



Stephen Velychenko. *Propaganda in Revolutionary Ukraine: Leaflets, Pamphlets, and Cartoons, 1917–1922.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. 304 pp. \$88.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4875-0468-7.

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Published on H-SHERA (August, 2021)

Commissioned by Hanna Chuchvaha (University of Calgary)

Omnipresence Rediscovered: The Many Facets of Propaganda in Revolutionary Ukraine

Following the October Revolution of 1917 and the ensuing civil war, the territory of present-day Ukraine became a battlefield for an array of conflicting ideologies, ranging from Ukrainian nationalism and socialism to Bolshevism, anarchism, and Russian monarchism. Stephen Velychenko's *Propaganda in Revolutionary Ukraine. Leaflets, Pamphlets, and Cartoons, 1917–1922* examines agitational and informational materials produced by ideologues of these political movements. The author undertakes a sociohistorical study of propaganda in Ukraine during the indicated period, investigating not only the messaging but also the networks of production and distribution. In the introduction to the book, Velychenko notes that he focuses on text-based materials, including decrees, leaflets, and pamphlets that have been preserved in major Ukrainian archives. Forty-six documents are reproduced in the book while a larger selection is available via an online supplement from the University of Toronto Press.

Propaganda in Revolutionary Ukraine is divided into four chapters. The first, “Message and Medium,” serves as the introduction to the period and the phenomenon of propaganda, also positioning the Ukrainian case vis-à-vis European and American developments. The next three chapters

are arranged chronologically to follow the power shifts on Ukraine's territory. Velychenko starts with the Central Rada that was created in March 1917 as the All-Ukrainian council and became the parliament of the independent Ukrainian National Republic, following its proclamation after the October Revolution. The same chapter covers the German-backed anti-socialist Ukrainian State of Pavlo Skoropadsky, also known as the Hetmanate, which overthrew the Rada in April 1918. The author then looks at the reinstated Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) with the Directory as its government between December 1918 and December 1919, while the final chapter is dedicated to the Bolsheviks. On the one hand, the book is a micro-history of previously little-studied propaganda on Ukrainian lands during the scrutinized period. On the other, it offers an insight into the country's political history and its nation-building process. Structurally, Velychenko uses the distinction between “medium” and “message” as two central blocks intended to create a unifying framework across the chapters.

The first chapter provides an overview of the publishing and paper industries in tsarist Ukraine before the start of the First World War and the changes they underwent in its aftermath. Using

statistics on key elements of printed matter production and distribution, such as paper manufacturing, printing press capacity, and the railway system, Velychenko observes the deteriorating conditions of these industries during the years of war and revolution. However, despite these technical challenges, the period saw a shift in the nature of publishing. As such, “thick publications for the educated elites” were replaced by “short, didactic works” (p. 32) written in the Ukrainian vernacular and aimed at the newly literate population of the non-Russian provinces, thus contributing to the process of Ukrainian nation building. The chapter concludes with two brief sections—“The People” and “Literacy and Comprehension”—that assess the propaganda agents and audience, as well as their levels of literacy and language proficiency. While literacy levels continued to increase through the war and revolutionary years, this did not necessarily mean that the literate “comprehended messages as authors intended” (p. 41). A telling anecdote illustrates how the audience misconstrued such neologisms as “aneksiia” (annexation) and “kontributsiia” (indemnity) to mean the tsar’s daughter Aneksiia and the town Kontributsiia, respectively. This section also explores a shift in the meaning of certain words: the “burzhui” (bourgeoisie) and “kurkul” (rich peasant), for example, changed from denoting a social class to signifying an ideological position or political loyalty.

The second chapter, “The Central Rada and the Ukrainian State,” looks at the propaganda efforts of these two political entities. The focus is mostly on the former since the Ukrainian State had no information ministry and thus produced a limited number of materials. The “medium” section of the chapter outlines the creation of the “Agitation Commission,” established by the Rada in March 1917, and its endeavors to centralize all propaganda work. Velychenko’s detailed description of the instructional materials that the Rada issued to its agitators overlaps, however, with a survey of its messaging that follows in the “message”

section of the chapter. One of the Rada’s main agitational tasks was to reconcile nationalism and socialism, hence the proliferation of propaganda stressing that Ukrainians constituted a separate nation with historical rights and that securing political autonomy would herald the implementation of social reforms. As described in the book, it was only during this time that the word “Ukrainian” started to be broadly applied to the majority of Ukraine’s inhabitants and “was disseminated among the population at large in mass publications” (p. 54). This, however, often confused the very same Ukrainians who, due to the lack of familiarity with the word, neither comprehended which group it denoted nor realized that the language they were speaking was, in fact, Ukrainian. Velychenko notes in passing that the Central Rada issued very few postcards and posters, which seems to suggest that its leaders consciously opted for language-based sources of information as opposed to a more visual approach. This aspect merits further exploration and analysis, which is out of the author’s scope in the present study, since such a strategy appears to be questionable in the environment of low literacy levels among the country’s population, and especially in comparison with the Bolsheviks’ favoring of agitprop. It also seems peculiar in light of the efforts of Mykhailo Hrushevsky, the head of the Rada, to establish the Ukrainian Academy of Art, with the ensuing return to Kyiv of many Ukrainian-born artists.

In the next chapter, “The UNR, Radical Socialists, and Warlords,” the author studies the propaganda of the reestablished UNR, as well as that of radical socialists (left wings of the socialist parties that dominated the UNR) and warlords (anti-Bolshevik commanders of insurgent armies fighting the Red Army troops). However, the last two groups are covered in a rather arbitrary way since the surviving materials are limited; the emphasis is thus on the UNR and the Directory. As in the previous chapter, Velychenko begins with the section on “medium,” providing an outline of the Dir-

ectory's failed attempt to establish a single propaganda ministry to coordinate the production and dissemination of its official communications. Hence, its agitational reach rarely extended further than Kyiv, where it had its office. Another notable aspect hindering the Directory's propaganda work was a perceived notion of it being Bolshevik that persisted among local officials, who were often either conservatives or leftover Hetmanate and tsarist personnel. Proceeding with the "message" section, the chapter makes clear the failure of Ukrainian leaders to formulate consistent goals and specific themes for their propaganda campaigns. Materials outlining the differences between the Russian and Ukrainian nations, as well as claims that political independence had to precede social reforms, appear very similar, if not identical, to those of the Central Rada. But here little attention is paid to the personalities at the top of each "regime" or people tasked with the propaganda efforts. It would be interesting to consider the difference between the sociopolitical standing of Hrushevsky as the head of the Central Rada, and Symon Petliura and Volodymyr Vynnychenko as leaders of the Directory.

In the final chapter, "The Bolsheviks," it becomes clear how much more organized Lenin's party was in terms of its propaganda efforts. This is particularly evident when comparing the Bolsheviks' establishment of a professional central apparatus of propaganda with the Directory's failure to create a single ministry for it. Moreover, the Bolsheviks went further in their propaganda consolidation by centralizing publishing, paper production, and distribution. This included expropriating all printing presses, seizing control over radio stations, and "creating a professional central cadre of propagandists" (p. 135). More successful too was their slogan "Land. Peace. Bread," which proved to be appealing and accessible to the predominantly rural population of Ukraine that was becoming increasingly war-weary. Since, in the end, the Bolsheviks emerged as the winning side, a larger quantity of their materials was preserved

in comparison with that of the Ukrainian governments. This allows Velychenko to provide a detailed and structured analysis distinctly outlining the four main themes of the Bolshevik propaganda campaign in Ukraine: (1) the claim that the workers and peasants of Russia and Ukraine had together made a single socialist revolution; (2) the assertion that leaders of the national Ukrainian governments were traitors in league with landlords and the bourgeoisie; (3) an explanation of the 1920 Polish-Ukrainian offensive through the lens of Russian nationalism and the need to defend and restore "Russian unity"; and (4) arguments against Nestor Makhno and irregular Ukrainian fighting units, classified as "bandits." The Bolsheviks' view of "Ukraine" as a concept is also interesting. Referring to it mainly in territorial terms, the party initially adhered to using "from/of Ukraine" rather than "Ukrainian." The latter adjective was largely identified as "reactionary," even though adjectival forms were applied to other nations, for example, Austrian, German, and Hungarian. But by late 1919, due to the unparalleled resistance that the party faced in Ukraine, Lenin had to concede to the Ukrainian national sentiment by integrating it into the Bolsheviks' messaging to the local population.

Propaganda in Revolutionary Ukraine is not a book for newcomers to the field of Ukrainian history. It does not provide much background on the historical and sociopolitical conditions within Ukrainian lands at the start of the given period, nor during the years immediately preceding it. The author succeeds, though, in capturing the atmosphere of constant flux and uncertainty that prevailed in Ukraine in 1917-22. Velychenko's definition of "medium" and "message" is never explicitly formulated, which creates some difficulty in understanding his intended structure and its applicability to the chosen material. The analyses suggest that the author interprets "medium" as the organizational infrastructure that underlay the production and distribution of propaganda: the administration and staffing of the offices tasked

with propaganda efforts, the level of its dissemination and saturation, and paper and transport supplies. But since the preserved statistical data is often limited, there is no uniform coverage of these elements throughout the book. It also means that information presented in the two sections of “medium” and “message” often overlaps while some key aspects remain unexplored, such as the financial side of printing and distributing the propagandistic material.

While his textual interpretation of the preserved materials often lacks consistency and clarity, Velychenko excels in critically assessing the available statistical data despite its frequently scarce, censored, and fragmented nature. The narrative and the described period come to life through the anecdotal accounts of the audience’s response to propaganda that are dotted throughout the book; many appear in the conclusion, which could be read as an independent and well-articulated essay. The presented stories help readers access and interrogate the mundane circumstances of the age, providing a glimpse into the everyday reality of people’s lives and reminding us “that life went on in the shadow of the great events” (p. 8). Velychenko’s incorporation of the Jewish question as a recurring theme is also a welcome aspect. The book examines reference to Jews within materials produced by various political groups and attempts to analyze reasons for the increased anti-Jewish violence in Ukraine. The author concludes that it was often “situational rather than ideological in nature” (p. 200) through word-of-mouth transmission of anti-Semitic ideas rather than an official sanctioning of pogroms via propaganda channels.

Velychenko advocates a more balanced approach to the study of the victors and those defeated. His main argument contends that “no one should either exaggerate Ukrainian failures or overestimate Bolshevik successes in the war of words” (p. 208). The author makes clear that the reception of propaganda was often dependent on

the conditions surrounding its appearance and dissemination, rather than on its message per se. Nonetheless, the presented narrative also suggests that the Ukrainian governments’ consistent failure to formulate a united and systematic communication strategy, as well as their failed attempts to centralize propaganda efforts, did play a role in the defeat of the Ukrainian state project at the time. There is no question that Velychenko’s publication is a timely and informative contribution to the study of propaganda produced in Ukraine during the revolutionary and civil war years. Providing invaluable data for the historiography of the Ukrainian nation- and statehood construction, it calls for further sociohistorical and cultural contextualization of the competing propaganda efforts. It is, however, not an exhaustive account, and the author openly states that his aim was not to write “a history of propaganda during the years in question” (p. 4), a claim that aims to justify the omission of such notable vying sides as the Western UNR, the White Army, and Makhno’s anarchists, since each “deserves a separate monograph” (p. 4). Similarly out of scope of the present study is image-based propaganda, for example, the agit-prop created by such artists from Ukraine as Mykhailo Boychuk and Vasyl Yermilov. *Propaganda in Revolutionary Ukraine* thus paves the way for further research into the messaging that surrounded the ruthless competition for loyalty on the territory of today’s Ukraine in the first decades of the twentieth century.

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Citation: Katia Denysova. Review of Velychenko, Stephen, *Propaganda in Revolutionary Ukraine: Leaflets, Pamphlets, and Cartoons, 1917–1922*. H-SHERA, H-Net Reviews. August, 2021.

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