

Prosvita Society in Kiev: The Ukrainian Struggle for Self-Identity in 1906-1920

**Fond F-1447; Opis' 1; 79 delo Tovarishchestvo
'Prosvita' v Kieve**

**Fond F-10, Kievskoe gubernskoe po delam ob
obshchestvakh prisutstvie; Opis'1**

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From the State Archive of the Kiev Oblast (GAKO) comes **Fond F-1447, *Tovarishchestvo 'Prosvita' v Kieve* [Prosvita Association in Kiev]** which includes 79 *delos*, or files, dating mainly between 1917-1920. This collection also includes the documents of **Fond F-10, entitled *Kievskoe gubernskoe po delam ob obshchestvakh prisutstvie* [Kiev Province Office for the Affairs Pertaining to Societies]**. All related documents remained classified and inaccessible to researchers until 1990.

The Prosvita Society was a cultural and educational public organization originally founded in Lvov in 1868 to promote education among the Ukrainians.¹ Prosvita came to Eastern Ukraine much later, after the 1905 revolution and the emperor's manifesto of October 17 – promising to guarantee freedom of religion, speech, assembly and associations – created conditions for normal political and public activities in Russia and the surrounding regions. All over the empire, people began to form public organizations and political parties of various orientations, including Prosvita. Branches of Prosvita were formed in 1905 and 1906 in Kiev, Ekaterinoslav, Odessa, Kamenets-Podol'sk, Zhitomir, Chernigov, the Kuban Region, Baku, and Vladivostok.

On 16 May 1906, the governor of Kiev was formally asked to authorize the opening of a Prosvita Association in Kiev, dedicated to Taras Shevchenko. The request was signed by prominent Ukrainian cultural figures including Boris Grinchenko (writer, public figure, publisher, student of folklore, and linguist), composer Nikolai Lysenko and painter Fotii Krasnitskii.²

The Prosvita's first meeting in Kiev on 25 June approved its charter and elected board members, including Boris Grinchenko as president. Others

elected to the board included S. Efremov, S. Shemet, and M. Levitskii. According to its charter, the society's goal was to "promote Ukrainian culture and, more importantly, education of the Ukrainian people in their own language, inside Kiev and in the Kiev Province." Working towards this goal, the society was to (a) publish books, magazines and newspapers, etc. in Ukrainian; (b) open libraries, museums, reading halls, and bookstores; (c) hold public lectures and readings, general education courses, stage performances, and encourage evenings of literature and music, concerts, exhibitions and so on; (d) establish grants, schools, homes, daycare centers, employment agencies and so on; (e) found contests and prizes for outstanding works of literature and art.³

Even though the authorities ruled to have Prosvita's activities permitted only in Kiev, it came to extend its influence all over Ukraine. The authorities then insisted that every city or village branch of the society should have its own charter and operate as an independent organization. This made it difficult to open local branches, public libraries, reading rooms, and bookstores.

The society's eventual success owed much to broad participation in its educational projects by Ukrainian intellectuals including Lesia Ukrainka (Larisa Petrovna Kosach), her sister Olga, V. Vinnichenko, D. Doroshenko and V. Stepanivskii.

Perhaps the greatest achievement for the Kiev-based Prosvita was the publication of books on a planned basis. The first booklet the society turned out listed subjects of the books soon to be released. Publication took off from there, with the number of copies per item published in Kiev ranging between 5,000 and 12,000, all of them well illustrated. All in all, the society printed 34 publications totalling 163,760 copies. This included two calendars for 1907 and 1908, a tear-off calendar, "Raduga," for 1907, the society's charter, progress reports for 1905 through 1909 and stories about Ukrainians who lived outside Ukraine at the time such as Galicia and the life of Galician Ukrainians, and Ukrainians living in Canada and America. Prosvita also cooperated with other publishers to produce "A Catalogue of Ukrainian Publications with Book Reviews," fliers and portraits.

The books were sold directly from Prosvita's bookstores and during various festive events. From 1908 onwards, books included the rules of Ukrainian grammar and spelling, which most certainly won more readers. The

society gained even more readers to its side by publishing a “Catalogue of Books for Popular Reading,” a guide to the book market.

Prosvita accomplished much in the realm of teaching, and eventually set up a special subcommittee that developed programs for daycare centers and elementary schools, made plans for opening a people’s university for Ukrainian studies and so on. The authorities, however, banned all these plans with the exception of those for lectures intended for the general public. The number of lectures permitted also varied with the changes in the political climate.

Prosvita also sponsored a library and reading room in Kiev which consisted mainly of donated books. The core of the library was a collection of books owned by Dr. K. Pan’kivskii of Galicia comprising 1,500 volumes.

In May 1910, the Kiev authorities, who resented Prosvita’s leading role in the cultural affairs of Ukraine, decided to ban the society entirely. The official reasons for the ban were stated in a memo to the governor of Kiev:

Acting on Your Excellency’s verbal instructions, we have studied 12 publications of Prosvita in the Ukrainian language, including the calendar for 1908, and 11 popular booklets brought out from 1906 to 1908. The 1906 booklets are ‘About Ukrainian Cossacks, Tatars and Turks,’ and ‘Land Management in New Zealand.’ The 1907 booklets are ‘The Liberation of North American States,’ ‘Stories about Ireland’ and ‘Ukrainians in the Kuban Region.’ The 1908 booklets are ‘Taras Shevchenko’ and ‘About Canada.’ The 1909 booklets are “Hetman Sagaidachnyi,’ ‘Labor and Capital’ and ‘The Brothers Gracchus.’ The 1910 booklet is ‘About Bukovina.’⁴

Analyzing the contents of these booklets, they concluded:

All the booklets, regardless of their different titles, are concerned with sociopolitical matters and at the same time they follow a very clear-cut program: to discredit the monarchy and spread revolutionary ideas, eulogize revolutionary and rebellious acts...undermine the prestige of the government’s legislative and administrative bodies and preach the solving of the agricultural issue according to the prescriptions of anarchist-communists...reject the need for religious education in

people's schools and raise the banner of a narrow ethnic autonomy for members of multilingual components of the state...Their authors are up in arms against initiating the Little Russian [Ukrainian] race into the Russian culture; they refer to this race as being deprived of all human rights and dream about a Slavic federative republic with Little Russia [Ukraine] as an independent member of this federation.

Thus, this 'educational' association does not sow among the masses of people the seeds of spiritual wheat but it sows chaff, or to put it more accurately, it is out to sow the wind in the hopes of reaping the whirlwind in due course.⁵

The documents pertaining to the elimination committee may be of particular interest to researchers. These include the minutes of Prosvita's general meeting of 14 May 1910, attended by 132 out of 180 members of the society; 9 reports from the elimination committee; a list of the society's property; a statement showing who and bought the property, when it was purchased and the relative value (ex. the library valued at 770 rubles, a bust of Shevchenko valued at 100 rubles, charcoal portraits on canvas of outstanding Ukrainian cultural figures Shevchenko, Kotliarevskii, Staritskii, Antonovich, Kulish, Rudanskii, Marko-Vovchok, and Karponko-Karyi valued at 25 rubles each); letters of K. Pan'kivskii about the books he donated to the Prosvita library; financial documents and so on.

The revolution in Russia during February 1917 overthrew the imperial government. Prosvita resumed operation in April the same year and passed a new charter. Prosvita's higher ruling bodies held annual general meetings. Between such meetings, the society was steered by its elected council, led by O. Lototskii. According to its charter, applicants were first accepted as probationary and then as full members of the society, with members paying dues of between three and six rubles. The society began its own magazine, Prosvitianin and sponsored commissions and groups for literature and libraries, performing arts and a group for children's affairs. The Kiev-based Prosvita set up branches in Poltava, Zhitomir, Borispol', Korostyshev and in other localities and villages around the Kiev Province. All in all, Ukraine had some 600 branches of the society. Their councils included mainly local writers, academics, teachers and medical doctors.

On 14 May 1917, members of a general meeting of the Kiev-based Prosvita decided to convene a congress in Kiev of Prosvita's representatives in order to draft a charter for an All-Ukraine Prosvita.

Despite the difficult political and economic conditions prevailing between 1917 and 1920, the society continued to open village seminaries, schools, libraries, reading rooms, bookstores, run courses of the Ukrainian language and publish books and newspapers in Ukrainian. Despite a lack of funds, the society put out several books and produced a number of short biographies of prominent hetmans, authors and cultural figures (Sagaidachnyi, Doroshenko, Shevchenko, Lesia Ukrainka, Kotsiubinskii, Grinchenko, Kostomarov, Antonovich, and Lysenko). During this period, the Prosvita society ran one kindergarten, four Ukrainian high schools, an evening elementary school, a school for adults and set up its own library of 8,000 volumes.

In the early 1920s, the Communist authorities charged Prosvita with conducting nationalist and anti-Soviet propaganda. The society folded soon after. Official propaganda claimed this closure was because of the emergence of new cultural and educational organizations brought forth by the Soviet system.

The Soviet government scrapped Prosvita in Western Ukraine in 1939 as a hotbed of separatism.

Prosvita's operation was resumed once Ukraine became independent.

Fond F-1447 of this collection contains materials of the First and Second All-Ukraine Congresses of Prosvita, minutes of general meetings of the Kiev-based Prosvita members, and progress reports of its branches in Kiev, Poltava, Ekaterinoslav, Volyn', Tavria, Chernigov, and Helsingfors. It also includes statistical reports of the Prosvita societies in Kiev, Poltava, Kharkov, Kherson, Volyn', Chernigov, Kursk, Voronezh oblasts, Black Sea area, Caucasus, Kuban, Siberia, Bessarabia, Donbass area, and Moscow. These reports contain information on Prosvita's membership; addresses of its branches; the years and months of their foundation; the number of meetings held; their funds; numbers of books in their holdings and numbers of readers; which books were in greatest demand; the events and lectures they held; and profiles of founders. Other documents include correspondence between

Prosvita and the Kiev Province commissioner of the Provisional government, the Central Rada, the governments of the Ukrainian People's Republic, Hetman Skoropadskii and the Directoria; the society's memorandum to the hetman on making Ukrainian the state language; and the Central Rada's donation of gold and silver medals for Prosvita's needs.

Additional valuable information can be found in the correspondence between Prosvita and its publishers Chas, Sil'skii Gospodar, and Soiuz; its correspondence dealing with the opening of an Ukrainian university, high schools, elementary schools, seminaries; the operation of lecture and library commissions; the building of a monument to Taras Shevchenko in the city of Romny in the Poltava region and a cultural center dedicated to the poet in his native village of Kirilovka in Zvenigorod Uezd of the Kiev Province; in the events to commemorate composer N.V. Lysenko, authors Turgenev and Kashchenko and economist and historian Tugan-Baranovskii; minutes of Prosvita council meetings in 1918 and 1919; documents pertaining to the renaming of streets in Kiev; papers concerning a Ukrainian Prosvita socialist center in Oranienbaum; papers on the financial performance of the society and so on.

The documents included in this collection are in Ukrainian and Russian.

¹ Lvov was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at that time.

² Kiev Oblast State Archive, fond 10, opis' 1, delo 20, pages 1, 2 ob.

³ GAKO, fond 10, opis' 1, delo 21, p.1 ob.

⁴ GAKO, fond 10, opis' 1, delo 21, p. 36.

⁵ GAKO, fond 10, opis' 1, delo 21, p. 42.

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