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FOCUS AREAS OF CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE RURAL INTELLIGENTSIA IN CHERNIHIV REGION IN THE 1920S–1930S

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Abstract. The article studies the phenomenon of the intelligentsia and rural intelligentsia and conveys the concepts of “intelligentsia” and “rural intelligentsia” by domestic scientists. The role of the rural intelligentsia of Chernihiv region in domestic cultural and educational activities is analyzed. The focus areas of the rural intelligentsia of Chernihiv region are highlighted, which consisted in the fulfilment of objectives in all life spheres of the Ukrainian village: education, culture, production, and improvement of the legal awareness of the population. It is emphasized the importance of establishing reading rooms (*khata-chyitalna*) and village centers (*silbud*) in Chernihiv region, which, in turn, exercised essential functions to raise the level of education and culture in rural areas. The authors analyze the main drivers, conditions and means of formation and functioning of educational centers, focus on the official duties of the heads of reading rooms and their assistants, and draw attention to the underpaid or unpaid work of the local intelligentsia, which worked as teachers, mentors, organizers, actors, lecturers, etc. It is also proved gaps in the operation of reading rooms, which were directly related to the lack of adequate funding, resource base, periodicals, and proper living conditions. The dynamics of their development and the peculiarity of functioning upon increasing ideologization and centralization of the Soviet regime are examined.

Key words: intelligentsia, rural intelligentsia, Chernihiv region, reading rooms, village centers, cultural and educational activities, state policy.

Introduction. The progress of socio-cultural aspects in the life of Ukrainian society has directly depended and depends on the views of the domestic political elite. As a result, the determination of anti-religious and cultural-educational activities always occurs in the political realm. The political activity of the educated stratum of society, both in Europe and Ukraine, affected the generation of public ideas and ideals. The progressive part of the population – the rural intelligentsia – played an active role in resolving religious, cultural and educational issues, in particular, of peasants.

The intelligentsia is a type of national elite that has begun to form and underwent a complex and long-term formation process since the early 19th century. The intelligentsia is a social stratum of the population that influenced the course of socio-economic and cultural processes in Ukrainian society (Borysenko, 2012: 22).

The concept of “rural intelligentsia”, as a separate socio-cultural and historical phenomenon, has recently begun to return to research interests of Ukrainian historians and foreign Ukrainian studies scholars. As for the definition of the intelligentsia after the brief domination of national governments in Ukraine, the utilitarian Bolshevik ideology of the 1920s imposed its own approach. After gaining

power, the Bolsheviks renounced their “intellectual status”. However, realizing that they would not be able to gain a foothold in quasi-state national republics without specialists, they started treating the intelligentsia less scrupulously. They were well aware that it is utterly unreasonable to oppress educated people who, following their professional duties, do mental work and take an active public position in society.

The research object is the rural intelligentsia of Chernihiv region.

The research subject is the performance of the rural intelligentsia of Chernihiv region in promoting cultural and educational activities.

The research goal is to analyze and generalize the impact of the rural intelligentsia of Chernihiv region on the progress of cultural and educational processes in rural regions.

Objectives: to analyze the rural intelligentsia’s impact on the formation, development and functioning of reading rooms and rural centers in Chernihiv region in the 1920s–1930s; to cover the main stages, dynamics and specifics of their development, as well as the focus areas of cultural and educational activities.

The study uses a set of general scientific theoretical and empirical **methods:** comparative, critical, synthetic and statistical tools (quantitative analysis and content analysis), and generalization.

Results and discussion. The intelligentsia contributed to the active development of cultural and educational activities not only in the central regions of Ukraine but also in rural areas, where uneducated population dominated. It is necessary to differentiate features inherent in the rural intelligentsia and distinguish it from the urban intelligentsia. The rural intelligentsia is a large group of intellectuals who worked (and often lived) in villages, which differed from the urban intelligentsia in terms of formation, professional functions, social status and, hence, had a different social psychology (Tsomra, 2007: 117).

Researcher V. Sheiko notes that the rural intelligentsia, which was mainly represented by the Ukrainian teachers – the largest stratum of the old intelligentsia, intended to end national oppression after the fall of the autocratic power and gain space for the progress of national culture (Sheiko, 2017: 204). They intended to give basic knowledge to rural residents, specifically children, and successfully performed tasks related to extending cultural and educational heritage.

In the first decades of the Soviet regime ruling, cultural and educational activity in rural regions was closely connected with the formation and practical functioning of an extensive network of village centers and reading rooms across the UkrSSR, where Chernihiv region held a special place, given its agricultural focus. To achieve the goal set, it is crucial to analyze the background of the emergence and formation of a network of village centers and reading rooms, their structure and practices, and thus, the participation of the rural intelligentsia in the implementation of cultural and educational work in the village.

Relevant activities of Chernihiv region’s rural intelligentsia in the period concerned are characterized by a rigid ideologization of cultural and educational work in the countryside. In general, as M. Zhurba noted, cultural work was not an end in itself for the Bolshevik regime – it was subject to the quite pragmatic tasks of ideological influence on the population. It has always involved political education measures (Zhurba, 2002: 265). For that reason, the Institute of the District Inspectorate of Political Education and District Methodological Councils was established.

First of all, thanks to the purposeful state policy on culture and education, reading rooms (sometimes called “club libraries”) became widespread in the rural area in the late 1920s. The low budget of the centers of political propaganda and cultural-educational work attracted the authorities, and they enthusiastically established support bases during the illiteracy eradication campaign, acquiring agrotechnical knowledge and rousing peasants’ interest in culture. At the same time, village centers (also known as *silbud*) began to function, which were considered a step higher in hierarchical terms since their main task was to engage the peasants in political education and assist in implementing

numerous ideological and economic campaigns. Reading rooms and village centers were the hubs of rural libraries, amateur hobby groups, propaganda lectures, and general educational reports.

The mission of village centers was to unite the peasantry and the agricultural proletariat with the urban proletariat into a “single working family”. The immediate task of village centers was to involve the poor and rural proletarians in the economic building of Soviet power by arranging rural economy and industry, as well as collective forms of economy. Thus, the resolution of the First Chernihiv Congress of Councils on the “organization of public education in guberniya (province) emphasized: “...reading rooms in the remotest villages should be the leaders of communism and socialist culture ideas. They should place the rural poor under their jurisdiction and shed the light of science on the dark environment through the fault of capital” (Borba, 1957: 332).

Village centers and reading rooms were supposed to replace the Ukrainian “Prosvita” (Enlightenment), the rural hubs of which were well known since the pre-revolutionary period. Considering these organizations counter-revolutionary, the Bolsheviks, in various ways, achieved their closure both in the city and the village. However, the Soviet authorities initially tried to control the Prosvita society and sovietize it. This was reflected in the organization’s charter. The document, in particular, emphasized the institution aims to disseminate socialist culture among citizens through “large-scale cultural and educational work” (Davydenko, 2002: 80).

Managers of most Enlightenment societies resisted turning them into centers of education of peasants in the spirit of socialism. Therefore, it was decided to finally liquidate these organizations. For example, the general meeting of the Nizhyn organization resolved: “Immediately establish a village center instead of the politically obsolete Prosvita (Davydenko, 2002: 81). A similar fate befell many institutions that were closed under the pretext of re-registration, but, in fact, it was a “purge”. Instead, village centers and reading rooms began to emerge in rural areas, which were supposed to combine political education work with the satisfaction of peasants’ cultural needs and be an obedient tool for educating the masses in the hands of the new system.

In general, in Chernihiv region, in 1925, there were 47 clubs, 146 village centers, 461 reading rooms, and 202 stationary and mobile libraries in the province (Yatsun, 1999: 53). Despite the slow spread of political education institutions in the left-bank districts of the UkrSSR, in Nizhyn region as of 1926, there were 101 educational organizations (reading rooms, village centers, schools for illiteracy eradication, libraries, etc.) (Horbanivskyi, 1926: 50); in Chernihiv district as of 1928, there were 106 village centers, 86 reading rooms, and 111 libraries (Sotsyalystycheskoe, 1983: 99).

Emerging village centers required help from the responsible authorities, hence it was proposed to provide all Hubradnarhosps (Huberniya Councils of National Economy) with all-round support and supply them with everything they needed. Village centers were about to become the only source of political education in the village aimed at understanding the class interests of the poor peasantry and the rural proletariat based on socialist culture and meeting cultural needs based on their economic interest. Teachers also highlighted the same: “the village center is the only political center, that is, it is the most expedient to introduce all political education measures through village centers, where the entire political educational asset is accumulated for cultural work,” one of the articles stated (Davydenko, 2002: 81). It was rural teachers, who belonged to the social class of the intelligentsia, were entrusted with the organization of political education work in the countryside because: “...the teacher deals with peasants all the time and knows better their psychology, needs, requirements, and interests,” emphasized in educational publications (Kinhi, 1926: 50). To achieve political education objectives, libraries, reading rooms, folk theaters, choirs, orchestras, museums, exhibitions, etc. were set up at village centers.

The council of the volost village center managed political and educational work on the ground, incl. the volost level. It consisted of 7 persons: the organizer of work in the village, representatives of the volost Komsomol center, the volost land department, the department of volost public education,

the volost committee of poor peasants, the volost union of land and forest workers, and the head of the volost village center. The councils of rural centers consisted of 3 persons (representatives of the rural Komsomol center and the committee of poor peasants and the head of the village hall). The village center was led by the head appointed by the county office, and the Council approved the general plan for the village center and supervised its implementation (Yurchenko, 1978: 96–100).

A characteristic feature of the activities of reading rooms was their seasonal nature: they did not operate in the midst of summer agricultural work and in winter due to the lack of funds for heating, and at other seasons, they were open every day, usually for 2–4 hours. The establishment of reading rooms was envisaged primarily in villages where there were no clubs, culture halls, libraries, and other culture and education institutions.

The primary goal of such associations was to conduct mass cultural and educational events, which covered the following areas: political education, anti-religious, industrial and agrotechnical propaganda, relevant agitation campaigns, celebration of revolutionary holidays, organization of lectures, talks, readings aloud, questions and answers evenings, performances of amateur groups, demonstration of “live” and “light” newspapers, etc.

The duties of heads and their voluntary assistants included running lectures, talks, collective readings of books and newspapers, anti-religious campaigns, library, educational and cultural work, etc. The vast majority of organizational issues were dealt with by the rural intelligentsia, which strived to raise cultural and educational activities to the proper level. More than anyone else, intellectuals realized the importance of the current situation in the village. But few people wanted to hold the executive since it was poorly paid, and in most cases, gratuitous.

The rural intelligentsia conducted practical cultural and educational activities through various hobby clubs at the mentioned institutions. Thus, natural science, library, military, self-education, literary, so-called “bezvirnyk” (non-believers), physical culture, and amateur art hobby groups worked at clubs and village centers. Natural science circles operated under the guidance of teachers and doctors, that is, rural intelligentsia. In circles, lectures were devoted to the Universe’s structure, the phenomena of nature, and evenings of questions and answers were held. For atheistic propaganda, natural science circles were organized. Political circles explained the policies of the party and the government and adhered to the program of political schools (Yurchenko, 1978: 96–100).

To achieve economic objectives, economic institutions were established at village centers: repair shops, rolling stations, research stations, fields, veterinary and matting hubs, outpatient clinics and model farms, handicraft workshops, cooperative shops, public canteens and tea houses, seed shops, grain cleaning farms, etc. Natural science clubs worked under the guidance of teachers and doctors. Therefore, L.P. Zlotnytskyi, a doctor of Sribrianska district in Pryluky region, was a board member at the local village center and gave 41 lectures in the first 2 quarters of 1928 (Otdel, 1928: 1). In the Danychiv reading room of Ripky district, the first lesson was held on Saturday, February 19, 1927. It attracted a large audience of listeners, predominantly youth. Teacher Mykhalchenko O.N. gave a lecture on “Worldbuilding”. In addition, lectures on health and history were given (Chernyhovskaia, 1927: 39). Political circles elucidated the policy of the party and the government and adhered to the program of political schools. The performance efficiency of circles of individual village rooms was evidenced by the fact that in the 1925 all-Ukrainian competition, the village center of Mala Divytsia was on top and won a cash prize, a radio receiver, film equipment, and books for the library (Yatsun, 1999: 53).

Reading rooms ran political and agricultural campaigns. Peasants gathered there to listen to reports, read newspapers and magazines, attend exhibitions, visit excursions, etc. Agricultural circles were set up at all reading rooms. They were the most crucial form of agrotechnical propaganda. Representatives of the agricultural intelligentsia gave lectures and reports on the regional specifics of agriculture, provided professional assistance to peasants, and organized excursions to research sta-

tions. Thus, at one of the lectures, it was proposed to inform the audience about the priority of sowing clover and potatoes in Polissia (Chernihiv region belonged to) (Kovaliv, 1926: 48).

At the outset of their existence, village centers were financed from the state budget, and with the transition to a new economic policy, they were transferred to self-sufficiency. As a result, given the new economic policy, institutions were allowed the following: to charge a fee for the use of premises, dining room, hotel, which were listed on the balance sheet of village centers; to use Soviet and sovkhoz (government-run cooperative) workshops and various agricultural hubs registered to village centers, using revenue earned for the needs of the village center; to use political education institutions, taking payment for performances (Yurchenko, 1978: 98).

The process of establishing a network of village centers and reading rooms faced some difficulties. Therefore, in 1924, an all-Ukrainian census of societies “Village Center” was conducted, which showed that one village center averagely united 102 men and, at the same time, the participation of women was low. A similar problem occurred Chernihiv region. Thus, according to the extracts from the minutes of the general meeting of Nizhyn district party organization, the discussion participant Shelmenko proposed eliminating the problem of low activity of women in public work by founding a nursery in the village.

As for the shortcomings in the performance of political education institutions, the speaker noted: “Books are scarcely used in reading rooms. Heads of reading rooms work poorly because they are underpaid, which means that in the future, it is necessary to pay attention to the salary of heads of reading rooms in order to improve their performance” (Kovalenko, 20212: 82).

Theoretical work principles provoked remarks. Thus, the provincial department of village centers of Chernihiv region complained about the program for agricultural circles. Dissatisfaction was driven by some aspects. First, the document’s explanatory note was of general nature and did not give practical advice on managing affairs. Secondly, the program did not contain specifics regarding some areas of the huberniya (province) that had inherent particularities of agricultural work. On top of that, it caused complaints due to “isolation from modernity”, the lack of recommended measures to combat pests. Consequently, 13% of crops were spoiled in the region in 1927, and the threat to a new crop remained in 1928. Thirdly, according to the huberniya department of village centers, the literature recommended for circles at village centers was improper and even detrimental given the practice of economic management. As a result, it was proposed using a book on crop rotation in arid areas and give preference to plants unpretentious to humidity. At the same time, Chernihiv region did not belong to the arid ones. The All-Ukrainian Department of Village Centers responded to those remarks. It reasoned some inaccuracies in the program by constant demands from regions about the availability of a universal document and the spontaneous emergence of agricultural circles in Chernihiv region. In addition, it was proposed to independently choose guidance materials for each individual district (Otdel, 1928: 34–35).

There were some shortcomings in the operation of open reading rooms. Therefore, in the village of Chortoryhy, Tulyholove district, no practical activities were carried out despite the fact that since the autumn of 1926, a work plan and calendar had been developed, various circles had been established, and there had been intention to publish a wall newspaper. The blame was laid on the institution’s head. Receiving payment in the amount of 40 karbovantsiv per month, no active actions were taken. Instead, peasants noticed that he was present at school all winter communicating with the female teacher. “Is he really going to work in the village center in spring and summer? With whom? No, it will not happen! In spring and summer, we are busy peasants – we have other things to worry about than visiting the village center,” one of the local activists was indignant (Sheiko, 2017: 203).

The Hlukhiv district village center also had problems. The main drawback was poor sanitation, particularly in the dining room: “You can face everything there: yesterday’s food, dirty dishes, and dirty housewife and maid. It becomes disgusting when you look at the people who serve you, and

this happens in the center, under the nose of the chief doctor,” complained a local correspondent. The institution’s manager was proposed to pay special attention to the current situation. The head of the Ponorntsia reading room was offered to extend its working hours in order to attract more peasants (Orhan, 1927: 25).

In the village of Buyanky, Ripky district, the head of the reading room, Ivan Lyzko, abused alcohol and squandered the membership funds, which provoked a supervision of the inspector from the district department of political education (Orhan, 1927: 69). Later, in the early 1930s, inspections were carried out purposefully – the authorities began to fight against the so-called “public enemies”.

Conclusions. Summing up, we can conclude that the network of political education institutions was represented in Chernihiv region primarily by village centers and reading rooms, which were one of the few means of cultural and educational work in the village for the rural intelligentsia. At the same time, it is essential to mark the numerous organizational and financial difficulties that stood in the way of the network’s formation. In addition, it is noted that cultural and educational work as it is was impossible under uncontested communist ideology. It was always aimed at propaganda effect on the population in order to raise a loyal citizen-producer, a cog of the system. The village “cultural forces” – teachers, doctors, and agronomists – had to play a leading role in those processes. Teachers and culture and education specialists were sent to rural regions not only to take illiteracy eradication measures but also to pursue large-scale political activities.

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