From Politician to Sociologist: Mykyta Shapoval and the Ukrainian Sociological Institute

Mykyta Shapoval, a Ukrainian politician during stormy times of the Ukrainian revolution, came to Prague as a political refugee in 1919. He was a member of the Ukrainian Social Revolutionaries party, one of the most important parties during a period of the Ukrainian independence struggle in 1917-1919.

Shapoval started his activities in Czechoslovakia as a politician and became the head of the Ukrainian Civic Committee which was established in the summer of 1921 to provide aid for immigrants, flooding into the country from the former Russian Empire. Shapoval used his connections with Czechoslovakian authorities to get government funds for the committee’s relief work.

Nevertheless, he believed that “cultural work” is much more important than this kind of social aid. He saw two main tasks in this area: to guarantee possibilities to train Ukrainian specialists in schools with Ukrainian language of instruction and to set up an institution for a research of the Ukrainian society.

With the financial help of the Czechoslovak government, he managed to establish a couple of Ukrainian schools of different levels in Czechoslovakia, and he also founded the Ukrainian Sociological Institute in Prague, which became a serious scientific institution.

As a sociologist, although he was almost autodidact, he earned recognition of his Czechoslovak colleagues, and, except his studies on Ukrainian topics, he also became one of important interpreters of T.G. Masaryk’s sociological ideas. Today, he is still respected for his insightful criticism of certain Masaryk’s ideas. He is one of the first ones who pointed out the inherent limitations of Masaryk’s philosophical sociology.

He used different methods to get recognition as a scientist and indispensable financial support. Firstly, it was his informal contacts with Czechoslovak policymakers. Secondly, he also maintained contacts with respected sociologists both abroad and in Czechoslovakia and published his works in journals and as books until his death in 1932.

Although it would seem that Shapoval had the best conditions for his activities, he was quite critical to Czechoslovak government and individual officials. He was convinced that Czechoslovak authorities had much more positive attitude to Russian refugees, which was definitely true at least for the Czech society in general. Although he got certain recognition as a scientist, he was not really able to establish himself in Czechoslovak academia and loss of financial support from Czechoslovak government for his Sociological Institute caused serious decline in his activities.

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