

How did Ukrainian thinkers in the 19th and early 20th centuries imagine a just society? What forms of political authority, economic order, and social inclusion did they consider fair? And what principles guided the distribution of land, wealth, and social status? This project explores these questions by studying how ideas of political and social justice developed in Ukrainian thought between 1830 and 1922.

During this time, Ukraine was split between two empires — the Russian Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire — each with its own systems of government, law, and society. Despite these differences, both empires treated Ukrainian lands as peripheral regions to be exploited for their resources and labor, while sidelining their people politically and culturally. Ukrainian thinkers living under these empires responded by developing visions of justice, sometimes different and sometimes overlapping, that addressed their shared challenges. This project explores these visions, how they evolved, and how they connected or diverged across borders.

Justice in Ukraine was not just a theoretical idea. It was lived and fought for by peasants demanding land reform, teachers battling widespread illiteracy, and workers organizing for better labor conditions. The short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic, which emerged after World War I, represented a high point for these justice movements. Yet, despite justice being central to Ukraine's political history, its conceptual development has not been thoroughly studied. This research fills that gap by examining how thinkers, writers, and activists across different regions and political views imagined and reshaped justice.

The study focuses on two main areas: political justice, which deals with questions of fair government, political rights, and the kinds of regimes considered legitimate; and social justice, which involves how land, wealth, and social status are shared, along with how marginalized groups are recognized and included.

The project looks at three key periods: 1830–1860, when Romantic nationalism and novel ideas of justice emerged; 1860–1890, which saw growing demands for class emancipation, gender equality, and new political programs; and 1890–1922, a time of mass politics, state-building, and revolutionary debates about justice. These periods align with major events like the end of serfdom, the revolutions of 1848, and Ukraine's brief independence, all of which spurred new thinking about justice.

Important figures studied include Mykola Kostomarov and Taras Shevchenko from the Russian Empire, and Markian Shashkevych and others in Habsburg Galicia during the earliest period. Later, the work of Mykhailo Drahomanov and his circle of thinkers, including Ivan Franko and Lesia Ukrainka, comes into focus. The final period highlights political leaders like Volodymyr Vynnychenko, Vyacheslav Lypynskyi, and historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky, who influenced political parties and debates about governance and citizenship.

This project makes three main contributions. First, it shows Ukrainian intellectuals as political thinkers, not just cultural icons. Second, it broadens the usual Western-centered conversations about justice by bringing in Ukrainian and Eastern European perspectives. Third, it presents justice not only as a response to oppression but as a hopeful vision of dignity, equality, and active citizenship.

This research is especially relevant today, after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which has brought issues of justice—such as accountability and human rights—into sharp focus. Beyond immediate concerns, it raises enduring questions: What kind of political system can fairly distribute resources and recognition? How should collective needs balance with individual rights? By looking back at historical ideas of justice in Ukraine, this project offers insights that deepen our understanding of present challenges and the future of justice in Ukraine.