisional Government's policy toward Ukraine's southern region. In November 1917, the Russian Sovnarkom did not recognize the UTsR's jurisdiction over the southeastern territories.

After the proclamation of the Third Universal (7 November 1917), Joseph Stalin accused the UTsR of annexing new guberniyas, even though as early as March 1917 he had called for the immediate declaration of political autonomy for the Caucasus, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Turkmenistan – those areas of Russia that represented “integrated economic territories with distinct ways of life and national populations, with local administrative practices and education in their native languages”.¹⁶ Evidently, he envisioned the borders of autonomous Ukraine in a very different format.

The issue of the status of Donbas – a region with a developed industrial complex and significant mineral resources – was particularly contentious. The Bolsheviks of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Basin considered this region part of Greater Russia. In November 1917, the leader of the Regional Committee of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party (Bolsheviks), or RSDLP(b), Fyodor Sergeev (Artem), proposed transforming the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Basin into an independent administrative-territorial unit which would be incorporated into Bolshevik Russia with its own self-governance.¹⁷

As we know, there was no consensus on this issue among the members of the first Bolshevik government of Soviet Ukraine. In his memoirs, Georgiy Lapchynskyi, a member of the first Soviet Ukrainian government, noted that local Bolsheviks were convinced that Donbas, Kryvyi Rih, and Kharkiv had no connection to Ukraine and should either be annexed to Russia or granted autonomy. Meanwhile, representatives from Kyiv – Mykola Skrypnyk and Yevgeniya Bosch – argued that it was in the interest of the revolution to keep the industrial regions tied to the agrarian territories of Ukraine.¹⁸

At the All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets in Kharkiv, a separate resolution was passed: *On the Self-Determination of the Donetsk and Kryvyi Rih Basins*. This resolution paved the way for the Congress of Workers' Deputies of the Donetsk and Kryvyi Rih Basins in early February 1918.¹⁹ Following heated debates between Mykola Skrypnyk, who advocated for the autonomous status of Donbas region within the Soviet Ukraine as part of the All-Russian Federation of Soviet Republics, and the supporters of regional separatism led by Semen Vasylychenko, the majority voted in favour of establishing

¹⁶ Iosif Stalin, ‘Vojna i revoljucija’, *Pravda*, 17 (1917), 3.

¹⁷ Petro Lavriv, *Istoriya pivdenno-schidn’oji Ukrainy* (Kyjiv: Spilka, 1996), p. 140.

¹⁸ Heorhij Lapčyns’kyj, ‘Peršyj period Radjans’koji vlady na Ukraini. CVKU ta Narodnyj Sekretariat: spohady’, in *Litopys revoljuciji*, 1 (1928), 159–75 (p. 162).

¹⁹ ‘Materialy ta dokumenty pro Donec’ko-Kryvoriz’ku respubliku’, in *Litopys revoljuciji*, 3 (1928), 250–88 (pp. 258–59).

the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic. Skrypnyk, who supported the idea of a global proletarian revolution as the means to justly resolve all political, economic, social, and national issues, withdrew his proposal from consideration. His goal was to build a Bolshevik yet simultaneously national Ukraine.

Reflecting on the events of 1918, Skrypnyk later wrote,

Our tragedy in Ukraine was precisely that we sought, with the help of the working class – ethnically Russian or Russified, which often treated even the slightest mention of the Ukrainian language and culture with disdain – to win over the peasantry and rural proletariat, which, being predominantly Ukrainian in composition, had historically developed a mistrust and prejudice toward all things Russian, ‘Muscovite’.²⁰

The resolution on the creation of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic emphasized that it was a separate administrative entity within the “free federation of free Soviet republics of Russia”.²¹ Overall, this entity was a separatist quasi-state formation created by the Bolsheviks. Alongside its proclamation, a local Sovnarkom was elected, which nevertheless maintained constant contact with the Russian Sovnarkom, and the decrees of the latter were considered mandatory for implementation within the republic. Skrypnyk argued that among the Donetsk Bolsheviks there was a notion to allow Upper Dnipro Ukraine to independently purge itself of “petty-bourgeois nationalism”. However, the VTsK of the Ukrainian Soviets gave its consent to the creation of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic, aiming to establish a strong ground for proletarian dictatorship in the Basin, which could become a “striking force” in the struggle against the UTsR. As for the government of the UNR of the Soviets and the VTsK of the Ukrainian Soviets, they were perceived by the leadership of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic only as simultaneously functioning bodies in regard to the Republic’s own respective governing structures.

In his turn, Volodymyr Zatonyskyi, analysing the relationship between the People’s Secretariat and the Council of People’s Commissars of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic, highlighted contradictions within the interpretation of the national question,

This is where the difference lay between the People’s Secretariat and Comrade Artem’s group in Kharkiv, the Katerynoslavites, and our

²⁰ Mykola Skrypnyk, ‘Donbas i Ukraïna’, in *Statti i promovy z nacional’noho pytannja* (München: Sučasnist’, 1974), p. 11.

²¹ See the Resolution on the separation of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic (Rezolucija o vydelenii Donecko-Krivorožskoj respubliky): ‘Materialy ta dokumenty pro Donec’ko-Kryvoriz’ku respubliku’, *Litopys revoliuciji*, 3 (1928), pp. 258–59.

people from Kryvyi Rih and Donbas: the latter tried to isolate themselves from Ukraine that was governed by Central Rada, while we tried to create a national Ukrainian Soviet centre for the entire Ukrain.²²

Within Soviet historiography, the creation of Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic was interpreted in two ways: on one hand, as a mistake by the local Bolsheviks due to their lack of political experience; on the other, as an attempt to prevent the occupation of Ukraine's developed regions by German and Austrian troops.²³ This ambiguity stemmed from the evaluations given to this republic by the central Bolshevik authorities. The Russian Sovnarkom did not recognize the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic either as an independent state or as part of Russia. According to some evidence, a meeting took place between Artem and Lenin during which the former unsuccessfully tried to obtain Lenin's consent to the creation of a separate republic. The harmful nature of separatist sentiments and secession was directly stated by the head of the All-Russian VTsK of the Soviets, Yakov Sverdlov.²⁴ The situation briefly changed later when, under pressure from German and Austrian troops in March 1918, the Bolsheviks attempted to use the self-proclaimed Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic as a means to retain control over Ukraine's eastern region. However, representatives of the forces allied with the UNR were unwilling to recognize any artificial entities, regardless of whether they were independent or subordinate to Russia, so this idea did not find practical implementation.

The territorial issue remained unresolved. The leadership of the separatist republic claimed territories that, in their opinion, had never been part of Ukraine – lands belonging to the Kharkiv, Katerynoslav, and parts of Kherson and Taurida guberniyas. The borders of this republic aligned with those outlined for Ukraine by the Provisional Government in August 1917 but were never enforced.²⁵ In early 1918, the eastern territories of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic became part of the newly established Don Soviet Republic, with its own Sovnarkom, while two other separate Soviet republics appeared in the south: the Odesa and Taurida republics. The former was established in late January 1918 within the territories of Kherson and Besarabia guberniyas, where power was held by the self-proclaimed

²² Volodymyr Zatonsky, 'Z spohadiv pro ukraïns'ku revolyutsiyu', in *Litopys revoljuciji*, 4 (1929), 139–72 (pp. 168–69).

²³ See: Jurij Gamreckij and others, *Triumfal'noe šestvie Sovetskoj vlasti na Ukraine* (Kiev: Naukova dumka, 1987). The analysis of Soviet historiography is provided in the following study: Halyna Turčenko and Fedir Turčenko, *Proekt «Novorosija» 1764–2014 rr: jvilej na krovi* (Zaporizžja: ZNU, 2015).

²⁴ *Bol'sevistskie organizacii Ukrainy v period ustanovlenija i ukreplenija Sovetskoj vlasti (nojabr' 1917 – april' 1918 gg.): sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Kiev: GosPolitizdat, 1962), p. 113.

²⁵ To support their arguments, the leadership of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic directly referred to the *Temporary Instruction to the General Secretariat*: "The Kyiv Rada, in its agreement with Prince Lvov and Tereshchenko, established the eastern regions of Ukraine along a line that was, and still is, the western border of our Republic". Quoted from: Halyna Turčenko, 'Impers'kyj projekt "Novorosija": bil'sovyc'kyj variant', in *Naukovi praci istoričnoho fakul'tetu Zaporiz'koho nacional'nogo universytetu*, 39 (2014), p. 77.

Council of People's Commissars, led by Volodymyr Yudovskyi. The Council functioned in Crimea during March–April 1918, with Jan Miller [real name: Janis Šepte] serving as the head of its VTsK.

In Odesa, the issue of power came to the fore after the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd. Local members of the RSDLP(b) sought to seize power in Odesa and its environs in parallel with their Petrograd counterparts, but they lacked sufficient military and popular support in both the city and the region. The Odesa Guberniya Council strongly opposed the Bolshevik attempts to seize power.²⁶ In this context, the Bolsheviks resorted to provocations, which exacerbated tensions between the local authorities and Ukrainian *Haidamak* forces. To stabilize the situation and prevent the escalation of conflict between various political groups, Lieutenant Colonel Viktor Poplavko²⁷ was dispatched to Odesa as the military commissar of the General Secretariat of the Ukrainian Central Rada. With significant authority from the Ukrainian military ministry, Poplavko undertook active efforts to strengthen the UTsR's authority in Odesa and prevent armed clashes in the city and surrounding areas. His attempts to establish contact with the Workers Deputies' Council, however, sparked a negative reaction from some of his allies, who accused him of secretly sympathizing with the Bolsheviks.²⁸ Nonetheless, following the proclamation of the Third Universal, a joint meeting of all socialist groups, including representatives of the Revolutionary Committee and the Military Council, was held in Odesa. The meeting supported the creation of the Ukrainian People's Republic within the federative democratic Russian republic.²⁹

The spread of anti-Ukrainian sentiments in the city was fuelled by Bolshevik provocations as they did not recognize the Kherson gubernia's jurisdiction under the UTsR. At the end of November, under the pretext of sending units to the Don to fight General Aleksei Kaledin's forces, and to a greater extent to establish a military dictatorship in Odesa, the Bolsheviks instigated clashes between the Red Guards and the Haidamaks, which lasted from 30 November to 2 December 1917.³⁰ After three days of confrontation, the better-organized Ukrainian forces emerged victorious.

²⁶ The decision to support the UTsR was made during a joint meeting of Odesa's political organizations, held on 27 October/9 November 1917. The decisive role in this decision was played by Volodymyr Chekhivskyi, the leader of the local Ukrainian Social Democrats. He announced that the Kherson Ukrainian Provincial Council, which he headed, and which represented the interests of the Central Rada, would not pursue "forcible Ukrainization" but would instead work in cooperation with all political organizations in Odesa.

²⁷ Taras Vinckovs'kyj, 'Viktor Poplavko v hornlyi revoljuciji: miž svojimy i čužymy', in *Čornomors'ka chuylja Ukrajin's'koji revoljuciji: providnyky nacional'noho ruchu v Odesi u 1917–1920 rr.*, ed. by Vadym Chmars'kyi and others (Odesa: TES, 2011), pp. 132–41.

²⁸ The head of the Odesa Military Council, Hryhoriy Hryshko, noted in his memoirs: "As it later turned out, he was not working for the benefit of Ukraine, but to its detriment. Unfortunately, we realized this too late. He was an operative working for the Bolsheviks".

²⁹ Vinckovs'kyj, 'Viktor Poplavko v hornlyi revoljuciji', p. 141.

³⁰ For detailed account of the power struggle in Odesa in December 1917, see: Mychajlo Koval'čuk, 'Ukrajins'ki vijs'kovi častyny v Odesi za Central'noji rady: formuvannja, orhanizacija, bojovyj šljach', in *Ukrajins'kyj istoričnyj žurnal*, 3 (2017), 46–66.

As a result, both sides were forced to agree to the creation of a unified governing body consisting of representatives from Ukrainian organizations and the Councils of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks and their supporters effectively maintained their own independence in the city's political life.³¹

Under these circumstances, the idea of declaring Odesa a free city within the UNR gained significant popularity.³² To pursue this idea, an Odesa delegation even travelled to Kyiv and received preliminary approval from Volodymyr Vynnychenko, the head of the General Secretariat. By mid-December, the city obtained approval from the central Ukrainian authorities to establish its own electoral district. Two separate commissions were formed – one by the city council and the other by the Council of Workers', Soldiers', Sailors', and Peasants' Deputies. Legal frameworks for the functioning of the free city were developed, along with two urban development programs. However, due to the growing activity of Bolshevik forces, these plans were never fully implemented.

The next attempt by the Bolsheviks to seize power in Odesa occurred after the Military Council declared its rejection of the ultimatum from the Council of People's Commissars to the Central Rada and the start of the war between Bolshevik Russia and the UNR. Both the local and national leadership underestimated the Bolsheviks' ability to significantly influence the course of events and the ability to conduct active military operations. The uprising against the Central Rada in Odesa was organized by the Military-Revolutionary Committee, which initiated a conference of factory committees on 4–5 January 1918, held at the plant of the Russian Shipping and Trade Society. The conference decided to transfer all power in Odesa to the Soviets. A Temporary Revolutionary Workers' Committee was elected to coordinate the actions and implement the plans.

Bolshevik propaganda proved effective, garnering support from workers of the Odesa railway workshops, naval personnel, crew members of ships anchored in Odesa, and the Soldiers' Committee. However, hopes for a peaceful seizure of power did not materialize. Odesa housed Haidamak units loyal to the UTsR. Clashes between pro-Ukrainian Haidamaks and the Bolsheviks lasted for a week, and it was only on 18/31 January 1918, that Odesa newspapers reported the establishment of Soviet power. The day before, on the evening of 17 January a joint meeting

³¹ *Ukrajins'ka Central'na Rada: dokumenty i materialy*, p. 577.

³² The idea of proclaiming Odesa a free port, *porto franco*, had been circulating in the city long before the events described. In 1913, Odesa port engineer Wilhelm Ekerle developed a project for an Odesa "free harbour", which later formed the basis of the plans to declare Odesa a free city in 1918. Interestingly, this idea was discussed both during the period of the Central Rada and the Hetmanate of Pavlo Skoropadsky. Wilhelm Ekerle's project, along with reflections on the advantages of a free harbour in Odesa for Ukraine's economy, was published in the Odesa newspaper *Vilne zhyttia*, 83 (16 July 1918).

of the presidiums of the Soviets was held to address the issue of organizing the government; a list of commissariats was approved, and D. Guryev, an anarchist, was appointed a city commissar. A few days later, the executive authority – the Odesa Council of People's Commissars – was formed, headed by the Bolshevik Volodymyr Yudovskyi, who was replaced by Petro Starostin in February.³³

The Odesa Soviet Republic encompassed parts of the Kherson and Besarabia guberniyas. The Bolsheviks considered the republic an autonomous part of Soviet Russia, unrelated to the UNR. A local newspaper even published an article claiming that Odesa had never been a national Ukrainian territory. However, it soon became evident that maintaining control over a city in turmoil, with various political factions operating, was far more difficult than merely proclaiming Soviet power. Sovnarkom, led by Yudovskyi, was unable to restore order in the city. Moreover, according to the memoirs of the head of the Odesa Soviet government, neither he nor his subordinates had any real power in the city.³⁴

The situation was further complicated by an external threat from Romania, which supported the Entente in the First World War. In early January 1918, Romania began the occupation of Besarabia, posing a danger to Odesa. Alongside the failures of internal policy and financial difficulties, the new government was also unable to organize a capable military force to defend the city from the Romanians. It turned out that Odesa's workers were not prepared to shed blood, neither for the global revolution (despite the declaration of 18 January) nor for Odesa itself.

To assist Odesa in organizing its defence, Christian Rakovskii, a representative of the Bolshevik government, arrived from Petrograd, while Kyiv sent Bolshevik units led by Mikhail Muravyov. Power in the city was handed over to the latter. However, after the January 1917 terror in Kyiv, orchestrated by Muravyov, his promises to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat in Odesa were seen more as a threat than an opportunity for Bolshevik authority. Reports appeared in Kyiv and Odesa newspapers, featuring his speech in which he threatened retaliation against anyone opposing his policies.³⁵ The head of Odesa's Sovnarkom, Volodymyr Yudovskyi, wrote that Muravyov arrived in Odesa "illuminated by the glory of his

³³ Oleksandr Šyško, 'Odes'ka Radjans'ka respublika: vid uzurpaciji vlady do jiji krachu', in *Pivden' Ukrainy: etnoistoryčnyj, movnyj, kul'turnyj ta relihijnyj vymyry: zbirka naukovych prac'* (Odesa: VMV, 2011), p. 173.

³⁴ Similar to Volodymyr Zatonskyi's remarks about the Kharkiv Soviet People's Commissariat, the head of the Odesa government, Volodymyr Yudovskyi, recalled that at that time there was no organized government with full authority in Odesa. Each of the commissariats operated at its own risk, and joint meetings resembled more of an improvised gathering than sessions of an executive authority.

³⁵ 'Promovy Muravyova v Odesi', *Nova Rada*, 22 (1918), p. 2; *Odesskie novosti*, 14 (1918), p. 3.

victorious campaign against Ukraine", but his arrival was a severe blow to "even the meagre progress we were making at the time".³⁶

In late February 1918, under the rule of Muravyov, who had a full control of the city (he imposed censorship, banned rallies and gatherings, introduced curfews, and collected contributions), internal struggles among Odesa's representatives of power intensified. As a result, the Odesa Soviet of People's Commissars came under the leadership of Petro Starostin. The news of the peace treaty signed between the Bolshevik Russia and the Central Powers on 3 March 1918, triggered anti-Bolshevik sentiment in Odesa. Muravyov declared forced mobilization and martial law; still, Bolshevik forces were defeated in battle by Austro-Hungarian troops near the Slobodka and Birzula stations. Consequently, an anti-Bolshevik uprising erupted in Odesa, with workers' assemblies passing resolutions to transfer power to the City Duma and to support the Constituent Assembly. Muravyov was denounced as a "former Black Hundred member and a servant of autocracy".³⁷ The Odesa Soviet Republic ceased to exist, and power in the city effectively passed into the hands of the City Duma, whose representatives negotiated with the Austro-Hungarian military command to transfer authority in Odesa to their military command and representatives of the UNR, while preserving local Soviets and trade unions. On the morning of 13 March 1918, Austro-Hungarian troops entered Odesa without a fight.

A different scenario unfolded in the Taurida guberniya. The Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd led to a political crisis: anticipating the threat of Bolshevik dictatorship and the formation of an alliance with Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar national movements, local moderate socialist parties consolidated on the issue of governance. On 20 November 1917, they formed a regional multiparty government – the Council of People's Representatives, which was supported by the majority of the population in Crimea and Northern Taurida. However, the moderate socialists were unable to secure their political success, as cooperation between Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar forces intensified. Both centres claimed that their primary goal was to organize a regional constituent assembly, and both actively collaborated to achieve this objective. On 13/26 December 1917, the Crimean Tatar *kurultai* declared the formation of the Crimean People's Republic and a national government, the Council of Directors (Directorate),³⁸ representing the Crimean Tatar population. On 19 December 1917

³⁶ Vladimir Judovskij, 'Dejatel'nost' odesskogo SovNarKoma', in *Oktjabr' na Odeščine* (Odessa: Izvestija, 1927), 138–45 (p. 141).

³⁷ A. Kirov, 'Rumčerod i RadNarKom Odes'koji oblasti v borot'bi za Žovten', in *Litopys revoljuciji*, 1 (1928), 86–114 (pp. 112–13).

³⁸ Dmytro Hordijenko, 'Krym u ta poza mežamy Ukrajiny', in *Naš Krym: do 100-riččja Ukrajins'koji revoljuciji (1917–1923)*, 7 (2019), pp. 5–49.

(1 January 1918) the Council of People's Representatives of the Taurida guberniya officially recognized the Crimean Tatar government, confirming the existence of a coalition between moderate socialist forces and Crimean Tatar national self-governing bodies. This coalition exhibited some overlap in functions related to regional governance, with the first centre primarily focusing on economic and political issues, while the second dealt mainly with political and military matters.

The newly established Crimean People's Republic lasted just over a month, marking an attempt by the Crimean Tatars to restore their own statehood in Crimea, which ultimately failed. By the end of January 1918, Crimea was occupied by Bolshevik forces. The Bolsheviks quickly restructured the governance system of the peninsula. From 28 to 30 January 1918, an Extraordinary Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies was held, with 44 delegates in attendance (27 of whom were Bolsheviks). The congress confirmed the dissolution of both the Council of People's Representatives and the kurultai, replacing them with the Taurida Central Executive Committee, headed by Jan Miller, leader of the RSDLP(b) in Simferopol. The new government consisted of commissariats for agriculture, finance, transport, justice, postal and telegraph services, labour, public education, social welfare, and national affairs.³⁹

The political regime of the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries and Bolsheviks, whose leadership was radically leftist, suppressed the Crimean Tatar self-government bodies and halted the publication of local newspapers. Some members of the Directorate and kurultai were arrested, some deputies fled Crimea, while others hid in mountain or steppe villages where government control was weak. Some kurultai members remained legally active,⁴⁰ and a few left-leaning deputies even cooperated with the new authorities. However, the Bolshevik dictatorship was largely alien to the majority of the Crimean Tatar population.⁴¹

Thanks to the sailors of the Black Sea Fleet and military forces sent from Russia, Bolshevik power had been established in Feodosia, Kerch, Yalta, Simferopol, and Yevpatoria by the second half of January. The process was overseen by detachments of sailors dispatched from Sevastopol to support local Bolshevik organizations. In February, headquarters were organized for the regular Crimean Red Army. However, in reality, the Bolsheviks held influence primarily in urban areas: for instance, the largest party organization

³⁹ Tetjana Bykova, 'Radjans'ka socialistyčna respublika Tavrydy', in *Storinky istoriji: zbirnyk naukovych prac'* (Kyjiv: Politechnika, 2011), pp. 117–38.

⁴⁰ *Kryms'kotatars'kyj nacional'nyj ruch u 1917–1920 rr. za archivamy komunistyčnych specslužb*, ed. by Andrij Ivanec' and Andrij Kohut (Kyjiv: K.I.S., 2019), p. 127.

⁴¹ Contemporaries of those events openly acknowledged that what was actually taking place was a struggle between Russians and Tatars. For example, General Pyotr Wrangel, one of the leaders of the White movement, recalled that at the beginning of 1918, during a search of his residence in Yalta, sailors from Sevastopol reassured him that he had nothing to fear as they were only fighting the Tatars.

in Sevastopol numbered only 400 members, while in Simferopol, Yevpatoria, and other cities the numbers were twice or even three times lower. In rural areas, the Bolsheviks formed a small group, and they were entirely absent in some regions. The Soviets continued to function largely due to the support of sailors from the Black Sea Fleet, among whom left-wing socialist revolutionaries (*esers*) and anarchists predominated, as well as Red Army soldiers. Crimean Tatar villages in the mountainous areas of Crimea and German colonies in the steppes were entirely outside the control of the new authorities. The dictatorship of the Bolsheviks and left esers was alien to the majority of the Crimean Tatar population. As later acknowledged by representatives of the Bolshevik government, from its inception to its demise under the German pressure, Soviet power in Crimea remained Russian.⁴²

The actions of the Bolsheviks immediately provoked a response from Ukrainian society. In February 1918, the Kyiv newspaper *Nova Rada* published an editorial eloquently titled 'They Are Fleeing'.⁴³ The article described the establishment of Soviet republics as part of the Great Russian Bolshevik policy, which from the outset had no intention of relinquishing control over Ukrainian lands,

What is most noteworthy here is that this is a primarily political fact... the separation stems from circles that neither think of nor desire a sharp economic division between the federative parts of the former Russia.⁴⁴

This sentiment was later echoed by Volodymyr Vynnychenko, who pointed to both political and economic reasons behind Bolshevik policy in Ukraine in early 1918. In his view, the economic reasons were rooted in Russia's need for Ukrainian coal, iron, and grain, while the political motivations were focused on restoring a "one and indivisible" Russian state. The fragmentation of all of Ukraine into separate "federative Soviet republics" was the primary means of destroying Ukrainian national statehood.⁴⁵

The socio-political situation was another important factor that played a significant role in the formation of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih, Odesa, and other Soviet republics in Ukraine. Between late 1917 and early 1918, Soviet power in Russia was unstable, and there was no certainty that the Bolsheviks would be able to secure victory in Ukraine. As a result, the creation of Soviet quasi-republics was one of the strategies employed

⁴² Kryms'kotatars'kyj nacional'nyj ruch, p. 127.

⁴³ 'Tikajut', *Nova Rada*, 15 (1918), p. 1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Volodymyr Vynnychenko, *Vidrodžennja naciji: istorija ukrajins'koji revoljuciji (marec' 1917 r. – hruden' 1919 r.)* (Kyjiv: Viden': Dzvin, 1920), pp. 269–70.

to protect Russia against losing strategically important Black Sea ports in the event of a Bolshevik defeat in Ukraine.⁴⁶ The loss of the Donetsk coal and metallurgical region that was critical to Russian industry would also have been catastrophic.

Lacking sufficient military strength to resist Bolshevik aggression, the Ukrainian government sought to improve its situation through political measures. In January 1918, the *Mala Rada* (Small Council) passed the law on national-personal autonomy, as well as the Fourth Universal, which proclaimed the independence of the UNR. At this stage, the international factor also played a crucial role, as UNR diplomats engaged in negotiations with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk. Following the declaration of independence, the UNR delegation, led by Prime Minister Vsevolod Holubovych, participated in these negotiations as representatives of a sovereign state. Meanwhile, the Bolshevik delegation, led by Leon Trotsky, insisted that power in Ukraine belonged to the Bolsheviks and that the Russian delegation included representatives from the Ukrainian Soviet government. However, with the support of Germany and Austria-Hungary, the UNR representatives won this diplomatic contest, and the negotiations concluded with the signing of a peace treaty.⁴⁷

The treaty established the conditions for peace and cessation of hostilities, which, in turn, provided an opportunity to address a wide range of internal issues facing the country. However, the most significant aspect was that the UTsR was recognized as a legitimate authority within the UNR. Additionally, the republic itself was partially recognized as a subject of international legal relations.⁴⁸ As a result of this treaty, the UNR also gained military assistance from Germany and Austria-Hungary, but in return it had to fulfil certain obligations regarding the delivery of grain and food products.⁴⁹

On 3 March 1918, a separate peace treaty was signed between Bolshevik Russia on one side, and Germany and its allies on the other. Russia committed to recognizing the treaty between the UTsR and Germany, as well as signing a subsequent agreement with the UNR. One of the provisions of the treaty included the recognition of UNR's independence,

⁴⁶ Halyna Turčenko, 'Impers'kyj projekt "Novorosija": bil'shovyc'kyj variant', *Naukovi praci istoryčnogo fakul'tetu Zaporiz'koho nacional'noho universytetu*, 39 (2014), p. 81.

⁴⁷ Contemporary historians are generally unanimous in their positive assessment of the foreign policy activities of Ukrainian diplomats during the negotiations. The role of Ukraine and the Ukrainian question in international relations in 1918 is described in Wolfram Dornik's study: Dornik, *Die Ukraine zwischen Selbstbestimmung*.

⁴⁸ On the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, together with detailed historiography, see: Guido Hausmann, 'Brest-Litowsk 1918: zwei Friedensschlüsse und zwei Historiographien', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 70 (2019), 271–90 (p. 271).

⁴⁹ See: Ruslan Pyrih, *Het'manat Pavla Skoropads'koho: miž Nimeččynoju i Rosijeju* (Kyjiv: Institute of the History of Ukraine, 2008).

the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the Red Guard from its territory, as well as the cessation of anti-Ukrainian propaganda.⁵⁰

De jure, the Bolsheviks lost control over Ukraine's territory under the terms of the peace treaty with the Central Powers. De facto, this occurred with the advance of German and Austro-Hungarian forces. However, Lenin's government sought to maintain its influence over the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. The existence of separate Soviet republics, which did not consider themselves part of Ukraine, gave Soviet diplomats grounds to hope that German forces would not enter these territories. The People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs attempted to use the creation of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic as the means to halt the advance of the Central Rada's allies. However, when it became evident that German forces were adhering to the borders outlined in Vynnychenko's "geography",⁵¹ the Russian Bolsheviks issued a clear directive to formally incorporate the republic into Soviet Ukraine. This decision was ratified at the Second All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets, held 17–19 March 1918, in Katerynoslav (present-day Dnipro, Ukraine).

Quite a different situation was unfolding in the south. In March, Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ukrainian forces occupied Ukraine's Black Sea coastline, including Odesa, Mykolayiv, and Kherson, and were approaching Crimea. These developments shifted the so-called Crimean question. Back in 1917, its resolution depended on national and ethno-national interests; by 1918, it had acquired strategic significance in the context of interstate interests of Ukraine and Russia concerning influence in the region. In February 1918, the UNR Council of Ministers decided on the terms of a peace treaty with Russia, under which Crimea would fall under Ukraine's sphere of influence, and the Black Sea Fleet would belong solely to Ukraine.⁵²

Bolshevik Russia, however, considered Crimea as a territory under its sovereignty. On 19 March 1918, the Taurida Soviet Socialist Republic was declared by decree of the Taurida TsVK, which lasted until 30 April 1918. The Bolsheviks' plan was to create a buffer Soviet republic, which would serve as a tool for armed struggle against the UTsR and German-Austrian

⁵⁰ Friedensvertrag zwischen Deutschland, Österreich-Ungarn, Bulgarien und der Türkei einerseits und Rußland andererseits [Der Friedensvertrag von Brest-Litovsk], 3 März 1918, 1000dokumente.de <https://www.1000dokumente.de/index.html?c=dokument_de&dokument=0011_bre&object=facsimile&trefferanzeige=&suchmodus=&suchbegriff=&t=&l=de> [accessed 10 March 2025].

⁵¹ This is the exact term Vladimir Lenin used in a telegram to Sergo Ordzhonikidze when analysing the activities of the Donetsk Bolsheviks, "no matter how much they try to separate their region from Ukraine, according to Vynnychenko's geography, it will still be included in Ukraine, and the Germans will conquer it", Vladimir Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, 55 vols (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo političeskoj literatury, 1967–1975), L, p. 50. According to "Vynnychenko's geography", the territory of the Ukrainian People's Republic was defined within the borders of nine Ukrainian guberniyas: Kyiv, Podillia, Volyn, Chernihiv, Poltava, Kharkiv, Katerynoslav, Kherson, and the mainland part of the Taurida guberniya.

⁵² *Ukrajins'ka Central'na Rada: dokumenty i materialy*, p. 167.

forces without violating the terms of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. However, the implementation of this plan faced numerous obstacles. According to the terms of the Brest peace, the mainland of the Taurida guberniya remained outside the Taurida Republic, and Soviet troops were required to withdraw from it. The inclusion of these counties in Taurida could have created additional grounds for conflict with the German occupation command and the UTsR. Therefore, on 21 March, under the directive of the Sovnarkom of the Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), to which the Taurida government was subordinate, a decree was issued limiting the territory of the newly created Soviet republic to the Crimean Peninsula. The decree made no mention of incorporating Taurida into the Soviet Russia's territory, although up until the end of April 1918 the Soviet government still retained de facto control over the northern counties and utilized their human and food resources.⁵³

All these developments provided a formal pretext for Germany to engage in the struggle for Crimea as a sphere of its influence. Strengthening its position in Crimea would offer Germany future opportunities for expansion into the Middle East. On 29 March 1918, the German and Habsburg Empires reached an agreement on the division of spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, as a result of which Crimea and Northern Taurida became part of the German sphere of influence. The German military leadership announced the necessity of occupying Crimea based on military, political, and economic grounds. On 18 April 1918, Austrian troops captured Perekop and began advancing deeper into Crimea. A few days later, the Crimean military group of the UNR Army broke through the fortifications at Chonhar and entered Dzhankoi⁵⁴. The appearance of German and Ukrainian troops in Crimea triggered a Crimean Tatar uprising and the flight of the leadership of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Taurida from Simferopol, marking the end of the Republic's existence.⁵⁵

The first Bolshevik occupation of Ukraine came to an end. In 1918, the full annexation of Ukrainian lands, which the UTsR considered its national territory, did not occur primarily due to military support from Germany and Austria-Hungary. By the end of December 1918, however, Bolshevik Russia would begin its second war against the UNR, which would result in the establishment of a Bolshevik regime on Ukrainian territory.

⁵³ Iryna Krasnodems'ka, 'Stvorennja radjans'kych marionetkovykh respublik na pivdennomu schodi Ukrainy jak instrument bil'sovyč'koji ekspansiji na počatku 1918 r.', *Ukrajinoznavstvo*, 4 (2019), 25–48 (pp. 36–37).

⁵⁴ On the campaign of the Crimean group of troops of the UNR Army, led by Colonel Petro Bolbočan, see: Volodymyr Sidak, Tetjana Ostaško and Tetjana Vrons'ka, *Polkovnyk Petro Bolbočan: trahediya ukrajins'koho deržavnyka* (Kyjiv: Tempora, 2009).

⁵⁵ *Kryms'kotatars'kyj nacional'nyj ruch u 1917–1920 rr. za archivamy komunistyčnych specslužb*, ed. by Andrij Ivanec' and Andrij Kohut (Kyjiv: K.I.S., 2019), p. 136.

Thus, the Bolsheviks were consistent in their struggle against Ukrainian statehood. However, it is important to emphasize that their rule in Ukraine was not organic; rather, it was experienced as an occupation. The Bolshevik leaders did not consider Ukraine a coherent political and economic entity but viewed the southern region as an integral part of ethnic Russia. Overall, the territorial issue played a significant role in the relations both between the UTsR and the Provisional Government, and between the UNR and Bolshevik Russia. Both Russian governments – the Provisional and Bolshevik – did not entertain the possibility of losing the southern and eastern Ukrainian lands. Therefore, the Bolsheviks essentially continued the policy of the Provisional Government regarding these regions, as shown by the fact that in November 1917 the Sovnarkom refused to recognize the UTsR's jurisdiction over the southeastern territories that had not been included in Ukraine's national-territorial autonomy in July 1917. One manifestation of this policy was the attempt to create several Bolshevik republics, referred to as "Soviet republics". The creation of these Soviet quasi-republics followed various scenarios but shared a common feature: Bolshevik governments did not consider themselves formally Ukrainian and did not intend to take the national factor into account in their policies. The main goal of Bolshevik Russia was to retain control over the economically attractive region of the Donetsk industrial basin and the Black Sea ports. The Bolsheviks' efforts to divide southern Ukraine into separate republics ultimately failed. On the one hand, the local population, unlike the Bolshevik leadership of these quasi-republics, did not support the dictatorship of the proletariat; on the other, the conditions of the Brest-Litovsk peace and the advance of allied UNR troops left the Bolsheviks with no chance of maintaining dominance in the southern region. By March–April 1918, these artificial entities had been dismantled.

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