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PERIODICAL PRESS IN THE PROVINCES OF THE MIDDLE
VOLGA REGION (1914-1918)

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Abstract

The article attempts to carry out a comprehensive retrospective study of the provincial press activities of pro-government mass media in the provinces of the Middle Volga region (Simbirsk and Samara provinces) during the First World War. The relevance of the problem lies in the importance of a detailed study and rethinking of the periodical press role of pro-government mass media in the communication space of Russia and an objective assessment of the contribution it has made to the development of residents' perceptions about military events, the course pursued by the imperial government, as well as socio-economic realities in the country. The article was formed on the principles of science, complexity, comprehensiveness, historicism, and objectivity. In the course of the work, specific methods such as: problem-chronological, historical-system, historical-typological, historical-genetic, historical-comparative and content analysis became fundamental. The paper considered transformations in the themes and activities of the pro-government periodical press in the realities of changing situation at the front, as well as the social, political, and economic situation in the country. Along with this, the article studies the peculiarities of the implementation of propaganda and information tasks by the mass media and their impact on the national consciousness of citizens. The authors came to the conclusion that the provincial press during the First World War was engaged in the formation of images of an external and internal enemy, and systematically condemned the "decadent" policy in the government and society.

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1. Introduction

Under modern conditions, an extremely important issue is how the mass media reflect the real state of affairs in the country and in the world. There is no doubt that, to date, the mass media have become a powerful tool for influencing public opinion, an operative information carrier around the world, as well as an effective way of manipulation. In this regard, it is important for the government of the Russian Federation to timely resist various external attacks, including “fakes” and distorted information spread by the media of “unfriendly” countries that perform mainly destructive and “rocking” tasks.

During the First World War – an event that had a significant impact at the beginning of the 20th century on the formation of the political map of the world and the further development of Russia, the periodical press was the only mass media available to the population. The periodical press, which was under constant and detailed censorship by the imperial authorities, performed both propaganda and informational functions. The relevance of the problem lies in the fact that the study of the experience of the state mass media functioning, as well as the influence of the economic and ideological policy of the state on the development of the press in emergency conditions can be used by the Government of the Russian Federation when making adjustments to the existing legislation regulating the activities of the media.

2. Problem Statement

The problem of periodicals during the First World War in the academic environment very rarely became the subject of scientific research. The pre-revolutionary period of historiography was characterized by the absence of generalizing works on the subject. The issues related to the problems were mentioned in fragments on the pages of the provincial newspapers – “The Voice of Samara”, “Simbirsk Provincial Gazette” and “Simbiryanin”.

In the first half of the Soviet period (1918–1955), the problem of the imperial press formation and the peculiarities of its distribution were indirectly addressed in works devoted to the First World War. Thus, Kandidov (1927) considered the role of the military press in the mass movement of assistance to the front. In the works by Omelchenko (1939), Boltin and Weber (1940), where the ideological character prevailed, the authors focused on the rejection by the proletariat of the political course pursued by the imperial government and mass mistrust of the imperial periodical press. In the second half of the 1950s–1980s, the liberalization of the socio-political life of the country led to the appearance of the first fundamental works on the subject. Okorokov (1970) studied in detail the periodical press of the 19th–20th centuries, Esin (1971) – presents the coverage features of the socio-economic life of the Russian Empire and the events of the First World War by the pre-revolutionary press, and Berezhnoy (1975) considered the principles of the censorship organization and the role of the periodical press in the daily life of citizens.

Modern historiography was characterized by significant changes both in the scientific approach and in the general tone of research. Historians sought to reproduce in their works the most reliable retrospective picture of the periodical press. The academic environment publishes the works by Korobkov

(2000), Borshchukova (2012), Kraikin (2009), Semenova (2016), Toshchenko and Kharchenko (1996), in which the national identity and the influence of mass media are considered in various manifestations.

In foreign historiography, historians have turned to the materials of the Russian periodical press as a source reflecting the characteristics of public attitudes in the Russian Empire. In the monograph of Hosking a small section devoted to the First World War, and the period of the war itself is called the days of intoxicating patriotism (Hosking, 1994), and in his work *Daily* (2001) focuses on the phenomenon of pan-Slavism and neo-Slavism and the further development of public sentiment in time of war. In general, the scientific literature analysis revealed the fact that there are no works where the problem of the periodical press of the Simbirsk and Samara provinces during the First World War was covered in detail, which enhances the relevance of this scientific article.

3. Research Questions

The subject of the study is the periodical press during the First World War in the Simbirsk and Samara provinces.

- i. to consider the transformations in the themes and activities of the pro-government periodical press in the realities of changing situation at the front, as well as the social, political, and economic situation in the country;
- ii. to study the peculiarities of the implementation of propaganda and information tasks by the mass media and their impact on the national consciousness of citizens.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to carry out a comprehensive retrospective study of the provincial press activities by the pro-government mass media of the Simbirsk and Samara provinces during the First World War.

5. Research Methods

The article based on general scientific and general historical approaches. The article was formed on the principles of science, complexity, comprehensiveness, historicism, and objectivity. In particular, the principle of historicism made it possible to take into account the characteristic features of the chronological period, to consider the problem of the periodical press development within the Simbirsk and Samara provinces, and the principle of objectivity – to properly apply real facts and analyze the current events. In addition, problem-chronological, historical-system, historical-typological, historical-genetic, historical-comparative methods, as well as content analysis were actively applied in the work.

6. Findings

In July 1914, the socio-political press of the Simbirsk and Samara provinces was radically changed in accordance with the new demands of the readership. Publishers switched to military events in the country, region, and abroad. All other departments of newspapers were subordinated to military subjects.

Eyewitnesses of these events noted that “if before the war the newspaper was just a friend of the house, now it has become a full-fledged hostess in it, since it determines the topic of almost every conversation between relatives and friends (Hastings, 2021). A special role in the coverage of military events was played by the pro-government (Black Hundred) press.

Monarchists united around the “Simbiryan” periodical. The editorial office of the newspaper was located in Simbirsk in the house of Balakirshchikov on the street of the Police Lane. In the town of Melekess, Samara province, a subscription to the publication was accepted in the estate of the doctor Ganieva Sirotkin. Fully following the views of the government, the newspaper hospitably presents its pages to the local department of the Nationalist and Octobrist Party. An “Appendix” was attached to the publication, providing political information and events from the front. The editorial office collaborated with the “Simbirsk Diocesan Vedomosti” and other right-wing newspapers (Russian Banner). The last page indicated a subscription to other right-wing publications (“Kievan”, “Motherland”, “Voice of Russia”, etc.). Monarchist organizations recommended that parishes subscribe to a newspaper “in order to know the truth” (SARM, 1915). In Samara, Petrograd leaflets “The latest news from the Theater of War” by the editor-publisher Stepnitsky were popular. The printing house of Viktorov in Bugulma published “Telegrams”. They were the longest-running and 466 issues were released in 1914-1916.

In Simbirsk province, publishers Kashinsky and Ksenov issued Bulletins of the St. Petersburg Telegraph Agency at the printing-office located in the house of Ilyin. The material was a reprint of telegrams from the capital newspapers, trade and public announcements, they were published 2 times a day (morning and evening), the selling price ranged from 2 to 3 kopecks. In Syzran the editor Bespyatov Published “Telegrams of the Petrograd Agency” in 1915 (SAUR, 1914a). The leaflets were intended for a mass readership. The material was mainly devoted to sensational events from the front, for example, headlines were printed in large type – “Whole regiments of Austrians were destroyed”, “Austrians are fleeing in all directions!”, “Our allies destroyed the Germans”. The information was patriotic in nature.

The right-wing daily periodicals informed about all the events taking place in the world and in the region. Local newspapers informed the population about the mourning demonstration in Vienna in support of the ruling Habsburg dynasty, about the Belgrade Catholic chapel, where the funeral mass for the hereditary couple took place. The coverage of the front events was presented by correspondents as the “retreat” of the enemy with enormous losses. Under the military censorship, right-wing editors hushed up the defeats of the Russian army, thereby forming confidence in the victory over the “evil German forces” among the population. The press described victories in an exaggerated way, as illustrated by the note “How two Cossacks repelled two enemy companies”. The enemy in the press seemed weak.

In Simbirsk, the newspaper “Simbiryan” occupied a leading place in popularity among the local population, its circulation in 1916 increased to 4,000 copies per day (unlike the left-wing newspaper “Volzhskie Vesti”, which issued 500 copies). The first military operations that took place on the Eastern Front were described in the article “The shameful flight of the Germans from the Russians”. The newspapers published the materials by war correspondents about the offensive of the two armies under the command of Samsonov and Rennenkampf. In the article “Successes of the Russian troops”, the author described the victorious offensive of the Russian armies, caused huge damage to the Germans. About the

defeat of the 2nd Russian army at Tannenberg and the loss of East Prussia positions, the official press was silent.

The war caused mass hysteria, accompanied by rumors and gossip. Letters from the front were censored, many were never written by the participants of the war and were compiled in the editorial office. Numerous letters of soldiers were published in the newspaper “Simbiryan”. The heading “On the bloody field” contained excerpts from a letter by a Simbirsk officer who expresses full confidence in “the near end of the war ... sentiment has become better”. The newspaper published excerpts from the letters of General Brzhozovsky, the commandant of the Osovets fortress, provided to the newspaper by his friends. Brzhozovsky writes that the earth, nourished with the blood of its faithful sons, will breathe with a full breast and give room for a long peace, work, mind and thought. Slavs will rise to a new, good, beautiful life and become the head of true progress. Although, it is still a long time to wait, but the dawn is already visible. On the Caucasian Front in January-February 1916, in the Battle of Erzurum, Russian troops completely defeated the Turkish army and captured the city of Erzurum. In honor of this event, the article “Caucasian Front” described a battle in the valley of the river Arkhave, where the Turkish detachment was defeated by Russian fire.

For residents of the provinces, the pro-government press published a list of soldiers from Simbirsk and Samara provinces died at the front. The press emphasized that different social classes go to war. For example, the newspaper “Simbiryan” published lists of front-line soldiers — “Warrant Officer Boris Fedorovich Solovyov died a brave death on the Lublin front on June 25, 1915, the son of an ancestral nobleman, landowner of the Alaty district F. A. Solovyov, a student of the Simbirsk cadet corps”. The exploits of the Simbirsk seminarian heroes S. Kudryavtsev and E. Bogoyavlensky were published. In the note “Incidents”, the material “Young Fugitive” was published, about a fifteen-year-old teenager Konstantin Nosov, who went “to war” as a volunteer.

Socio-economic problems also were of great importance for the right-wing press. In 1914–1915, the state budget deficit more than tripled, and inflation began in the country. In the Simbirsk Provincial Gazette, the governor decree on setting prices for the sale of essential foodstuffs was published. In 1916, a decree of the Ministry of Trade and Industry on fixed prices of leather goods was published in the Samara Provincial Gazette. Inflation led to the fact that at the beginning of 1916, the wage level, compared with the pre-war period, increased by 10–15 %, and the prices of many goods and products increased by 100–300% (Efimov, 2006).

The pro-government periodical press also favored Russian officials. In the newspaper “Simbiryan” the article “About the attacks on the zemstvo chiefs”, by the author criticizes the representatives of the Russian left parties – “the Shingarevs and Milyukovs”, for opposing the allocation of additional funds for the maintenance of clerical officials in the provinces. Poets writing on military subjects reflecting the hard life of the trenches were also published in the press during the war. The author L.A. in the poem “War” writes – “Villages are burned, only pipes are blackening, and an old woman is crying sorrowfully at the stones. The enemies are close. Here mercilessly crude, grenades are exploding again along the forest at the chains”. In the poem, the dead forest becomes alive from the firing of cannons and “into the chatter of ominous machine guns, rifle fire burst”.

On the pages of the right-wing press, the question of the liquidation of lands belonging to the Germans was also radically raised. The materials of the article “On the issue of restricting German land ownership” indicate the Ministry of Internal Affairs activity, which is developing bills on significant measures to restrict German land ownership in Russia.

Materials aimed at undermining the authority and image of the German soldier appear in the official press. The article “The fighting qualities of our enemies” emphasizes such qualities as “hooliganism and looting”, the Germans “knifed and killed unarmed heroes”. It was also written that Germany was “always afraid of Russia”. As a result of the initial victories in East Prussia of the Russian army, such a primitive image of the “German neighbor” was created that their favorite way of reconnaissance was to “climb trees”. Newspapers published patriotic letters of Simbirsk officers and soldiers from the front stating that Austrians and Germans wanted to “surrender as soon as possible”.

Many Austro-Hungarian prisoners arrived in Simbirsk during the war. The attitude of the local population and the “Simbiryan” editorial office can be judged by the article “Prisoners in the village”, where the correspondent writes about local peasants who host Austrians “with open arms”. Local residents voluntarily accommodate one or even two people in their homes, “here it is, the kindness of the Russian soul!”. The press belittled the dignity of the Austrian army, they were presented as weak and helpless, inspiring readers to the imminent end of the war, “we are about to win”.

After the February revolution, the right-wing editorial offices sided with the new government and began publishing news at the suggestion of the local administration. By October 1917, in Simbirsk and Samara, as in the whole country, the right-wing press was liquidated.

7. Conclusion

The right “official” press fully supported the regime and the government in the war to a victorious end until February 1917. Concerning the events related to the socio-economic crisis and criticism of the authorities, the editors were more restrained in contrast to their left-wing colleagues. Although, sometimes criticism in the press still appeared, for example, the problem of teachers and peasants. During the war right-wing newspapers were engaged in the formation of images, both of an external enemy and an internal one, also sharply condemned the “decadent” policy in the government and society. As for the task of creating a powerful “patriotic” press in the Samara and Simbirsk provinces as opposed to the opposition, it turned out to be an unrealizable plan. “Patriots” in the future could not find for their newspapers, whether they were created, not only readers, but also intelligent and competent employees, since most of the residents turned away from the imperial regime.

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