

**Stephen Velychenko.** *Painting Imperialism and Nationalism Red: The Ukrainian Marxist Critique of Russian Communist Rule in Ukraine 1918-1925.* U of Toronto P, 2015. viii, 280 pp. Illustrations. Appendix. Notes. Index. \$45.00, cloth.

**I**t is hard to imagine a more appropriate book to appear on the eve of the centennial of the revolutions of 1917 in the Russian Empire than Stephen Velychenko's most recent contribution to the rich and contested historiography of the Ukrainian revolution and state.<sup>1</sup> He rescues from historical oblivion an important chapter in that history—concerning the short-lived Ukrainian Communist Party and the ideas and politics of Ukrainian communism, which lived on a bit longer in various later Soviet opposition movements. Velychenko makes his most extended case to date that these Ukrainian communists deserve a place in the pantheon of the global anticolonial left, alongside Mao Zedong, Frantz Fanon, Irishman James Connolly, and Indonesian Tan Malaka. He addresses his book to, among others, Western leftists and revolutionaries (today and since 1917) who have ignored the long available evidence thanks to the hegemony of the Russian Bolshevik narrative of communist internationalism that excluded Ukraine from consideration as a colony.<sup>2</sup> Velychenko places the Ukrainian communists in the broader contexts of both the Soviet Union's national communist oppositions and Chinese and Vietnamese national communism as well as in the context of Irish and Algerian anticolonial movements in the British and French empires. Earlier historians and memoirists had already claimed the Ukrainian Marxist critics as authors of the first models of "national communism," which were simultaneous in the 1920s Soviet Union with the ideas of Muslim Bolshevik critic Tatar Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev and a later version in Josip Broz Tito's Yugoslavia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Other contributions: Velychenko's *State Building in Revolutionary Ukraine: A Comparative Study of Governments and Bureaucrats, 1917-1922* and his two volumes on the historiographic debates about Ukraine in Russia, Poland, and the Soviet Union (i.e., *National History As Cultural Process: A Survey of the Interpretations of Ukraine's Past in Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian Historical Writing from the Earliest Times to 1914*; and *Shaping Identity in Eastern Europe and Russia: Soviet-Russian and Polish Accounts of Ukrainian History, 1914-1991*).

<sup>2</sup> See Velychenko's recent essay in *Krytyka* "Russian Bolsheviks, Ukrainian Communists, and the Comintern: How Russian Bolsheviks Shaped Foreign Radical Leftist Views on Ukraine."

<sup>3</sup> See Mace.

The most important contribution of the book under review is its chapter 3, which expands on earlier essays by Velychenko published in *Ab Imperio* (Kazan, 2012)<sup>4</sup> and *Skhid/Zakhid* (*East/West* [Kharkiv], 2013)<sup>5</sup> and contains more than forty pages of archival and other documents not previously available in English-language translations, including material from the Ukrainian Communist Party newspaper *Chervonyi prapor* (*Red Banner* [Kyiv]). Unfortunately, the articles are a clearer and more persuasive expression of Velychenko's theses than the book, which suffers from much repetition, confusion, and poor editing.

The 1918 manifesto of Ukrainian communism, co-authored by Serhii Mazlakh and Vasyli' Shakhrai, *Do khvyli* (*Shcho diiet'sia na Ukraini i z Ukrainoiu?*) (*Concerning the Moment [What is Happening in Ukraine and to Ukraine?]*), has been available in English translation since 1970; the Ukrainian Communist Party was created in January 1920. Velychenko's book places this document and the party in their larger contexts. Although the Ukrainian Communist Party was abolished in 1925, Velychenko sees the legacy of this party lasting until the suicide, in 1933, of Mykola Skrypnyk, the leading Ukrainian Bolshevik.<sup>6</sup> Velychenko includes in this Ukrainian communist opposition the left-wing Ukrainian Social Democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries who had renamed themselves the Ukrainian Communist Party (Borotbists) in early 1919 as well as the federalist Ukrainian minority in the "official" Communist Party of Ukraine. Marxists were not the only socialist or leftist critics of Russian imperialism and Communist rule. Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries, most notably Pavlo Khrystiuk in his classic *Zamitky i materialy do istorii ukrains'koi revoliutsii 1917-1920 rr.* (*Comments and Materials on the History of the Ukrainian Revolution 1917-1920*), identified Russian Bolshevik imperialism as a tragic feature of the Ukrainian Revolution (and even for the Russian Revolution itself).

Velychenko's heroes are Mykhailo Tkachenko, Lev Iurkevych, Iurii and Vasyli' Mazurenko, Andrii Richyts'kyi, and other Ukrainian Marxist critics of what they themselves diagnosed as "Russian" Communist rule in Ukraine under two Soviet "Bolshevik" regimes during 1918-19. They insisted on an

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<sup>4</sup> That is, "Ukrainian Anticolonialist Thought in Comparative Perspective: A Preliminary Overview."

<sup>5</sup> That is, "Ukrainian Anti-Colonialist Marxism (1919-1923): A Forgotten Legacy in a Forgotten Colony."

<sup>6</sup> For the English translation of *Do khvyli*, see Mazlakh and Shakhrai, *On the Current Situation in the Ukraine*, edited by Peter J. Potichnyj. Velychenko also acknowledges his debt to an earlier historian-veteran-eyewitness to Ukrainian communism, Ivan Maistrenko.

independent socialist state for Ukraine with its own Communist party, confederated with other socialist states with their own Communist parties. Shakhrai was arrested and executed under White rule in Saratov exile, while Iurii and Vasyli' Mazurenko and Richyts'kyi were first politically defeated in Stalinist Soviet Ukraine and later died in Joseph Stalin's Gulag or before the execution squads of the NKVD. The Ukrainian diasporas of North America and Europe largely repudiated the Ukrainian Marxist legacy, but some adherents survived outside of Soviet Ukraine.

Velychenko concludes with a whirlwind of counter-histories. He speculates about what sort of regime the Ukrainian Marxists would have established had they come to power, and he assumes that such a state would have been a party dictatorship with terror used against its subjects "much as did communists elsewhere." And Velychenko even worries that Ukrainian communists in power might have done "what their Russian counterparts had only planned and deported all of Ukraine's communist Jews" or that they might have deported their Russian and Polish landowners; he also suggests that that same state might, nonetheless, have enjoyed sufficient legitimacy, "because it was supported by a majority of peasants," and that it might, like the Vietnamese and Chinese parties, "still be a ruling party today" (172). This counterfactual history run amok detracts, throughout the text, from the message of the lost alternative of national communism in Ukraine.

In the end, however, Velychenko's book also draws attention to the lack of a good English-language synthetic history of the Ukrainian Revolution since John Reshetar's 1952 classic, *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917-1920: A Study in Nationalism*.

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