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READER RESPONSE TO THE SOVIET PRESS CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE TROTSKII-ZINOV'EV OPPOSITION, 1926-1928

In his 1901 article, "Where To Begin," Lenin enumerated the roles the Bolshevik press had to play in the coming revolution. "The newspaper," he wrote, "is not only a collective propagandist and ... agitator, it is also a collective organizer." In the years after 1917 Soviet journalists and propagandists never tired of repeating this aphorism. Yet Lenin's formula omitted two of the main functions newspapers came to fulfill in Soviet society—the exposure of wrongdoers inside and outside the state apparatus, and the collection of information on popular moods.

Both the "denunciatory" (razoblachitel'naia) and information-gathering functions of the Soviet press depended on a massive inflow of letters to the newspapers. Indeed, Soviet newspapers received a volume of mail probably unprecedented in world history and certainly unmatched by newspapers in the United States and Western Europe. For the Bolsheviks, these letters were input from below, a manifestation of mass, democratic participation in Soviet Power. But what is their meaning for the contemporary historian? Did the Party leadership respond to the resentments and desires which ordinary people expressed through their letters? Or did the letters and the reports based on them simply pile up in archives, unexamined? This article will argue that in the mid-1920s, at least, reader letters to the newspapers helped to catalyze important changes in the presentation of Party propaganda, if not policy.

Reader letters in the 1920s were a vital part of the state's mechanism for gathering intelligence on popular moods and adjusting propaganda to them. They were, in a sense, the Soviet equivalent of our opinion polls. Lenin himself had regularly perused reader letters forwarded to him by the Pravda edito-

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rial board. When officials at the Central Committee Subdepartment for the Press organized *Krest'ianskaia gazeta* in late 1923, they stipulated that the newspaper should use reader letters to gather information on the mood of the peasantry. By 1926 most, if not all, central newspapers put together summary reports (*svodki*) on the reader letters they received and forwarded them to high level Party and state organs, including the Central Committee, the *Komsomol* Central Committee, the Moscow regional (*oblast*) Party Committee, the People's Commissariat of Agriculture and the Central Committees of trade unions. The highest levels of the Party leadership, including Stalin, Molotov and Kaganovich, read these *svodki* and the individual reader letters which newspaper editors forwarded to them. They also requested intelligence on specific topics. In late February of 1927, for example, Molotov asked *Krest'ianskaia gazeta* to provide him with a report on peasant attitudes toward the threat of war, which the newspaper provided.

Recent studies of early Soviet newspapers have looked at the press as an arena of real, if limited, interaction between the Party leadership, journalists, Party activists and the “non-Party masses.” If we are to examine Soviet newspapers of the 1920s as the products of interaction between leaders, journalists and readers, we need to understand the mechanisms of that interaction.

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3. See letter from S. B. Uritskii, former editor of *Gudok*, to Iakov Iakovlev, editor of *Krest'ianskaia gazeta*, February 2, 1924, in Rossiiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniia dokumentov noveishei storii (hereafter RTsKhIDNI), f. 17, op. 60, d. 892, ll. 21-22.

4. For *Krest'ianskaia gazeta* reports to the Central Committee, see RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 19, l. 137 and following. For a description of *Gudok* reports to the Central Committee of the railroad workers' trade union, see Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossisskoi federatsii (hereafter GARF), f. 9613, op. 2, d. 94, ll. 1–10b. For *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* reports forwarded to the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture, see Rossiisskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki (hereafter RGAE), f. 7486, op. 37, especially d. 65. For reports to the Moscow Party Committee by Uchitel’*skaia gazeta* and *Golos tekstilei*, see Tsentral’nuyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv obschhestvennykh dvizhenii gorod Moskvy (hereafter TsGAOD g. Moskvy), f. 3, op. 9, d. 81, ll. 107–36, 156.

5. On Molotov’s 1927 request to *Krest'ianskaia gazeta* for a report on peasant attitudes to the threat of war, see RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 19, l. 174. The regular *Krest'ianskaia gazeta* reports forwarded to Stalin and Molotov can be found throughout delo 19 (of the same fond and opis’). For an example of an individual reader letter forwarded to Stalin (by M. Grandov, the editor of *Bednota*, in January 1926), see RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 19, l. 131.