

Education as a prominent state-building pillar: Orest Sikorskyi and the Balta Ukrainian Gymnasium (1917–1919)

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This article examines the role of Orest Sikorskyi (1880–1919), a Ukrainian educator, administrator, public and political figure, and organizer of the Ukrainian national movement in Balta and the Balta County of the Podillia Governorate, in the awakening of national consciousness among the local population amid revolutionary upheavals. Drawing on archival documents, eyewitness accounts, and contemporary scholarly research, the author considers O. Sikorskyi's civic and educational activities in Balta as a significant local manifestation of the broader national struggle for Ukraine's cultural and political self-determination. Born into a priestly family, O. Sikorskyi received a European education in History at the universities of Tartu and Halle, which shaped him as a representative of the modern intelligentsia: the profound moral and cultural values of his religious upbringing were integrated with a European worldview. His leadership of the commercial school in Balta, and later the Ukrainian gymnasium he founded, not only provided an institutional foundation for the development of national education but also fostered community cohesion in the face of prolonged political upheavals, war, and social instability. The tragic circumstances of his life underscore his dedication to Ukraine, and the lessons drawn from his experience remain relevant today, demonstrating the enduring connection between education and state-building.

KEYWORDS

Ukrainian national movement, Balta, educational leadership, national consciousness, state-building, European education

Introduction

The problematic process of forming a modern Ukrainian political nation during the revolutionary upheavals of 1917–1921 was especially evident at the local level. The absence of a unifying national idea and the contradictions in the development of national consciousness weakened state-building efforts and ultimately contributed to the failure of the independence struggle at that time. Education, although a crucial factor in shaping national identity and consolidating communities, also faced serious challenges: the lack of resources, political instability, and competing cultural influences limited its potential to become a fully effective instrument of nation-building. The process of Ukrainianization involved a complex transition from the former imperial (Tsarist) educational system to a modern, progressive Ukrainian model, which had to be constructed almost entirely from scratch. As reported by the Podillia Governorate Commissioner for public education, Yukhym Shchyrtsia, in May 1918, the main obstacles to school Ukrainianization were reduced to three factors: “the shortage and lack of appropriate textbooks; the attitude of the teaching staff toward this cause; and the influence of the Bolshevik wave.” (*Central State Archive of Supreme Bodies of Power and Government of Ukraine [TsDAVO Ukrainy], 1918.2201.1.28*)

Contemporary studies on the national movement in Podillia, particularly the works of Oleksandr Zavalniuk and Oleksandr Komarnytskyi (2005), highlight the importance of local initiatives in awakening national consciousness

and fostering community resilience during the revolutionary era. In the research of Bohdan Sushynskyi (2005) and Anatolii Lekar (2009; 2013), attention is primarily focused on Balta and the Balta County, where the revolutionary events of 1917–1921 are examined within a broad historical and social context, with an emphasis on the chronology and description of developments. At the same time, these works mainly reproduce a kaleidoscope of turbulent processes, while the figure of O. Sikorskyi and his role in the national and cultural revival of the region are addressed only superficially. Moreover, the dimension of education, which constituted a central arena of national consolidation and cultural transformation, receives little systematic attention. The establishment and functioning of Ukrainian schools, the struggle for language rights, and the broader pedagogical initiatives that shaped civic consciousness in the revolutionary era are often mentioned only in passing. Yet it was precisely through educational activity that local communities articulated their national aspirations, sought to institutionalize cultural identity, and laid the groundwork for resilience amid political upheaval. Even in more specialized research on the O. Sikorskyi family, such as that of Viacheslav Menzhulin (2019), O. Sikorskyi appears only incidentally – for example, in connection with his correspondence with Mykhailo Hrushevskyi during his student years. As a result, the contribution of educational initiatives and local pedagogical efforts to the broader cultural and national transformations of the time remains underexplored.



Thanks to the detailed examination of archival documents preserved in the Central State Archives of Supreme Bodies of Power and Government of Ukraine, it becomes possible to reconstruct this complex picture more precisely. Materials from the State Senate of the Ukrainian State (*Fund 905*), the Balta County Electoral Commission for the Ukrainian Constituent Assembly (*Fund 1134*), the Podillia Provincial Starosta (*Fund 1793*), the Office of the Balta County Commandant of the Ukrainian People's Republic (*Fund 2159*), as well as key ministerial collections such as the Ministry of Education of the Ukrainian State (*Fund 2201, 1918–1919*), the People's Ministry of Education of the Ukrainian People's Republic (*Fund 2581, 1917–1918*), and the Ministry of Public Education of the Ukrainian People's Republic (*Fund 2582, 1918–1921*) provide valuable insights. These sources encompass legislative acts, government initiatives, reports, correspondence, school records, letters, and telegrams, which together shed light on the development of educational institutions in Balta and the county, the challenges of implementing Ukrainization, and the concrete role of O. Sikorskyi in advancing cultural and national goals through education.

In addition, archival holdings of the University of Tartu preserve Orest Sikorskyi's personal file, lecture book, examination results, and creative works. Furthermore, the archives of Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg contain materials related to his studies there, including the courses he attended.

The purpose of this research is to examine the role of O. Sikorskyi in the educational and cultural life of Balta and the Balta County during the revolutionary period from 1917 until his tragic death from the Bolsheviks in February 1919. By focusing on his activities as an educator, community leader, and advocate of national revival, the study seeks to illuminate how local educational initiatives contributed to the shaping of Ukrainian identity and the strengthening of civic resilience. This approach aims to complement existing historiography, which has primarily emphasized political events and social dynamics, by highlighting the educational dimension as a significant factor in regional and national transformations.

In view of the outlined purpose and the need to examine both the personal contributions of O. Sikorskyi and the broader educational developments in Balta and the Balta County during the revolutionary period, the following research tasks have been identified:

- To examine the biographical background of O. Sikorskyi, including his clerical upbringing and European education, and assess how it influenced his approach to pedagogy and civic engagement.
- To analyze the state of education in Balta and the Balta County during the revolutionary period, including the challenges of Ukrainization and the transition from the Tsarist system to a modern Ukrainian educational model.
- To investigate O. Sikorskyi's activities as an educator, administrator, and community leader, with particular attention to his role in managing local schools and establishing the Ukrainian Gymnasium in Balta.
- To identify lessons from O. Sikorskyi's educational and civic work that remain relevant for contemporary Ukrainian education and nation-building.

Research methods

This study employs a combination of historical methodologies, including interdisciplinary application of these methods, carefully selected to correspond with the nature of the sources and the objectives of the research, in line

with contemporary approaches in Ukrainian historical scholarship.

The archival method serves as the foundation of the research, providing access to primary sources, including official documents, correspondence, reports, and institutional archival. Closely connected to this, the historical-genetic method traces the evolution of educational practices, highlighting the transition from the Tsarist system to the Ukrainian school framework and situating O. Sikorskyi's initiatives within broader historical trajectories.

To understand the interplay between educational institutions, local authorities, and revolutionary social dynamics, the historical-systemic method is applied. This approach allows the study to evaluate how these interactions influenced community resilience and the development of national consciousness. Complementing this, the historical-comparative method situates Balta's educational experience in relation to the broader state educational policy, emphasizing both shared trends and the distinctive characteristics of O. Sikorskyi's work.

The study also integrates the historical-structural and historical-functional methods, which facilitate a detailed examination of institutional and social structures within the educational system and their roles in fostering civic engagement, national identity, and local cohesion. Simultaneously, the historical-sociological and historical-psychological methods help to analyze the social and individual factors influencing the practice of education, teacher attitudes, community responses, and O. Sikorskyi's personal motivations.

Finally, the historical-cultural method is used to examine the integration of Ukrainian language, history, and traditions into the curriculum, emphasizing schools as centers of civic and cultural identity. An interdisciplinary approach synthesizes insights from pedagogy, social history, and political history, allowing the study to reconstruct the multifaceted role of education during the revolutionary period and the complex influence of O. Sikorskyi on local society.

By combining these methods, the research presents a holistic understanding of the educational and civic processes in Balta, illustrating both the challenges and achievements of school Ukrainization and highlighting the personal and institutional contributions of O. Sikorskyi to community resilience and nation-building.

Results and Discussion

Before analyzing O. Sikorskyi's contribution to the development of educational policy and the strengthening of national resilience in Ukraine during the revolutionary period of 1917–1919, it is worth outlining his biographical background. A study of his education, professional career, and scholarly interests allows for a deeper understanding of how his intellectual preparation and practical experience shaped his subsequent civic and cultural engagement.

O. Sikorskyi was born on 12(24) December 1880, in the village of Zaliznyachka, Zvenyhorod County, Kyiv Governorate, into the family of a parish priest, Dmytro Sikorskyi, and his wife, Sofiia. He was the third child in a large family with two older brothers – Petro and Mykhailo – a younger brother, Vasyl, and a sister, Mariia. The Sikorskyi family belonged to an extended kinship network that also produced notable figures such as the aviation pioneer Ihor Sikorskyi and the psychiatrist Ivan Sikorskyi.

Orest received his primary education at the Uman Theological College, and in August 1896, he entered the Kyiv Theological Seminary, graduating in 1902. His diploma indicates excellent proficiency in Hebrew and basic medical

knowledge, alongside exemplary conduct. He earned top marks not only in theological disciplines but also in History, Algebra, Physics, Didactics, and Greek language.

In accordance with the regulations of the time, O. Sikorskyi began his pedagogical career after graduation, teaching at a two-class parish school in the town of Lypovets during 1902–1903. In the autumn of 1903, he enrolled in the historical section of the Faculty of History and Philology at the Imperial Yuriev University (now the University of Tartu). There, he pursued a broad curriculum that included Theology, Epistemology, History, Philosophy, Pedagogy, Logic, Literature, Diplomatics, as well as the study of several languages – German, Russian, Greek, and Latin (EAA.402.1.24220).

O. Sikorskyi demonstrated deep engagement with Classical Literature and Philosophy, studying the works of Plautus, Suetonius, Aristotle, Theocritus, Thucydides, Velleius Paterculus, Sophocles, Lysias, and Bacchylides. His academic record reflected high achievement in Ancient and Modern Philosophy, Psychology, Church History, Slavic History, and the works of Greek and Roman authors. Among his surviving written works are essays such as “The Twelve Articles and Their Guiding Principles,” “N.M. Karamzin and His ‘History of the Russian State’”, and “The Role of Church Life and Struggles in the Anglo-Saxon State in the Spread of Christianity in Germany” (*Estonian Historical Archives [EAA].402.1.24219*).

At the same time, O. Sikorskyi reflected deeply on his own destiny as a young scholar. Seeking both intellectual guidance and personal orientation, he turned to one of the most prominent Ukrainian historians of the era, Mykhailo Hrushevsky. In his correspondence, written mostly in Ukrainian, O. Sikorskyi appealed to his “fellow countryman” for advice on how to organize the continuation of his studies (Menzhulin, 2019). This exchange illustrates his early awareness of the broader cultural and political significance of his studies and his desire to link academic growth with national development.

In January 1906, O. Sikorskyi petitioned to transfer to St. Volodymyr University in Kyiv, but his request was denied. Driven by a desire to receive a European education, later that year, he traveled to Germany and was admitted in April to the University of Halle-Wittenberg, where he studied until September 1907. His coursework included XIX Century Philosophy, Roman, Greek, and German History, the History of the Ancient Near Eastern States, European History, the Crusades, and the Dynamics between the Imperial and Papal Powers (*Archive of the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg [MLU-Archiv].5.46.25; MLU-Archiv. 47 II.41.35; MLU-Archiv. 39.299*). Upon returning to Yuriev (Tartu), his academic results from Halle (three semesters) were officially transferred and accredited. He later interrupted his studies again in 1910 due to family circumstances.

In parallel with his studies, O. Sikorskyi worked in 1909 as a teacher at a trade school in Yuriev (Tartu), and from 1910 he moved to Lublin, where he taught History and Russian language at the Lublin Commercial School and the Helena Czarniecka Girls' Gymnasium until 1915 (*Kurier Lubelski, 20.05.2014; Po latach 35., 1939*).

Following the advance of German and Austro-Hungarian forces in August 1915 during World War I and in compliance with imperial evacuation orders for state employees, O. Sikorskyi was forced to leave Lublin. He was reassigned to serve as the director of the Balta Commercial School, a position he was officially confirmed in during the autumn of 1916 (*TsDAVO Ukrainy, n.d., 2201.1.552*).

O. Sikorskyi greeted the February Revolution of 1917 in Balta, where he served as a school director. The changes in the socio-political life of the Russian Empire opened new opportunities for the cultural and educational revival of the Ukrainian people, and he immediately became actively involved in these processes. The legal foundation was provided by the Russian Provisional Government's decree of April 28, 1917, which allowed for the establishment of new secondary schools funded by the state, local councils (zemstvos), or private initiatives.

On August 19, 1917, the local “The Society for the Promotion of Upbringing and Education in Secondary and Lower Educational Institutions of the Town of Balta and Balta County” (hereinafter – the Society), at the persistent urging of O. Sikorskyi, resolved to open a Ukrainian gymnasium in the town. On this basis, a preliminary permit was obtained from the trustee of the Kyiv School District to open two classes of the gymnasium, with a further petition to the ministry for granting it the full rights of an educational institution. To accelerate the process, a delegation was even sent to Kyiv and Petrograd, which secured the official recognition of the gymnasium as a “legal” institution (*TsDAVO Ukrainy, n.d., 2201.1.463*).

On September 15, 1917, the gymnasium opened its doors to its first students. Classes were held in the building of the commercial school in the afternoons, starting at three o'clock. The student body was predominantly Ukrainian – out of 49 students, only four belonged to other nationalities (three Jews and one Pole). This fact became a decisive argument for O. Sikorskyi: even before the circulars of the General Secretariat of Education of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR) of October 12, No. 1316 “On the Introduction of Ukrainian Studies in Secondary Schools” and of October 13, No. 1359 “To the Ukrainian People”, he raised the issue of the full Ukrainization of the institution (*TsDAVO Ukrainy, n.d., 2201.1.463*).

In a letter to the General Secretariat of Education of the UPR dated November 18, 1917, the director reported that the Ukrainian language and the history of Ukraine had already been introduced into the curriculum in place of the Russian language and Russian history. According to O. Sikorskyi, both the teachers' council and the students welcomed this decision with joy. The letter was accompanied by appendices: lists of teachers, a budget, a class schedule, and data on the number of students. In this document, O. Sikorskyi for the first time officially recorded the new status of the institution as a Ukrainian gymnasium and justified it in accordance with legal acts and the national composition of the students (*TsDAVO Ukrainy, 1918.2201.2.141*).

However, this very decision provoked a conflict with the Society, which, despite its initial support, did not share the Ukrainization policy. It insisted on preserving the Russian character of education and refused to continue supporting the gymnasium. As a result, throughout the entire 1917–1918 academic year, O. Sikorskyi was forced to struggle for the autonomy and financial viability of the institution.

The material situation remained difficult: funding was provided only through tuition fees, while many students were exempted from payments. The budget deficit reached 4,284 rubles and 51 kopecks, which led to delays in paying teachers and covering the rent for the premises. O. Sikorskyi repeatedly appealed to the authorities, requesting state support and the transformation of the gymnasium into an eight-grade institution with moderate fees, in order to make education accessible to children from less affluent

urban and rural families (*TsDAVO Ukraine*, 1918.2201.2.141).

Despite financial hardship and political upheavals, the educational process continued. Instruction in Ukrainian was provided in Religious Studies, Ukrainian History, the Ukrainian language, and partly in World History and Natural Sciences (Anatomy, Physiology, Hygiene, Crystallography). Due to a shortage of textbooks, some subjects (in particular Mathematics and the Natural Sciences) still remained taught in Russian.

At the same time, the events of the revolutionary period directly affected the school year. An important catalyst of national activity in the Balta County was the arrival in May 1917 of the 269th Reserve Rifle Regiment, composed mainly of Ukrainians, which later became the 269th Haidamaka Regiment of the Ukrainian Central Rada. The regiment actively contributed to raising national consciousness among soldiers and the population, maintaining contacts with Rumcherod and the Odesa Provincial Council of the Ukrainian Central Rada. However, it was neutralized by the Bolsheviks in January 1918. These events demonstrated the growth of national awareness among the youth, while the peasantry remained primarily focused on addressing socio-economic issues, particularly the land question. The autumn of 1917 was marked by the elections to the Constituent Assembly, and during the winter, Bolshevik activity intensified in Balta, even threatening to destroy the gymnasium (*Lekar*, 2009: 116–117).

The activities of the local youth, who aspired to the Ukrainization of the educational process, gained particular importance. Thus, on October 22, 1917, a circle of Ukrainian students was established in Balta, which soon initiated an official appeal to the authorities. In their petition of December 7, 1917, the students emphasized that, despite their request to introduce Ukrainian studies in schools, no action had been taken for nearly two months. They addressed the General Secretariat of Education directly, demanding the issuance of an order on the introduction of Ukrainian subjects in the educational institutions of Balta and, most importantly, the assignment of Ukrainian teachers to the town. The petition stressed that at that time, there were only two Ukrainian teachers in Balta, who were already overburdened with work at the Ukrainian gymnasium (*TsDAVO Ukraine*, 1918.2201.2.141).

This document is eloquent evidence of the public demand for the Ukrainization of education and confirms that the efforts of O. Sikorskyi, as both a leader and a pedagogue, enjoyed strong support among the local community and school youth.

In March 1918, during the anti-Bolshevik uprising, part of the youth and supporters of the Central Rada attempted to restore Ukrainian authority in the town, but the Bolsheviks offered fierce resistance. The events of March 6, 1918, when about 15 students were killed during an attempted uprising near the Balta railway station, demonstrate the youth's readiness to defend the national idea and to engage in civic activism, while at the same time reflecting the weakness of organizational structures among the adult population (*Lekar*, 2009: 117–118).

With the arrival of Hetman P. Skoropadsky's administration in April 1918, administrative authority in the Balta County was strengthened: the state guard was reestablished, while punitive measures by the authorities and requisitions carried out by the Austro-Hungarian occupation administration provoked a mass partisan movement. The main social and political base of Ukrainian authority was the intelligentsia, an active representative of which was

O. Sikorskyi. He headed private educational courses, where patriotically minded youth and officers of the local state guard were being formed.

The confrontation between O. Sikorskyi and the Balta Society gradually intensified and, by the summer of 1918, had acquired an openly conflictual character. Its culmination came with a complaint addressed to the Minister of National Education by the Society's representatives, M. Itkis and F. Maiboroda. In a "Detailed Memorandum," they claimed that O. Sikorskyi "did not correspond to his position either as a director, as a pedagogue, or as a man." The authors of the document emphasized an alleged "clearly expressed distrust" of him on the part of teachers and parents, accused him of disobedience to the decisions of the supervisory council, and even argued that O. Sikorskyi had resigned only under the pressure of the Austrian administration, which had temporarily arrested him in July 1918 (*TsDAVO Ukraine*, n.d., 2201.1.463).

The complaint contained a wide range of accusations, ranging from disciplinary violations to moral allegations. In particular, it referred to the selection of staff "at his own discretion," "handling funds without oversight," as well as entirely discrediting claims of "sending students during lessons to buy vodka." It was also emphasized that the director simultaneously headed the Balta Ukrainian Gymnasium, which, according to the Society's plan, was supposed to be under its supervision, but in fact had been "isolated" by O. Sikorskyi and was operating beyond the Committee's control (*TsDAVO Ukraine*, 1918.2201.2.141).

This document demonstrates the Society's attempt to use administrative and judicial mechanisms to remove O. Sikorskyi from the educational sphere of Balta once and for all. It is no coincidence that the complaint stressed the need not only to confirm his dismissal, but also to "remove" O. Sikorskyi from Balta altogether, since his "further stay" allegedly posed a threat to the moral condition of the youth.

The rhetoric of the complaint, filled with emotional descriptions and accusations, stands in stark contrast to the documents O. Sikorskyi submitted to Ukrainian institutions. In his reports and letters, the gymnasium appears as a genuine center of national education overcoming material hardships, whereas in the Society's complaint the focus is placed on discrediting the personality of the director and portraying a "management crisis."

Thus, the complaint of M. Itkis and F. Maiboroda is a valuable testimony not only of a personal conflict, but also of a broader confrontation between the Ukrainian movement in the sphere of education and the conservative forces that sought to retain control over the school system. It also reflects the atmosphere of mistrust and political struggle characteristic of the transitional period of 1917–1918.

At the same time, the situation of O. Sikorskyi himself and his fellow teachers remained extremely difficult. On August 26, 1918, the Podolian gubernial commissioner, in his urgent appeal to the Minister of National Education of the Ukrainian State, reported a wave of arrests of teachers carried out solely on the basis of denunciations by opponents of Ukrainian education and the national cause. Among those repressed was O. Sikorskyi, who by then was arrested in the Balta region for the second time. The commissioner stressed that about forty teachers had been entered into "black lists," as a result of which, instead of taking part in Ukrainian studies courses in Balta, the teaching staff had to disperse and go into hiding from persecution. This fact clearly illustrates the scale of opposition to Ukrainian school initiatives even during a period of formal state

support for national education (*TsDAVO Ukrainy, n.d., 2201.1.28*).

The Ministry appealed to the Department of General Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, requesting measures for the teacher's release. However, the response of the Internal Affairs Ministry came down to the suggestion that petitions should be addressed directly to the German High Command in Ukraine. Eventually, a request was sent to Commander-in-Chief General Kirchbach, whose representative replied that no German troops were present in Balta, since the town was under the control of Austro-Hungarian units. The case was also taken up by Orest's elder brother, Petro Sikorskyi, a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Confessions, whom the Ministry of National Education asked to urgently gather information on who exactly had carried out the arrest.

The issue of unlawful repressions against teachers remained relevant in the autumn. Thus, on September 24 and October 2, 1918, the Ministry of National Education sent requests to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, demanding an end to the baseless arrests of teachers, which undermined the very possibility of organizing Ukrainian schooling at the local level (*TsDAVO Ukrainy, n.d., 2201.1.409*).

Ultimately, the question of O. Sikorskyi's release was resolved probably not so much due to government measures, but rather as a result of the forced withdrawal of Austro-Hungarian troops from Ukraine in November 1918 and the subsequent fall of Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi's regime.

The struggle with internal adversaries around the gymnasium did not go unnoticed by Ukrainian authorities. The Podolian Gubernial People's Administration, in its letter of September 9, 1918, and also in a telegram to the Ministry of National Education of the Ukrainian State, reported that the educational institution had found itself in extremely dire financial straits. It was emphasized that the Balta town and county administrations, which had gained significant influence after the arrival of the Austro-German administration, intended "to turn the gymnasium into a Russian one." At the same time, it was reported that director O. Sikorskyi, due to political persecution, was forced to leave Balta, while no teacher of the Ukrainian language was left in the town at all (*TsDAVO Ukrainy, 1918.2201.2.141*).

The Provincial Administration persistently urged the Ministry to pay attention to the situation of the Balta Ukrainian Gymnasium and to provide it with support: to bring the institution under state funding or allocate a subsidy, to supply it with teaching staff, and to prevent its Russification. This document demonstrates that the gymnasium was regarded by the authorities not merely as a local initiative, but as part of the nationwide network of Ukrainian educational institutions that required state protection.

It is worth emphasizing that the need to preserve and support the Ukrainian gymnasium in Balta was recognized not only by its director but also by the wider teaching community. On 18 August 1918, 149 teachers from Balta and Holovpil (Olhopil) counties addressed the head of the Kyiv School District Commissariat. In their appeal, they stressed that in all lower and higher primary schools, teaching was already conducted entirely in the Ukrainian language. At the same time, in the region there was not a single secondary school that would continue this national course. Such a disproportion, the document noted, hin-

dered the unity of school education and slowed the development of Ukrainian national culture (*TsDAVO Ukrainy, 1918.2201.2.141*).

In this regard, the teachers asked the commissariat to petition the Ministry of National Education of the Ukrainian State to bring the Balta Ukrainian Gymnasium under state funding. This appeal became an important testimony of solidarity within the educational community and its aspiration to create a full, continuous system of Ukrainian education from primary to secondary level.

In September 1918, O. Sikorskyi finally left his position as head of the commercial school, focusing instead on the development of the Ukrainian gymnasium. On 22 September 1918, he appealed to the director of the Department of Secondary Education of the Ministry of National Education of the Ukrainian State, requesting to be appointed permanent director of the Balta Ukrainian Gymnasium. In his letter, he emphasized that the Ukrainian gymnasium was closer to his heart, and he also submitted a résumé that included his university education, administrative and teaching experience, and participation in public life, including his candidacy for the Ukrainian Constituent Assembly and his role as head of the "Prosvita" society.

On 18 October 1918, the Department informed O. Sikorskyi of his appointment as acting director. However, he was instructed to provide detailed information on the condition of the gymnasium and at the same time to clarify the reasons for the dissatisfaction with him among part of Balta's residents, who wished him not to head the institution. This assignment reflected the complex socio-political context: local circles of town and county authorities, as well as part of the teaching community, were hostile toward O. Sikorskyi because of his firm stance in favor of the Ukrainian language and culture, his conflicts with the Society and his control over the gymnasium's finances (*TsDAVO Ukrainy, n.d., 2201.1.552*).

In a letter dated 24 October 1918, the Podolian Provincial People's Administration emphasized the importance of O. Sikorskyi's activity for the Balta Ukrainian Gymnasium. It stated that under his leadership, the gymnasium, which had previously operated with only two classes, had been expanded to four and had effectively become Ukrainian. Despite active attacks from opponents of Ukrainian education and political persecution, Orest ensured the organization of teaching and the material provision of the institution. The pedagogical council and the local Ukrainian community expressed satisfaction with his work and their desire to see him as permanent director. The Administration requested the Ministry of National Education to appoint him to this position, stressing that only under his leadership could the gymnasium become stable and fulfill the mission of a national school in Ukraine (*TsDAVO Ukrainy, n.d., 2201.1.409*).

The change in the political situation after the fall of the Hetmanate and the coming to power of the Directory opened new opportunities for O. Sikorskyi. On 23 December 1918, Yukhym Shcherytsia, Acting Head of the Ministry of National Education of the UPR, informed the commissioner of education and arts that on 15 December in Vinnytsia, O. Sikorskyi had been appointed County Education Commissioner of Balta County. In a separate letter, he notified O. Sikorskyi himself of this appointment, emphasizing that he could also retain his position as director of the Ukrainian gymnasium (*TsDAVO Ukrainy, n.d., 2201.1.28*).

Significantly, the assumption of the position of county commissioner by the Ukrainian intellectual O. Sikorskyi re-

sulted in vigorous organizational measures aimed at promoting the Ukrainian national idea and building the foundations of Ukrainian administration in the county, for which he was nicknamed “the little Petliura” by the Bolsheviks.

The activation of Ukrainian forces could not but encounter opposition from I. Dyachyshyn – formally the commander of the 14th Balta Regiment of the Directory (in reality, the Odesa Regional Committee of the Bolsheviks, seeking to preserve the Balta partisans from destruction, had instructed I. Dyachyshyn in Odesa in mid-1918, during negotiations with O. Grekov, commander of the Southern Group of the UPR army, formally to recognize UPR jurisdiction so as to be able to withdraw the partisans from Odesa to Balta without hindrance).

On 1 January 1919, a military parade took place in Balta – the partisans marched under the red flag, while the state blue-yellow banner of the UNR offered to them, by order of I. Dyachyshyn, was trampled into the mud. The armed confrontation between I. Dyachyshyn and O. Sikorskyi that began thereafter ended with the death of the county commissioner: on 4 February 1919, at about 4 a.m., I. Dyachyshyn’s detachment (about 40 men) secretly entered Balta, surrounded O. Sikorskyi’s house, and according to various accounts, he either shot himself or was shot personally by I. Dyachyshyn, who sought revenge for the death of his brother Mykhailo, captured and executed by Petliura’s forces shortly before (*Lekar*, 2013: 120).

This event became a symbol of the devotion of the Ukrainian intelligentsia to the national cause and at the same time reflects the difficulties of establishing Ukrainian authority during a period of political instability and armed conflicts.

The findings of this study illuminate the significance of O. Sikorskyi’s educational and public activities within the broader context of Ukraine’s national revolution. Drawing upon archival documents, petitions, local press materials, and correspondence, the research reconstructs both the historical setting and the personal trajectory of a figure whose work exemplified the intertwining of pedagogy, national identity, and civic resistance. O. Sikorskyi emerges not merely as a local school administrator, but as a passionate advocate of Ukrainian national rebirth, whose personality, moral convictions, and vision positioned him at the forefront of regional cultural transformation.

O. Sikorskyi’s personality, as inferred from testimonies, petitions, and accounts by contemporaries, was marked by a rare combination of intellectual rigor, organizational skill, and profound ethical commitment. He was regarded as an inspiring figure – principled, courageous, and deeply devoted to the ideals of enlightenment, national self-determination, and social justice. His leadership was defined not only by his institutional role, but by his charisma, empathy, and unwavering moral authority. In the highly polarized and dangerous environment of revolutionary Podillia, such qualities were both a source of strength and a cause for political targeting.

His personal philosophy was grounded in the belief that education was not simply a means of individual advancement, but a powerful tool for national liberation and civic consolidation. This view was especially relevant given the overall condition of Ukrainian education in 1917–1919. Following the collapse of the Russian Empire, Ukraine found itself in a fluid and chaotic political landscape, characterized by successive regimes, including the Central Rada, Hetmanate, Directory, and occupying forces. Each of these authorities implemented divergent, often contradictory, education policies, while structural instability, lack of funding,

teacher shortages, and political repression severely hindered the development of a stable national school system.

In this context, the Ukrainian national movement viewed education as central to its state-building agenda. The call for Ukrainian-language instruction, decolonized curricula, and the training of national teachers became emblematic of a broader resistance to centuries of imperial cultural domination. Schools, gymnasiums, and local educational societies were transformed into spaces of ideological confrontation, where battles over textbooks and language mirrored the struggle for sovereignty.

Within this broader educational revolution, O. Sikorskyi’s work in Balta stood as a clear expression of bottom-up civic mobilization. His role as founder and director of the Balta Ukrainian Gymnasium was not limited to administrative tasks. He cultivated a school that embodied the ideals of the Ukrainian national revival: instruction in the native language, the study of national history and literature, and the promotion of civic virtues aligned with democratic and cultural renewal. The school became a site of national consciousness, shaping a generation of youth who were to become carriers of Ukrainian identity.

Firstly, O. Sikorskyi’s life and work reveal the deep connections between education and political resistance. His numerous arrests and the repression of his colleagues underscore how seriously internal enemies and occupying forces viewed Ukrainian educational efforts as threats to the status quo.

The fact that many teachers in the Balta County were blacklisted speaks to the systematic nature of these persecutions. In this environment, O. Sikorskyi’s steadfastness and refusal to compromise his principles underscore the deeply political nature of his pedagogical mission.

Secondly, his ability to maintain institutional momentum in such conditions points to his strategic vision and community-building capacities. The consistent support he received from teachers, parents, civic leaders, and regional councils speaks not only to his personal credibility, but to the shared belief in the transformative power of education. Petitions to the Ministry of Education and appeals from the Podillia Provincial People’s Council affirm that O. Sikorskyi’s leadership was perceived as essential to the success of the national school project.

Thirdly, the case of Balta illustrates how the Ukrainian struggle for independence was not limited to military or diplomatic efforts, but also unfolded through cultural and educational institutions. The “frontline” of the revolution included classrooms, libraries, and school boards. As such, O. Sikorskyi and others like him functioned as cultural warriors, whose resistance was expressed through curriculum development, teacher training, and the cultivation of national pride in youth.

The broader revolutionary period saw education become a major battleground in Ukraine’s fight for freedom. Despite temporary statehoods and a lack of coherent central authority, Ukrainian intellectuals and community leaders continued to establish gymnasiums, teachers’ courses, literacy programs, and local Prosvita branches. These efforts were often unsupported – or outright suppressed – by various regimes, yet they reflect the depth of the population’s desire for cultural autonomy and national dignity. O. Sikorskyi’s life and tragic death must be understood in this context: as part of a collective struggle to reclaim and redefine Ukrainian identity through knowledge and learning.

Finally, O. Sikorskyi’s appointment in December 1918 as District Commissioner of Education by the Directory

represents institutional recognition of his contributions. It also signifies the alignment of his work with the emerging state's vision of national education. However, the fragility of this progress was brutally highlighted by his murder in early 1919 at the hands of the Bolsheviks. His death was not only a personal tragedy but a symbol of the violent backlash against the Ukrainian national revival, especially in region where education and identity-building was gaining traction.

Moreover, this study positions O. Sikorskyi as both a product and a shaper of his time – a figure whose personal integrity and professional dedication made him an integral part of Ukraine's resistance during its struggle for statehood. His legacy challenges traditional historiographies that prioritize military and political elites by demonstrating how educators and cultural workers also played decisive roles in shaping Ukraine's national trajectory. By examining O. Sikorskyi's life and the educational frontlines of the 1917–1919 period, we gain a deeper understanding of how identity, resistance, and education intersected in Ukraine's first attempt to assert its independence in the XXth century.

Conclusion

The legacy of O. Sikorskyi extends beyond the historical context of the Ukrainian nation-building process in the early XXth century and offers a powerful framework for understanding the transformative role of educators during periods of political upheaval. His life illustrates that the educator is not merely a transmitter of knowledge but a custodian of national resilience and cultural continuity. In this regard, O. Sikorskyi emerges not only as a school director or public servant but as a symbol of ethical leadership rooted in civic responsibility.

For modern Ukraine, particularly in the face of war, occupation, and hybrid threats, O. Sikorskyi's example underscores the necessity of moral courage in the defense of cultural sovereignty. His actions reflect a strategic understanding that long-term national security is inseparable from intellectual independence and identity formation within the classroom. O. Sikorskyi's ability to act decisively under unstable conditions offers a lesson in the cultivation of institutional agency – where individual commitment aligns with broader national objectives, even in the absence of full state support.

Moreover, his legacy challenges contemporary Ukrainian society to reimagine the educator not as a passive functionary of the state, but as an architect of the future – capable of mobilizing communities, resisting ideological conformity, and anchoring democratic values in everyday pedagogical practice. In the Ukrainian context today, where the education system is both a target and a tool in the struggle for sovereignty, O. Sikorskyi's model reinforces the idea that educational and cultural defense is as vital as military defense.

Ultimately, the historical experience of O. Sikorskyi provides not only a case study of perseverance in the face of repression but also a call to invest in the ethical and strategic capacities of educational leadership. His life story encourages contemporary Ukrainians to view education not simply as a policy sector, but as a battlefield for values, memory, and national self-determination.

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Освіта як наріжний камінь державотворення: Орест Сікорський та Балтська українська гімназія (1917–1919)

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У статті досліджується роль Ореста Сікорського (1880–1919), українського педагога, адміністратора, громадського, політичного діяча та організатора українського руху в м. Балта та Балтському повіті Подільської губернії, у пробудженні національної свідомості українського населення в умовах революційних потрясінь. Спираючись на архівні документи, спогади очевидців та сучасні наукові дослідження, автор розглядає громадську та освітню діяльність О. Сікорського в Балті як важливий локальний вияв ширшої національної боротьби за культурне та політичне самовизначення України. Виходець із родини священника, О. Сікорський отримав європейську філологічну освіту в університетах Тарту та Галле, що формувало його як представника модерної інтелігенції: глибинні моральні й культурні цінності релігійного виховання поєднувалися з європейським світоглядом. Його керівництво комерційною школою в Балті, а згодом і заснованою ним українською гімназією, не тільки забезпечило інституційну основу для формування національної освіти, але й згуртувало громаду в умовах тривалих політичних потрясінь, війни та соціальної нестабільності. Трагізм його долі підкреслює його самовідданість українській справі, а уроки, винесені з його досвіду, залишаються актуальними й сьогодні, демонструючи міцний зв'язок між освітою та державотворенням.

Ключові слова: український національний рух; Балта; освітнє лідерство; національна свідомість; державотворення; європейська освіта.

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