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Popular Perceptions of Soviet Politics in the 1920s: Disenchantment of the Dreamers

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In 1988, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously posed the question regarding the peoples of the Indian subcontinent, 'Can the subaltern speak?'.(1) Spivak referred to the seemingly insurmountable challenge of writing a history of the colonized masses when nearly all of the available sources were products of the colonizers and thus reflected their preoccupations, biases, and frames of reference. Historians of Soviet Russia have long faced a similar challenge, as their dependence on officially published accounts meant that an 'authentic' voice of the broad populace, a voice unencumbered by the ideological requirements of the Bolshevik regime, became something of a holy grail in the profession. The opening of Soviet archives brought to light sources that were never intended for publication, such as letters of appeal to Communist party leaders or secret police (OGPU or NKVD) reports (*svodki*) on the mood of various sectors of the population. Sarah Davies mined such sources from the 1930s for her book *Popular Opinion in Stalin?s Russia*, while Russian historians published collections of documents, including *Golos naroda*, and *Pis?ma vo vlast?*, which drew from the thousands of letters that figures such as M. I. Kalinin, chair of the Soviet Central Executive Committee, received daily in the 1920s and 1930s.(2)

Olga Velikanova has closely examined these collections and conducted her own extensive archival research in St. Petersburg and Moscow to analyze the relationship of ordinary Russians to their government in the 1920s. She is well aware of the dangers that uncritical use of her sources presents. In particular, she discusses debates among historians regarding police (OGPU) *svodki*, which, by default, focused on discontent among the population and criticism of the state and its policies rather than on displays of enthusiastic support (pp. 17?18). Moreover, the mandate to uncover elements hostile to Soviet power gave police agents the incentive to find evidence of their presence and, in doing so, justify their own existence. Velikanova argues that pressure to tailor police reports to superiors' expectations was lighter in the 1920s than in the 1930s, and even the OGPU leadership itself was aware of the tendencies to embellish information. Velikanova is therefore confident that the sources, by virtue of their volume and their relative consistency, do have much to tell us about popular attitudes toward Soviet power in the first decade of Bolshevik rule.

Two interrelated themes in particular provide Velikanova with windows into the minds of the rank-and-file masses: fears of impending war and the ill-fated movement to create peasant unions. War scare is especially important to her argument, because she sees in it a means of assessing loyalty and willingness to support the new state. She argues that the spontaneous movement to create peasant unions challenges stereotypes of the peasantry as a politically inert mass and shows that rural Russians pushed back against efforts to neutralize them politically or impose ideological constraints from above. Thus the year 1927 emerges in her account as a decisive moment in Soviet history, not (as has often been told) because Stalin used the fear of war to isolate his enemies and push the country toward an accelerated pace of industrialization, but because the war scare and peasant union movement together revealed unanticipated levels of hostility toward state policies among broad (and essential) sections of the population. The state?s responses to those realities established precedents that would characterize the entire Stalin era: an assault on peasant autonomy and widespread arrests of suspected enemies in so-called mass operations, all fueled by a paranoid sense of vulnerability to foreign attack.

The 1920s witnessed a series of war scares, the most important of which arose in early 1923 and in the spring and summer of 1927 but with smaller waves in 1924 and 1925. An ultimatum by Lord Curzon to the Soviet government to halt propaganda activities in British colonies, combined with the assassination of Soviet emissary V. V. Vorovsky in Switzerland, provided the ostensible cause for the first alarm; but Velikanova argues persuasively that it was primarily the product of anxiety over Lenin?s failing health and the fear that internal opponents would take advantage of the occasion to rise up against the regime and attract support from the country?s enemies abroad. The scare of 1924 she describes as 'a planned mobilization action directed by the Comintern according to its goals ? to maintain international class solidarity and both a high war and a revolutionary spirit in society' (p. 44). Here Velikanova offers a fascinating treatment of the demonstrations and exhibitions to heighten awareness of the threat from abroad and to prepare the population for aerial and gas attack. Rather than galvanizing support, however, the scares generated anxiety in much of the population, with the result that peasants hoarded grain and supplies, expressed vigorous hostility to war (which they blamed their leaders for provoking), and spread confused rumors over the actual extent of the international threat.

Velikanova devotes two entire chapters to the scare of 1927. The first is an examination of what she calls 'power discourse', by which she means the discussions among the Politburo, diplomats, the military, intelligence services, the OGPU, and the Comintern regarding the immediacy of the threat. Here she shows that an alarmist mood about Russia's international position was widespread well before the actual outbreak of the scare in May, when the British government, angry at Soviet interference in the general strike of 1926 and at evidence of military support for revolutionaries in China, severed diplomatic relations. And just as an assassination had heightened the sense of threat in 1923, the murder of Soviet deputy ambassador P. L. Voikov in Warsaw by a member of an émigré organization prompted Stalin to dispatch a hastily worded telegram calling for the OGPU to seize all of the monarchists in Soviet prisons as hostages, execute five or ten for each subsequent assassination, and initiate mass arrests of monarchists and so-called Whiteguardists across the country. The Politburo quickly adopted resolutions in line with these demands and, together with

mass propaganda and campaigns for military preparedness, thus began a 'mass operation' that increased the number of civilian informants, netted tens of thousands of people, and streamlined the process of trying and executing those convicted as 'enemies'. Velikanova makes an important contribution to the historiography of Stalinism here by firmly connecting the pattern of violence characteristic of the 1930s to the threat that Stalin and his leaders perceived from abroad and from within in the 1920s.

Were Soviet leaders cynically manipulating fear of attack to mobilize the population and strike against their internal political enemies? Or did they genuinely believe that they stood on the brink of invasion? On the whole, Velikanova takes seriously Bolshevik fears that their country faced imminent war, pointing out that the leadership was receiving conflicting information, with the Comintern and the OGPU braying about the malign intentions of the country?s foes while the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs pleaded for restraint in discussing the threat of war. Red Army generals offered mixed assessments of the likelihood of attack, but Velikanova points out that the army made no changes to its planned mobilization programme, and, indeed, defense expenditures grew only gradually over the 1920s, suggesting a lack of urgency (p. 49). It is thus easy to see why historians have variously interpreted the war scares. But even though Velikanova recognizes the utility of the scares for mobilizing support and consolidating Stalin's control of the party, she is clear in arguing that 'Fear, rather than cold calculation, stood behind the war-scare politics' (p. 80). She sees no evidence in Stalin's correspondence to suggest that it was 'a conscious manoeuvre to crush the opposition' (p. 47); and given the damage that the war scare of 1923 had done to the country's international trade and the panic it generated in the market, she finds it hard to imagine a deliberate repetition of the experience for purely political ends.

Popular reactions to rumors of war in 1926 and 1927 ? the subject of the following chapter ? revealed to the party leadership the extent of anti-government sentiments, especially among the peasantry. OGPU reports relayed statements that peasants largely blamed their own leaders for the worsening of international relations and would, in the event of war, turn their weapons on party representatives and local bureaucrats. Recruitment into the Red Army dropped; the marketing of grain ? despite only a slight decline in the overall grain harvest ? fell by nearly half as peasants hoarded their supplies; and party members in large numbers submitted resignations, fearing that their membership implied a willingness to take up arms in defense of the state. Indeed, by the time yet another war scare hit in 1930, at the height of the violent campaign to collectivize agriculture, OGPU agents reported widespread hopes among the population for invasion based on the belief that war would bring an end to Bolshevik rule.

The movement in the 1920s to form independent peasant unions to represent rural interests, much as urban trade unions gave workers representation and a means of pursuing wage increases, further unveils for Velikanova popular attitudes toward the Bolshevik government and helps explain its sense of vulnerability and paranoia. In particular, peasants expressed anger over the low prices at which the state procured grain, the absence of consumer goods, the weakness of local soviets, attempts to impose artificial class categories on social structures in the villages, and the favoritism shown to industrial workers. Velikanova finds evidence of these and other complaints across the breadth of the USSR, and their sheer abundance and consistency lead her to conclude that 'the majority, or at least a large part of the population, in the 1920s ?generally tended toward? rejecting Bolshevik politics. People did not trust the government and did not want to sacrifice their lives defending it' (p. 190).

Such a conclusion, however, implies the mirror possibility that a majority, or at least a large part of the population in the 1920s was either supportive of, or, if possible, indifferent to Bolshevik politics. While Velikanova?s evidence effectively counterbalances the decades of Soviet historiography that ignored popular voices of dissent, few historians seriously doubted that they existed, and many Western scholars were inclined to believe that they were the overwhelming majority of popular opinion. Although Velikanova does add subtlety to her analysis by discussing generational differences, the influence of utopian thinking, and the memories of violence in the civil war to explain pro-Bolshevik sentiments, she perhaps too easily dismisses statements of support as simply 'speaking Bolshevik', whereas dissenting voices to her have the ring of independence and, thus, authenticity. More persuasive, in my view, is Alexander Livshin?s argument that, in an era of enormous instability, people harbored a host of mutually contradictory ideas about politics,

economics, culture, and social relations, all of which changed with the fluctuating circumstances.(3) Such an approach of course complicates any discussion of 'popular opinion', but considering the immense economic and political problems that Velikanova documents so well, we require no less care and nuance in explaining support for the regime than in describing its opposition.

Despite its focus on popular opinion, Velikanova's account tends to be Stalin-centric. This is understandable, given the growing concentration of decision-making power in his hands and historians' desire (which I share) to explain his rise and the violence of his rule. But part of the strength of her narrative and other recent studies is to show the contributions of other leaders and even of broad segments of the population to those processes. It is therefore curious that she lapses into statements that seem to restore the idea of 'the boss' (*nachal'nik*) engineering a nationwide hysteria based on his own paranoia. His role is obviously critical in 1927, when he was well on his way to full control, but this was far less the case in 1923, when, she claims, 'panic at the top was initiated and orchestrated by the General Secretary' (p. 80), an assertion for which her evidence is slim. If, as she says earlier (p. 50), 'angst over foreign intervention' was 'deeply rooted in the mentality of the Bolsheviks', and if, as she points out, alarmist signals from Politburo members N. I. Bukharin, A. I. Rykov, and K. E. Voroshilov (only the last of whom can be called a Stalinist) actually preceded the war scare, then to describe the scares in terms of Stalin's manipulations would seem to return us to reductionist explanations.

Nevertheless, Velikanova deserves praise for focusing our attention on the important role that fear of war played in shaping mentalities ? both popular and among the leadership ? in the 1920s, and, especially, on 1927 as a critical year in the shaping of Stalinist rule. Moreover, by amplifying the voices 'from below', she has helped enrich our understanding of the first decade of Soviet power and shown that the occupants of the Kremlin may have worried as much about their own citizens as they did about enemies abroad.

Notes

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Basingstoke, 1988), pp. 271?313.Back to (1)
2. Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror: Propaganda and Dissent, 1934?1941* (Cambridge, 1997); *Golos naroda: Pis'ma i otkliki riadovykh sovetskikh grazhdan o sobytiiakh 1918-1932*, ed. A. K. Sokolov (Moscow, 1998); *Pis'ma vo vlast', 1917?1927: Zaiavleniia, zhaloby, donosy, pis'ma v gosudarstvennye struktury i bol'shevistskim vozhdiam*, ed. A. Ia. Livshin and I. B. Orlov (Moscow, 1998).Back to (2)
3. Aleksandr Livshin, *Nastroeniia i politicheskie emotsii v Sovetskoi Rossii 1917?1932 gg.* (Moscow, 2010), p. 306.Back to (3)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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