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**FREEDOM IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF WORKERS OF  
RUSSIA (1918)**

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**Abstract**

The understanding of freedom in different local civilizations is a fairly traditional element of social consciousness that does not change much over time even in the Western European world which develops, as a rule, impulsively, since the Renaissance the understanding of freedom is quite stable in content. In uniquely traditional civilizations (for example, in Chinese), freedom in the minds of people is generally interpreted in the same way from generation to generation. The authors associate the duration of the transformation of the concept of "freedom" in a turning point with the specifics of civilization. Based on the regional materials of Russian history, the article analyzes the understanding of freedom by the peasantry and the proletariat at a specific time, namely in 1918. This time is a turning point for Russia as a whole, part of the period of the civil war that unfolded after the October events of 1917. As a result, the authors come to the conclusion that the transformation of public consciousness does not undergo rapid changes, the traditional understanding of freedom by the peasants ("land and freedom") is preserved in the key of communality and the limited space of the "world". A young, from the point of view of the time of formation in Russia, group of proletarians, in contrast to the peasants, understands freedom in a different way and sees it in economic and political protest forms.

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## **1. Introduction**

The intellectual tradition of understanding freedom in the public mind is interesting and has a long multi-generational history (Danilin et al., 2000; Demichev, 2020; Goldin, 2019; Kenez, 1996; Pavlov, 2018; Shevyrin, 2007; Smele, 2015a, 2015b). Based on the understanding of freedom, a person (an individual) or a group of people acted in a certain way under the influence of various kinds of factors in the changing conditions of life. In different civilizations at different periods of the historical process, changes in ideas about the world around, including changes in ideas about freedom, have undergone significant changes. We think that in order to identify the patterns of interaction between the specifics of the era and the understanding of freedom, it is necessary to have a significant amount of historical material, and only in this case it become possible to draw global conclusions. In addition, the topic chosen by the authors of the article is additionally updated, because until now historians cannot come to an unambiguous assessment of the October events of 1917 and their consequences.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Hypothetically, any "era of change" should lead to a change in the understanding of freedom. However, let us ask ourselves the question: Does the picture of the world (and in particular the image of freedom) always change in transitional epochs? And if it does, how fast does it change? What factors determine the dynamics of change? In answering these questions, we can analyze any historical material of the transition period. And as a consequence, a kind of puzzle will be formed from various fragments of the analysis of the behavioral forms of representatives of a particular society; this puzzle helps to deeply represent a particular era as a whole.

## **3. Research Questions**

To answer the questions raised, let us turn to a specific period of Russian history, the beginning of the Soviet era, which was very difficult for those people who lived and acted then due to the civil war that took place after the proclamation of Soviet power. Let us focus on the understanding of freedom by the peasants and workers of one of the provinces of the Russian state, namely the Nizhny Novgorod province.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the work is to reveal the peculiarities of understanding of freedom by the workers of the Nizhny Novgorod province in the conditions of the establishment of the new government after the October Revolution of 1917. By achieving this goal, one can better understand how society reacts to certain changes in certain specific historical circumstances.

## **5. Research Methods**

When writing the article, the authors primarily relied on the historical-genetic method, which, as you know, is one of the most widespread in historical research. The methodological basis was the works of

Russian philosophers who studied the nature of the Russian character and mentality (Berdyayev, 1998; Lossky, 1991). Based on the content of the documentary texts of the secret services of the Soviet state, the rhetoric of these texts, the conclusions that sound in them, The authors of the article strove to investigate the problem posed, to identify the degree of revolutionary discourse (in terms of understanding freedom) based on the behavioural type of workers in the province in 1918, correlating it with the traditional style of people's behaviour from the bottom of Russia.

## 6. Findings

In carrying out the research the authors relied on the materials compiled by representatives of the emerging and asserting Soviet power in 1918 and deposited in the funds of the Central Archives of the Nizhny Novgorod Region (Central Archive of the Nizhny Novgorod Region, 1918). The tasks that were pursued by the compilers of these documents were determined by the following necessity: the Bolsheviks wanted to understand the situation in the regions, who are the opponents of Soviet power, what is their potential in opposing the supporters of V.I. Lenin, whom they can rely on in building socialism. The creation of such an informational discourse gave an opportunity to the authorities to make more effective decisions.

Materials of special agencies became a significant part of the source base of the article: circulars, instructions and other normative materials of the Cheka. We especially note the reports on the activities of the Cheka of Nizhny Novgorod region, deposited in the fund 1099, which date back to September and October 1918. At first, the reports sinned with an excessively exalted revolutionary style; assessments of their own activities were saturated with a special political pathos. For example, speaking about the results of his activities in September 1918, the compiler of the report (signed by the chairman of the Cheka of Nizhny Novgorod region, Ya.Z. Vorobyov) noted the following: "A series of quick arrests of a number of provocateurs silenced all those who had previously tried to support the vile lies of the enemies of the revolution". Subsequently, the style of reporting became less emotional.

The degree of reliability of the above can be considered quite high, because when compiling the reports on what had happened, the Chekists were interested in truthful identification of the forces that opposed the new government, called counter-revolutionary. Very often "counterrevolutionaries" were people who actively rejected the Soviet regime, as well as apolitical people or people who simply did not understand what was happening.

The workers and peasants strove to realize political freedom through the formation of their own power. The majority of the population of the Nizhny Novgorod region knew about such a form of organization as Soviets even before October 1917. First, Soviets of Workers 'and Soldiers' Deputies were created, and from April 1918 they acted as united in a common Council of Workers 'and Soldiers' Deputies. In mid-March 1918 the Provincial Council of Peasant Deputies was formed. In April-May Soviets of Peasant Deputies were created in all districts of the province, if there were county and city zemstvo boards there. The formation of the bodies of Soviet power in the counties prompted the report of the emissary of the Nizhny Novgorod provincial executive committee, Grigory Ivanovich Kupchikov, which was sent to the assistant of the Nizhny Novgorod provincial commissar, Shablygin (Central Archive of the Nizhny

Novgorod Region, 1918). The report was drawn up on the basis of Kupchikov's business trip to the Nizhny Novgorod district, where he was during February 1918.

The county, according to the report, looked far from encouraging: "anarchy reigns", "riots in the villages are carried out by dark individuals and deserters under the banner of the Bolsheviks", "dark individuals are trying to outrage civilians", "the destruction of farms, lynchings, thefts, acts of arson and all kinds of fraud appear more and more often". The emissary drew attention to the food shortage. Kupchikov proposed "to expand the rights of the police ("in the provinces, it is literally powerless to do anything against pogroms, anarchy and lynching "), to arm the police and establish contact between the police and the provincial commissar." According to the author of the report, "major excesses should be expected in the near future." Indeed, during 1918 in the province, according to our calculations, there were from 50 to 70 actions of workers against the new government. This was how freedom, often bordering on anarchy, was understood.

From the report of P. Zalogin (the instructor of the organization of Soviets in the Nizhny Novgorod County), sent on March 4, 1918 to the Nizhny Novgorod Provincial Department of the Council of Workers and Peasants' Deputies, it follows that local peasants were in no hurry to create bodies of Soviet power, relying on the communal way of life. Even, starting from 1917, the peasants were engaged in unauthorized logging, seized the land of the landowners, believing that in the conditions of this "will" they have every right to do so. The freedom proclaimed by the new government was understood by workers and peasants in different ways and not always in the way the new government wanted.

Relations between the new government and the Sormovo workers were rather difficult. The Bolsheviks themselves provoked the discontent of the Sormovichi by breaking up the conference of the commissioners of factories and plants of the Nizhny Novgorod and Vladimir provinces on June 18, 1918 (Central Archive of the Nizhny Novgorod Region, 1918).

This was followed by strikes at the enterprise. It was joined by other plants and factories, as well as by the trade union of employees and workers of commercial and industrial enterprises and public institutions of Nizhny Novgorod and its province. Most of the stores stopped trading, for which they were later confiscated in favor of the provincial food committee. There were rampant searches and arrests. Weapons and food supplies were taken from the participants in the movement. Part of the food was given to the poorest segments of the population. The chairman of the Rastyapinskaya Cheka formed in July 1918, Movchan, and his deputy Nikolayev reported later that at that time not only office workers and many workers, but also the administration and owners of enterprises were on strike (Central Archive of the Nizhny Novgorod Region, 1918). Using the vocabulary of Karl Max, a strange community of representatives of "antagonistic classes" arose.

The events of June 18 pushed the population of the large and economically developed village of Gorodets to an anti-Bolshevik uprising. The Chekists qualified this action as an uprising of the entire local bourgeoisie, led by a circle of Mensheviks, Right Socialist-Revolutionaries and Cadets (Central Archive of the Nizhny Novgorod Region, 1918).

As described in the document, the events unfolded as follows. "In all the churches the alarm was sounded, and the people fled to the square from all corners. The crowd grew and strengthened, pressing against the headquarters of the Soviet militia. With the first shot, the crowd was thrown back to the People's

House, but there it reorganized itself, taking on a more formidable form. Speakers appeared in the crowd ... The Chairman of the Council had already been arrested, and with him several policemen were arrested as well. Many were beaten. The party of the local organization (the Bolsheviks) urgently gathered, decided to die, not allowing itself to be disarmed, and to burn the party list and documents if it would be impossible to break through the line of the besieging crowd. The crowd dispersed late in the evening. A mixed commission of the Soviets and the population was elected, but the actions of this mixed commission were abruptly cut short: the next day Comrade Rosenblum with a detachment of Red Army arrived, there was a machine gun with them, he dismissed this commission. The local population reconciled for a while and expected that Nizhny Novgorod would soon be taken by the Czechs ... This was also expected by the completely passive inhabitants of Gorodets (Central Archive of the Nizhny Novgorod Region, 1918).

From the above fragment from Nizhgubchek's report on the events of June 18, it is clear that the Bolsheviks were not supported by the population in Gorodets, and the local initiative to reach a compromise between the Soviet government and ordinary residents was wiped out as a result of violence from the provincial government.

The investigation, which was carried out according to the results of the Gorodets events, ended with the arrest of the most active participants in the performance and the seizure of weapons and ammunition (2 revolvers, 42 sleeves for revolvers, 5 cartridges, 3 sleeves for a rifle). The small stock that had the participants was considered illegal and served as a basis for conviction of criminal activity (Central Archive of the Nizhny Novgorod Region, 1918).

The ideological confrontation in the Nizhny Novgorod province in the summer and autumn of 1918 directly depended on an external factor: the situation on the Eastern Front and the situation of hostilities near Kazan. "General reassurance" in the region came after the capture of Kazan by the Red Army. There were no major riots during September.

In the Decree of the Government - Council of People's Commissars of September 5, 1918 "On the Red Terror" violent actions were seen as a direct necessity. On the one hand, the text of the document emphasized that the counter-revolutionaries were to become the object of physical extermination. On the other hand, the Resolution recorded a certain level of publicity: it was proposed to publish lists of persons subject to firing squad. In order to deploy a repressive policy in the context of the outbreak of the "red terror", in September the Guberniya Cheka paid great attention to organizing a network of Uyezd Chekas. This work was thoroughly carried out by the nonresident department of the Guberniya Commission throughout the month. Special attention was paid to the Arzamas Uyezd Extraordinary Commission, which had the status of a frontline Cheka. This was due to the concentration in Arzamas of a large amount of military force during the struggle for the possession of Kazan.

## **7. Conclusion**

The ideological confrontation in the Nizhny Novgorod province in the summer and autumn of 1918 directly depended on an external factor: the situation on the Eastern Front and the situation of hostilities near Kazan. "General reassurance" in the region came after the capture of Kazan by the Red Army. There were no major riots during September. The studied material leads the authors to the conclusion that the deep sources of the ideology of the Russian masses should be sought in the strata of the people's

consciousness of the previous periods. In many ways the basis for their understanding is the works of representatives of the Russian intellectual elite, which characterize the main population of Russia - the peasantry. Sometimes this characteristic is very contradictory: from the conservatism of the ideas of the peasants to the explosive state of their consciousness. The analysis of the archival materials used makes it possible to assert that the understanding of freedom by the workers of the Nizhny Novgorod province strictly corresponded to group social interests, and was based on its traditional perception. There was no rapid change in the understanding of freedom. The workers, who were under the active propaganda of the Bolsheviks, believed that Freedom will be achieved if they fight for it: the most class-conscious proletarians actively participated in social and political movements. The less active ones were ready to confine themselves to the struggle for economic rights or not to join the ranks of the fighters at all. Some of the peasants were prone to riots.

Subsequently, as the Soviet regime was being consolidated, freedom began to be understood by the majority of society in the form presented by the political elite.

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