

**THE PEASANT-CENTERED CONCEPT
OF THE UKRAINIAN REVOLUTION (1917–1921)
BY DMYTRO DONTSOV**

Among the galaxy of Ukrainian thinkers and theorists of the concepts of nation-building in the twentieth century, Dontsov holds a prominent place. His thoughts, ideas, approaches, understanding of the peculiarities of national nation- and state-building, and the prospects of the Ukrainian political nation have not lost their relevance in the current situation. Their comprehension will contribute to a clearer understanding of the latest Ukrainian realities and outline statehood prospects. The publication and republication of his works during the years of Ukraine's independence¹, on the one hand, is a confirmation of their relevance, and on the other hand, it is a return from oblivion of the figure of an original Ukrainian theorist of the European level.

The theoretical heritage of the thinker, given its powerful intellectual potential, has attracted and will continue to attract the attention of researchers, public and political figures, and society as a whole. Quantitative and qualitative indicators of the already accumulated knowledge about her are sufficient grounds to speak of Donetsk studies as a subdisciplinary area of scientific discourse. In particular, there is an institutionalization of Donetsk studies. In Ukraine, the Dmytro Dontsov Scientific and

¹ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики та інші праці. Тернопіль : Крила, 2022. 368 с.

Ideological Center was created and is now functioning². According to the analysis of the latest historiography³, the focus of researchers' attention is mainly on issues related to Dontsov as a theorist of the current Ukrainian nationalism^{4; 5}, the developer of the nationalist concept of the state^{6; 7; 8}, the comparison of Dontsov's and V. Lypynsky's⁹ views, etc.

At the same time, the issues related to Dontsov's concept of the peasant revolution of the early twentieth century, the role and importance of the peasantry in Dontsov's model of Ukrainian revolutionary events, and the formation of Ukrainian statehood are presented to a lesser extent. For example, O. Zaitsev examines the stages in Dontsov's understanding of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921 and the evolution of his views on it¹⁰.

In view of this, the purpose of the study is to reveal the content of Dontsov's concept of the peasant revolution, the agrarian

² Науково-ідеологічний центр імені Дмитра Донцова. URL: <http://dontsov-nic.com.ua/author/donzadmin/>

³ Шліхта І. Постать Дмитра Донцова у працях українських учених. *Українська біографістика*. 2008. Вип. 4. С. 283–296.

⁴ Ситник О. Донцов Д. і проблема української національної ідеології. *Наукові праці історичного факультету Запорізького національного університету*. 2009. Вип. XXVII. С. 140–143.

⁵ Лукашенко Є. Чинний націоналізм Дмитра Донцова. *Політикус*. 2016. Вип. 3. С. 9–19.

⁶ Онуфріїв Р. Становлення та основні засади націократичної концепції держави в 1920–1930-х рр. *Юридичний науковий електронний журнал*. 2021. № 1. С. 412–415.

⁷ Харахаш Б. Ідея нації у творчості Дмитра Донцова. *Українські проблеми*. 1998. № 1. С. 128–140.

⁸ Зайцев О. Доктрина Дмитра Донцова та її вплив на націоналістичний рух 1920–1940-х років. *Україна: культурна спадщина, національна свідомість, державність*. 2014. Вип. 24. С. 16–34.

⁹ Віхров М. Липинський і Донцов: спір на грані двох світів. URL: <https://tyzhden.ua/lypynskij-i-dontsov-spir-na-hrani-dvokh-svitiv/>

¹⁰ Зайцев О. Осмислення досвіду Української революції у творах Дмитра Донцова. *Історія та історіографія в Європі*. 2016. Вип. 5. С. 77–88.

component in Dontsov's theoretical heritage, presented in the work "The Grounds of Our Politics"¹¹.

"The Grounds of Our Politics is a work written by Dontsov in the context of the Ukrainian revolutionary reality of 1920–1921. The author worked on it in Bern and completed it in early January 1921: "I have finished my book and feel like a woman who has already given birth"¹².

A prominent place in the book is devoted to the analysis of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921, in which he was a direct participant. At the same time, this is not a retelling of the facts, but a reflection of the thinker on revolution as a phenomenon in general and the Ukrainian revolution in particular. The philosopher derives the concept of "revolution" etymologically from the French word "la revolution," that is, "the rotation of the Earth around the Sun." On this basis, Dontsov understood "revolution" as a circular movement that ends at the point where the movement began ... a movement that could never have any end." The proposed interpretation compared favorably with the dominant version of "revolution" at the time, which "has some mystical and, so to say, anti-scientific meaning" as "just a large-scale brawl"¹³.

The nature of revolution, Dontsov argued, is dominated by the irrational: "not an action, not a conscious plan, but revenge". Accordingly, the revolution is not made with the aim of "achieving something positive, only because the offended revolutionary conscience was looking for an access to the outside"¹⁴. He also interpreted the concept of "counterrevolution" in an original way. He understood it as "the tendency to replace anarchy with a new, but still

¹¹ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. 212 с.

¹² Зайцев О. Осмислення досвіду Української революції у творах Дмитра Донцова. *Історія та історіографія в Європі*. 2016. Вип. 5. С. 78.

¹³ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 110.

¹⁴ Ibid.

anarchic system, which, like the one that has just been overthrown, soon begins to betray the tendency to stabilization and thus to conservatism”¹⁵.

He identified the 1917–1921 revolution as a socio-political one. Dontsov distinguished between the Russian and Ukrainian revolutions. The basis for this identification for him was its results. In his opinion, the Russian Revolution led to fundamental political changes, caused the fall of “tsarist absolutism, official Orthodoxy, and the political superiority of the Russian people.” The Ukrainian Revolution resulted in the subjectivization and formation of the Ukrainian nation. This was manifested in the constitution of “own forms of political, legal, state and church life”¹⁶. The driving force and creator of the Ukrainian Revolution, according to the thinker, are “Ukrainians, not russians”¹⁷.

Another difference between the Ukrainian Revolution and the russian revolution was its character, its specific mover or Actor. Dontsov formulated his own vision of the Ukrainian Revolution. In his understanding, it is social, bourgeois, not socialist. It is “the creation of a respectable stratum of the average peasant bourgeois, a type that will *mutatis mutandis*, like one eye to the other, resemble this man to whom Maupassant devoted so many hours of his talent.” For him, it was obvious that the non-socialist character of the Ukrainian Revolution was due to the following factors. First, socialist ideas were not widespread among the peasantry, “no one stood behind them, except for a handful of town workers and the uneducated, classified and moscow-based, though in love with the Kobzar, intelligentsia.” The poor peasantry was “as far from socialism as other peasants.” Second, workers and peasants are different from each other. First of all, in their sources of income.

¹⁵ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 110.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. С. 111.

A worker, having a source of income in wages, “can be a socialist”. The source of a peasant’s income is private property, and therefore he is “a party to the principle of private property”¹⁸. Their separateness by this criterion also determines the fundamental difference between them and between the revolutions in which they are actors. Thirdly, the purpose of peasants’ participation in the revolution, taking into account the second factor, is to increase their own wealth¹⁹.

Thus, the thinker summarized, the revolution that the peasantry made in Ukraine could not “be socialist, even in its intentions. It was not socialist in fact”²⁰. The Ukrainian revolution, which had a peasant character, lasted from 1902. Dontsov saw its origins in the peasant riots of 1902 in Kharkiv and Poltava regions. In his understanding, it was an explosion of energy of the Ukrainian nation that took place three years earlier than the First Russian Revolution of 1905–1907²¹.

Justifying the peasant character of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921, he drew attention to the reasons for the explosion of energy of the Ukrainian nation. The author of *The Grounds of Our Politics* proposes an approach according to which “the reasons for it lay in the incompleteness of the coup that Alexander II made in 1863.” The thinker makes a certain inaccuracy. In the year he mentioned, the tsarist government, in order to prevent the spread of the Polish uprising on the Right Bank and its support by the peasants, introduced mandatory land redemption by peasants, and the number of payments was reduced by 20%. These measures accelerated the elimination of the status of temporarily obligated peasants. More than 1.5 million peasants have switched

¹⁸ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 111.

¹⁹ Ibid. С. 112.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. С. 109, 112.

to compulsory land purchases. This accelerated the transition of temporarily obligated peasants to the category of peasant owners²².

Obviously, Dontsov was referring to the Great Reform of 1861, the abolition of serfdom in the Russian Empire. Later in the text, he unequivocally speaks of the imperfection and incompleteness of this large-scale nationwide event – the abolition of serfdom, the presence of post-serfdom elements in the countryside. The “incompleteness” of the Great Reform of 1861, in his opinion, was as follows:

- 1) peasant smallholdings – “peasants have executed up to 24% of the land”;
- 2) economic dependence of the peasant on the lord;
- 3) low economic and socio-legal status of the peasant;
- 4) the desire of peasants to own the land on which they worked;
- 5) the desire for freedom – “the final abolition” of serfdom as an economic dependence.

The latter reason gives the peasant character of the Ukrainian Revolution another distinctive feature from the Russian Revolution. According to D. Dontsov, it is European character. In particular, sharing the opinion of O. Bauer, he “sees in this new revolution for the complete destruction of serfdom an analogy to the European revolution of 1848.” Similar peasant revolutions in the early twentieth century took place in “the whole of Eastern and Central Europe. Hungary, Romania, Croats, Poland, and the Balkan States, as well as Ukraine, are under the sign of a great peasant-bourgeois revolution...”²³.

According to the theorist of contemporary nationalism, the First World War was a powerful external geopolitical factor in the modern history of Europe in general and Central and South-Eastern Europe in particular. As a powerful catalyst for the transformation of the map

²² Лазанська Т. Тимчасовозобов'язані селяни. URL: http://www.history.org.ua/?termin=Тимчасовозобов'язані_селяни

²³ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 112–113.

of Europe, it caused fundamental multilevel changes. The first level was the reformatting of its political landscape. The second was the renaissance of the peasantry as an active subject of history. The third is that, apart from the First World War, the revolution became the instrument of fundamental transformations in Europe. According to D. Dontsov, the first manifestation was “the collapse of three great powers, Russia, Austria, and Hungary...”. From the standpoint of modern knowledge, it is more correct to speak of the collapse of four empires: Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ottoman. However, this does not change the fundamental point: the emergence of new subjects of international relations at that time. The manifestation of the latter in the countries “which we called the South-East of the Occident” is the displacement of old elites: “it (the old aristocracy – «C.K.») was replaced by a new class – peasant democracy”, which was ‘of epochal importance in the political history of Europe’²⁴. The third manifestation was the peasant revolution in the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe.

The First World War and the peasant revolutions in Europe led to the emergence of a new actor on the stage of European history in the early twentieth century, a transformer of pre-war life and a designer of new political realities. It was the peasantry. In fact, the agrarian sector of the European economy, peasant cooperation, and the peasantry, paradoxically at first glance, found themselves in a much more favorable socioeconomic and socio-political position than they had been before. Crisis phenomena in industry, financial and banking systems, and urban culture, according to the thinker, freed “the peasant from hypothetical debts.” The shackles of urban civilization, with all its consequences, ceased to constrain the energy of the peasantry and peasant cooperation. Its development gave impetus to qualitative and radical changes, to the emergence of a new type of peasant – previously unknown, unrecognizable. According

²⁴ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 112–113.

to D. Dontsov, “from a disheveled white slave, a slave of the city,” the peasant became the center, “the axis around which the entire economic life of the countries torn by war begins to revolve”²⁵.

In fact, the emergence of such a peasant-centered approach is the peasant renaissance in Central and Southeastern Europe in general and in Ukraine in particular. The revival of the peasantry, according to the philosopher’s concept, led to its priority in the areas of economy and defense. At the same time, transformations took place in Ukrainian national life. They relate to the change of “the landed aristocracy, which has ceased to give social value to society, has postponed the leadership of the nation, giving way to a new class that has as its ideal ‘organized individual initiative’...”. In the Ukrainian realities of the time, the thinker believed that “the old-fashioned class ... has now let go of its weak arms.” In view of this, it was logical, in his opinion, to turn to the peasantry and political influence²⁶.

In fact, Dontsov argues in favor of the peasantry as the leader of the modern Ukrainian nation, the peasantry as the bearer of Ukrainian identity, the embodiment of national ideals and virtues, and the socio-economic and socio-political basis of Ukrainian statehood. He states without humiliation that Ukrainians are a peasant nation. “The Ukrainian peasant has already made his revolution and no longer needs any other”²⁷.

In Dontsov’s conception of the peasant revolution, we observe the author’s intelligent and critical peasant-centeredness. The thinker realized that in the early twentieth century the peasantry was not fully prepared for state-building. At the same time, in the context of the Ukrainian Revolution, the peasantry acted as a trigger

²⁵ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 113–114.

²⁶ Ibid. С. 114.

²⁷ Ibid. С. 116.

for the then non-linear processes of Ukrainian nation-building, to use modern terminology.

As a real actor of historical reality, it had its own characteristics and peculiarities compared to other participants in the revolutionary events. According to D. Dontsov, among others, the peasantry was a separate entity endowed with the following characteristics. The first was a deep awareness of its interests. The second was “a great political instinct”. The third is “quick orientation”. The fourth is “indomitable stubbornness in pursuit of goals”. The fifth is “organizational dexterity”. The sixth is “sense of order”. The seventh is “complete indifference to pacifism, anti-militarism, and other ‘isms’”. The eighth is “aristocratic aversion to all forms of ochlocracy, forcibly imposed on ... the intellectuals”²⁸.

Thus, for the philosopher, the Ukrainian peasantry, endowed with the above-mentioned virtues, is the foundation of a strong house of “own statehood.” He supports his arguments by saying that the peasantry is the genius of the “Ukrainian race.” It is endowed with “profound wisdom,” “innate waywardness, and a developed sense of action”²⁹.

How did Dontsov see the palace of his “own statehood”? Based on a peasant-centered approach to interpreting the events of the Ukrainian Revolution and the processes of national statehood formation, in 1920–1921, at the time of writing, the thinker proposed an original model of the latter. He was guided by the fact that the peasant, the peasant ideology, is an antidote to Bolshevism and nihilism³⁰. In essence, it was a “third way” (similar to the agrarian interpretation) between liberal and socialist strategies of state building. It was a kind of peasant alternative that was realized in the Second Polish Republic, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia

²⁸ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 126.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid. С. 200.

in the interwar period. His ideal was a “peasant petty-bourgeois republic”³¹. Thus, he associated the statehood of Ukraine with the peasantry and the peasant petty-bourgeois republic.

For the philosopher, the concept of “peasant petty-bourgeois republic” was synonymous with “peasant democracy.” Understanding and distinguishing the essential aspects of this phenomenon is the focus of the work “The Foundations of Our Politics”. In his characteristic authorial manner, he explains what democracy is in general, its varieties, and the essence of peasant democracy itself.

The philosopher wrote: “I understand the word democracy to mean something completely different than our professional democrats, and I do not belong to those who will fall to their knees before an idea expressed in seven words.” For Dontsov, democracy is “a fact that must be accepted, whether we like it or not... Unable to destroy it, we must take it into our hands and regulate it, because, unbridled and unregulated, it will destroy civilization.” In his opinion, “there is democracy and democracy,” so the settlement of democracy is not “circle quadrature”³².

Reflecting on “democracy and democracy,” the thinker understood the diversity of forms of this phenomenon. He distinguished between the following types of democracy:

- 1) “democracy of the ‘demons’, Shyhayevshchyna”;
- 2) “moscow’s ‘nothingness’”;
- 3) “democracy of Ruso, that great plebeian, as he is unanimously called by Nietzsche and Carlyle”;
- 4) “Wagner’s ‘Twilight of the Gods’”;
- 5) “the democracy of Beethoven’s Eroica”;
- 6) “the democracy of a French or Bulgarian peasant or Canadian farmer”;

³¹ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 119.

³² Ibid. С. 202.

- 7) “the democracy of a Savoyard or Gascon”;
- 8) “the democracy of a German social democrat”³³.

Dontsov tried to summarize the diversity of democracies of that time in the following scheme. On the one hand, there are democracies of “pacifism, egalitarianism, anti-militarism, ochlocracy, acorn socialism and class struggle, democracy of universal and leveling of the reification of numbers, sentimental and anemic people’s government”. On the other hand, it is a democracy of “labor, hierarchy, social solidarity, duty, and a strong grip.” The nature and content of democracies determined their role in the life of the nation and the state. According to this criterion, the thinker distinguished the following types of democracy: “the one that plants and binds society together, ... the one that destroys and builds”. What is common to all of them is that the priority regulator in the democracies of such societies is “the low materialistic instincts of the masses or the arbitrariness of the master over a flock of equal slaves”³⁴. Thus, these were antagonistic democracies, democracies of extremes.

Among them, another democracy stood out in a qualitatively better way. The researcher identified it as a democracy of “self-discipline, of higher ideas, which, like ‘family,’ ‘native land,’ and ‘social solidarity,’ make one social organism of a higher order out of an agglomerate of divergent wills.” Such democracy, according to Dontsov, is “an element of production, labor, and an element of freedom and amateurism.” It is an ideal for him. For the thinker, a typical country with an ideal democracy was “North America”³⁵.

At the same time, it was not only “North America” that embodied Donets’s ideal of democracy. He also saw its features on the European continent. In particular, in peasant democracies

³³ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 202–203.

³⁴ Ibid. С. 203.

³⁵ Ibid.

in general and in the Ukrainian one in particular. Thanks to the peasantry itself, the thinker argued, democracy would acquire a new “breath of life,” a “proofreading.” Under the influence of the peasantry and its power, democracy will be able to withstand civilizational challenges and not fall victim to the latter³⁶.

Thus, there are sufficient grounds to say that Dontsov considered the democracy of Ukrainian peasants to be ideal. He understood it as a variant of the general ideal democracy inherent in North America and European peasant democracies. In this way, he did not diminish the role and importance of the Ukrainian peasantry, its state-building potential, and Ukrainian peasant democracy. On the contrary, he recognized it as a variant of an ideal world democracy. Accordingly, the “third way” of the Ukrainian peasantry in his understanding of the philosopher, which was identical to the agrarian one, corresponded to the global trend of the time.

For Dontsov, peasant democracy in general, or the democracy of the Ukrainian peasantry in particular, is ideal, different from others, given the idealism and separateness of the Ukrainian peasantry – its creator, carrier, and subject. As in the previous case – in justifying the uniqueness of the peasantry as an actor of Ukrainian nation- and state-building, and in the case of justifying the ideal of peasant democracy, the philosopher resorts to explaining this phenomenon by revealing the uniqueness of its carrier – the peasantry.

First of all, he emphasized the separateness of the peasantry from other subjects of the socio-cultural space of the time by the manner and style of world perception. Their specificity and difference from others form the peculiarities of the psychology of the Ukrainian peasantry. The main ones, according to the thinker, were as follows. First. The Ukrainian peasantry perceives the world through a refined prism that it has developed. According to it, only the peasant is its “rightful heir”. Second. He does not destroy the beauty

³⁶ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 204.

he is proud of, admires, and enjoys: “he does not trample on flowers with his feet.” The only thing he wants is to “have them for himself”. Third. He does not strive to “pull down those who are higher in deeds,” only to reach their level. Fourth. He does not humiliate the enemy, he fights with him as an equal, with whom “it is still necessary to somehow ‘get along’”. Fifth. Respect for property rights, rejection of the methods of “war communism”. Sixth. The peasantry is inherently revolutionary. It was clearly demonstrated during the peasant revolutions of 1902, 1905–1906, 1917, and the struggle against the Bolsheviks. Seventh. Peasant traditionalism, a deep understanding of the continuity of social evolution – all that is denied and misunderstood by the “apostles of the ‘world revolution’”. Eighth. An overdeveloped sense of humor, which testifies to the “organizing power of the intellect,” the desire for success and achievement, the tendency not to despair in the face of difficulties, and not to be afraid of death. Ninth. “The sound mind of our peasant”, his practicality and pragmatism. Tenth. Attraction to individualism: “a sense of personal worth and responsibility”. Accordingly, “opposition to the collective responsibility of nihilism”. Eleventh. Deep respect for such social, political, and spiritual institutions as the family, private property, the state, and the church. Twelfth. Patriotism of the peasantry. No nation or state can exist without patriotism. Thirteenth. The peasantry’s healthy skepticism of others: “a fully justified distrust of any stranger”. The thinker contrasted this trait with the “relaxing ‘internationalism’ of our social heroes”. Fourteenth. The Ukrainian national character of the peasant is different from his Moscow counterpart and is related “to the main foundations of the European psychotype”³⁷.

Thus, the above-mentioned main characteristic features of the psychology of the Ukrainian peasantry contemporary to Dontsov separated it as a carrier of peasant democracy, as well

³⁷ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 204–208.

as peasant democracy itself, from the carriers of other democracies and other democracies themselves. Thanks to this psychology, peasant democracy in general, and that of the Ukrainian peasantry in particular, was ideal, in line with the world's models of the time. The Ukrainian peasant, in the philosopher's interpretation, as the personification of Ukrainian peasant democracy, is a "social class of the future", "endowed with a developed legal consciousness, ready to defend its rights by all means, disdainful of ready-made ideologies, hostile to all 'socialisms', 'pacifisms' and 'internationalisms'³⁸. In other words, the Ukrainian peasantry is an actor of the nation with prospects. The Ukrainian peasant democracy, of which it is the carrier and embodiment, also has corresponding prospects.

It is known that the key ideologies of agrarianism are:

1) the uniqueness and indisputable value for humanity of the spiritual, moral, cultural and social properties inherent in the peasantry and its labor;

2) recognition of the peasantry as an independent stratum in political life;

3) not capitalist, but a "separate" peasant way of developing society, preservation of private property – small peasant property as its optimal regional variant and the basis for social progress, as well as the idea of a peasant cooperative state;

4) the superiority of agriculture and the countryside over industry and the city, as well as the peasantry over other social groups;

5) the peasantry – the agricultural layer – concentrates the main positive values and qualities of society, is the foundation of state stability and the bearer of national identity, and the listed virtues should determine its political power³⁹.

³⁸ Донцов Д. Підстави нашої політики. Відень : Видавництво Донцових, 1921. С. 207.

³⁹ Корнюєнко С. Агратизм. Велика українська енциклопедія. URL: <https://vue.gov.ua/Агратизм>

Given the above, there are sufficient grounds to state that Dontsov's work "The Grounds of Our Politics" presents agrarian views. The concept of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921, developed by him and duly substantiated, convincingly demonstrates its peasant character. Thus, Dontsov's intellectual heritage represents, among other things, the Ukrainian agrarian intellectual discourse. On the one hand, it harmoniously complements the theory of Ukrainian agrarianism represented by the works of P. Kulish, V. Lypynsky, H. Simantsiv, and other authors. On the other hand, it is a component of central and southeastern agrarian thought.

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