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WHY DURING THE POLISH-BOLSHEVIK WAR DID SOVIET PROPAGANDA DISCOURSE DOMINATE EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINION?

Abstract

In 1919–20, a war took place between two states that had emerged at the end of the Great War: Soviet Russia and the reborn Republic of Poland. It was a clash of widely different legal, political, and ideological systems. The conflict took place not only on the military and diplomatic planes but also within propaganda. Upon taking power in Russia, the Bolsheviks, in their official speeches, presented themselves to the world as the defenders of peace and the sovereignty of all nations; the imperial aspirations of Soviet Russia were hidden under the slogans of a world revolution that would liberate oppressed peoples. The military and ideological conquest began with a concentrated focus on neighbouring countries, including Poland. At the same time, a suggestive propaganda message was sent to the West, setting out the course of events from Moscow's point of view.

Keywords: Poland; Bolshevik Russia; Great Britain; Polish-Soviet War 1919–20; propaganda; Western public opinion

I INTRODUCTION

If there is to be a war, the blame for its outbreak must be placed on the Polish government.

Georgy Chicherin to Lenin, 14 Feb. 1920

The Russians seem to be absolutely confident of the victory of their propaganda, which, as they say, is as simple as it is effective, and it will ultimately defeat the entire Europe, which is just a matter of time.

Lord d'Abernon

The entire public opinion of the working classes of England, mindful that it was the Bolsheviks who attacked us in the autumn of 1918, is nonetheless convinced that the Polish government has rejected the peace treaty offered to us by the Bolsheviks in the winter of this year.

Envoy Jan Modzelewski to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 1920

This article represents an attempt to reflect on Russia's actions following the October coup and the impact of these same actions on public opinion in Europe in the context of the Polish-Soviet War. Finding an answer to the question posed in the title of this paper will be difficult, but not impossible. Since the Bolsheviks were able to burrow into the minds of Western citizens and, to a large extent, 'rearrange' them following their own interests, researchers of these events have endeavoured to recreate both actions and reactions from the perspective of one century.

The issue of the perception of Russia in the West, including Bolshevik Russia, has been and continues to be of interest to many researchers, such as Martin Malia, E. Malcolm Carroll and Dariusz Tołczyk.¹ Still, the driving force of what was Soviet propaganda remains insufficiently understood. Under what circumstances did the Bolsheviks manage to gain the momentum and power to aspire to stage a revolution in the thinking processes of their own society and the international arena? What contributed to the unquestionable success of the Soviet propaganda in the West? I would like to point out from the outset that when I write about the "dominance of Soviet propaganda discourse" in Europe during this period, or about its success, I am not suggesting that most Europeans succumbed to the persuasions of Lenin and Trotsky, or accepted the contents of the Soviet message from the East. There were also insightful observers, such as politicians and journalists, who followed developments with both insight and a sense of unease.

¹ Martin Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes. From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA-London, 1999); E. Malcolm Carroll, *Soviet Communism and Western Opinion 1919-1921* (Chapel Hill, 1965); Dariusz Tołczyk, *GUŁAG w oczach Zachodu* (Warszawa, 2009).

Their voice, however, proved to be too weak. Apart from the circles that were ready to accept and even identify with the Bolshevik point of view, many Westerners (including politicians) showed an ignorance of the situation in Central and Eastern Europe, lack of interest, helplessness. As a consequence, there was a failure to respond to Soviet *agit-prop* (agitation and propaganda). Indeed, Europe underestimated the threat to an almost critical extent. (This threat was well understood by Poles, an issue beyond the presented text's scope.)

I also use here the term 'revolution' to refer to the events that took place throughout 1917 in Russia, starting with the February Revolution. What happened in October (according to the old calendar) of that year resulted in part from earlier incidents. The Bolshevik coup itself – this is the term I consider to be more adequate – was a coup d'état carried out in a country whose citizens had won their freedom just a few months earlier.

II

The time in question was turbulent and uncertain. A wholly changed world was emerging from the ashes of the Great War. In Central and Eastern Europe, nation-states emerged on the ruins of fallen empires, not without obstacles and local armed conflicts. A revolution took place in Russia in 1917, and its result was the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks. Fighting took place in all those regions, and even the deliberations of the Paris Conference and the subsequent signing of the Treaty of Versailles were not able to stabilise the still precarious situation. Europe, ravaged by war, wanted peace but continued to experience upheavals and flashpoints.

The Republic of Poland, reborn in 1918, after more than one hundred and twenty years of partition between the three invaders, continued to fight for its final shape on all its borders. The conflict on the eastern frontiers would prove to be the most critical theatre of conflict. Polish-Russian relations were tense, and the situation in the region was highly complex. Russia, plunged into chaos and shaken by internal struggles, was entirely unpredictable, the more so as the news from there arrived at intervals and was difficult to verify. Many believed that the rule of the Bolsheviks would turn out to be a short-lived episode, and then everything would return to 'normal', that is, to the status quo ante. Numerous groups in Europe had hoped for a better

future arising from the legacy of the Russian Revolution. In many countries, due to the war and post-war poverty, the prevailing mood had been significantly radicalised. The official message that flowed from the East was one filled with promise, especially for those in thrall to *ex oriente lux* and literally accepted the enunciations that originated from that part of the world. This marked the beginning of the peace decree, adopted during the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which took place immediately after the Bolshevik coup:

The Workers' and Peasants' Government ... proposes to all warring peoples and their governments to begin at once negotiations leading to a just democratic peace.

A just and democratic peace for which the great majority of wearied, tormented and war-exhausted toilers and labouring classes of all belligerent countries are thirsting, a peace which the Russian workers and peasants have so loudly and insistently demanded since the overthrow of the Tsar's monarchy, such a peace the government considers to be an immediate peace without annexations (i.e., without the seizure of foreign territory and the forcible annexation of foreign nationalities) and without indemnities.²

It was the first document of the new government that referred to foreign policy. The language in which it was written was also a novelty. The decree's authors addressed nations and the working classes, and not the governments of warring states. Soon the world would have to get used to such phraseology and the language of Soviet diplomacy, which would unceremoniously violate the norms of interstate relations. Official communications sent abroad from Petrograd and then from Moscow would be more propagandistic than diplomatic (let us call it *differentia sovietica*).

These actions were deliberate. *The Decree on Peace* addressed "in particular the conscious workers of the three most advanced nations of mankind and the largest states participating in the present war: England, France and Germany, [because] the workers of these countries have rendered the greatest possible service to the cause of progress and socialism".³ As the researcher of the discussed issues noted,

² Włodzimierz I. Lenin, *Dziela*, xxvi (Warszawa, 1953), 239–42, quoted after: *Primary Documents: Lenin's Decree on Peace, 26 October 1917*, <https://www.firstworldwar.com/source/decreeonpeace.htm> [Accessed: 10 Nov. 2021].

³ *Ibid.*

the decree was to influence the workers' movement in other countries with the intention of bringing about a world revolution, one where peace equated with socialism.⁴

In the article 'For Bread and Peace' published by Lenin in May 1918 in the *Jugend-Internationale* (no. 11), we read: "The socialist revolution that has begun in Russia is, therefore, only the beginning of the world socialist revolution. Peace and bread, the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, revolutionary means for the healing of war wounds, the complete victory of socialism—such are the aims of the struggle".⁵

Let us note that the Bolsheviks from the outset looked to imbed their newly acquired power within the apparatuses of the state, so they thought and acted to shape not only domestic but also external opinion. Such messages, and there were many of them, found fertile ground in the communities left most wounded by the war, and not only in left-wing circles. The issue of peace was to be found in Soviet diplomacy, journalism, and in messages addressed both internally and abroad until the end of the existence of the USSR.

The above remarks are summarised in the slogan that the Russian Revolution of 1917 took over from the French Revolution of 1789: "War to the palaces, peace to the cottages". The Bolsheviks willingly resorted to this slogan in their propaganda discourse since it assumed that war should be waged against enemies (imperialists, bourgeoisie, etc.), and that the people would benefit from the won peace.⁶ Needless to say, in fact, as a result of hostilities (including the civil war), it was the representatives of the lowest and poorest social strata that would suffer the greatest numbers of casualties and losses.

The article 'For Bread and Peace' also makes mention of a war that is being waged "for the division of spoils, for the plunder of small and weak nations". The alleged concern for the weakest nations harmonised with the right of nations to self-determination proclaimed by the Bolsheviks. This is one of the most important slogans used

⁴ Wojciech Materski, *Pięć kłamstw Lenina. Rosja po przewrocie bolszewickim: propaganda a rzeczywistość* (Warszawa, 2019), 18.

⁵ Lenin, *Dziela*, 391–2, quoted after: *Primary Documents: Lenin's Decree*.

⁶ See Aleksandra J. Leinwand, *Sztuka w służbie utopii. O funkcjach politycznych i propagandowych sztuk plastycznych w Rosji Radzieckiej lat 1917–1922* (Warszawa, 1998), 98–101.

by the Russian Revolution, although this slogan's origins are a great deal earlier than the revolution itself.

The disputes over the self-determination of nations, raging among Marxist theorists and activists of the international workers' movement from at least the second half of the nineteenth century, intensified with the impending war. The Russian social democrats intended to use the aspirations of those nations oppressed by the Russian Empire to hasten its collapse. This attitude distinguished Russian Social Democrats from most European Social Democrats.⁷ Lenin, who spoke a great deal on national issues, formally recognised the right of nations to self-determination. However, it was primarily about the self-determination of the proletariat (and not the nation as a whole), which manifested itself, for example, in attacks against the Polish Socialist Party for its forthright demand for Polish independence.⁸

Time has shown that the Bolsheviks evoked the right of nations to self-determination as needed, using it "solely as an effective agitation instrument".⁹ Richard Pipes also accurately characterised Lenin's attitude towards national affairs and the success of the policies pursued by the Bolsheviks in this field.

Lenin looked upon national problems as something to exploit, and not as something to solve. But as a psychological weapon in the struggle for power, first in Russia and then abroad, the slogan of self-determination in Lenin's interpretation was to prove enormously successful. The outbreak

⁷ Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Le Grand défi: bolcheviks et nations 1917–1930* (Paris, 1987); quoted after the Polish edition: *Bolszewicy i narody czyli Wielkie Urągowisko 1917–1930*, transl. Krzysztof Kowalski (Warszawa, 1992), 51.

⁸ Leszek Kołakowski so wrote: "Lenin's position is thus clear, and it is hard to see how he can ever have been represented, as he notoriously was, as a champion of political independence for all peoples. He was a convinced opponent of national oppression and proclaimed the right of self-determination, but always with the provision that it was only in exceptional circumstances that social democracy could support political separatism. Self-determination was at all times absolutely subordinate to the party's interests, and if the latter conflicted with the nation's aspirations, then the latter were of no account. This reservation in effect nullified the right of self-determination and turned it into a purely tactical weapon. The party would always try to utilize national aspirations in the struggle for power, but the 'interest of the proletariat' could never be subordinated to the desires of a whole people". *Id.*, *Main Currents of Marxism. Its Rise, Growth and Dissolution*, ii: *The Golden Age*, transl. from the Polish by P.S. Falla (Oxford, 1978), 401.

⁹ Materski, *Pięć kłamstw*, 57.

of the Russian Revolution allowed the Bolsheviks to put it to considerable demagogic use as a means of winning the support of the national movements which the revolutionary period developed in all their magnitude.¹⁰

On 15 November 1917, the Council of People's Commissars [Sovet narodnykh komissarov, aka Sovnarkom] issued the *Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia*. The document signed by the People's Commissar for Nationality, Joseph Stalin and the chairman of the Sovnarkom, Vladimir Lenin, announced, among others, the "equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia", their right to "self-determination, even to the point of separation and the formation of an independent state" and "the free development of national minorities and ethnographic groups" inhabiting the territory of Russia. These are the most important points mentioned at the end of the declaration, while the earlier fragment talks about the formation of a "fair and lasting union of the peoples of Russia", and "only as of the result of such a union can the workmen and peasants of the peoples of Russia be cemented into one revolutionary force able to resist all attempts on the part of the imperialist-annexationist bourgeoisie".¹¹ The inclusion in one document of inconsistent or incompatible statements is not an oversight but a clear announcement of what would be the instrumental treatment of the national issue. An announcement, let us add, that was consequently implemented.

One could briefly summarise the practical actions of Soviet Russia towards the nations as follows: the first option is to incite and strongly support all, even the weakest, revolutionary movements wherever they formed. This option was the most desirable for the Bolsheviks, as the speeches under the banner of social liberation offered hope that the revolution would spread and, at the same time, stifled the emancipatory aspirations of nations, which was the real goal of the Kremlin.

Secondly, suppose the aspirations for national independence were revealed, in such case, the Bolsheviks, describing them as chauvinistic and threatening to the victorious Russian revolution (the arsenal and range of epithets were broader), tried to suppress them *manu militari*.

¹⁰ Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union. Communism and Nationalism 1917–1923* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), 49.

¹¹ *Документы внешней политики СССР*, I (Москва, 1957), 14–15, quoted after: *Powstanie II Rzeczypospolitej. Wybór dokumentów 1866–1925*, ed. by Halina Janowska and Tadeusz Jędruszczak (Warszawa, 1981), 364–5.

It was possible, especially in the territories of the former tsarist empire or those adjacent to them. In December 1917, the Red Army brutally cracked down on the efforts of Belarusian communists (sic!) to mark national distinctiveness within the Bolshevik revolution, which they had joined voluntarily. The following year, the emancipation efforts of the Tatars and Bashkirs, followed by those of the Azerbaijanis, Armenians and Georgians, were cruelly suppressed. These are just examples of ‘the bringing of order about’ on the part of the forces of the newly created state.¹²

Thirdly, when there was no other option, the authorities of Soviet Russia officially declared recognition of the given nation-state by signing a peace treaty with it. However, such an option was treated as a necessary evil, a temporary concession to the rule of the hated bourgeoisie. Following the principles of ‘revolutionary morality’, the signed agreements were not intended to be kept. Under favourable circumstances, the Sovietisation (or at least attempts at Sovietisation) of consecutive countries was undertaken.

Simultaneously with the official declarations, which were to show the most earnest intention of respecting the rights of ‘oppressed nations’, the Bolshevik leaders did not hide their true intentions in public speeches. In January 1918, in a speech delivered at the Third Congress of Soviets, Stalin argued “the necessity of interpreting the principle of self-determination as the right to self-determination not of the bourgeoisie, but of the labouring masses of a given nation. The principle of self-determination should be a means in the struggle for socialism and should be subordinated to the principles of socialism”.¹³ Shortly after that, Lenin in the article ‘The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government’ stated that the federation being incepted would be “the surest step leading to the most lasting unification of Russia’s various nationalities into a uniform, democratic, and centralised Soviet state”.¹⁴

Characteristically, there is no clear position on the issue of Poland’s independence in the official Soviet documents from the first months fol-

¹² Materski, *Pięć kłamstw*, 65–72.

¹³ Quoted after: J.V. Stalin, *Works*, iv, November, 1917 – 1920, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1918/01/15.htm> [Accessed: 10 Nov. 2021].

¹⁴ Lenin, *Dziela*, xxix, 209, quoted after: *Primary Documents: Lenin’s Decree*.

lowing the October coup. Especially if we recall the position of the West on this matter: the statement of the British Prime Minister (January 1918), the President of the United States (Wilson's 13th point, in a speech delivered to the US Congress on 8 January 1918) or the resolution of the prime ministers of France, Great Britain and Italy (3 June 1918).¹⁵ Almost a year after the Bolsheviks had taken power in Russia, on 29 August 1918, a decree of the Council of People's Commissars was issued abolishing the partition agreements and recognising the "inviolate rights of the Polish nation to independence and unity". The document was published after Russia made public secret diplomatic acts and treaties signed by the tsarist governments with the governments of the coalition states. At the same time, the Peace in Brest was concluded with Germany, and it was one of the elements of the political campaign against Germany.¹⁶ This decree contained beautifully sounding words about respecting the rights of the Polish nation to independence, and such an official message was sent out into the world. Even though the document contained expressions typical for revolutionary speeches and not used in traditional diplomacy, it could have made a positive impression; and that was what the Bolsheviks had wanted to achieve. The enunciation of August 1918 was intended to testify to the goodwill of the rulers of Russia and indicate that –

¹⁵ On 5 Jan. 1918, in a speech to trade union delegates, David Lloyd George so declared: "Russia can only be saved by her own people. We believe, however, that an independent Poland comprising all those genuinely Polish elements who desire to form a part of it, is an urgent necessity for the stability of Western Europe". <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1918Supp01v01/d4> [Accessed: 26 July 2021]. Wilson's 13th point: "An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant". *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States. 1918. Supplement 1. The World War, I* (Washington, 1933), 16. The fragment of the resolution of the three prime ministers concerning Poland stated that "The creation of a united and independent Polish State, with free access to the sea, is one of the conditions for a lasting and just peace and the rule of law in Europe". *Powstanie II Rzeczypospolitej*, 410.

¹⁶ Fragment of decree cited after *Stosunki Rzeczypospolitej polskiej z państwem radzieckim 1918–1943. Wybór dokumentów*, ed. by Jerzy Kumaniecki (Warszawa, 1991), 30; see also Aleksandra J. Leinwand, *Czerwonym młotem w orla białego. Propaganda sowiecka w wojnie z Polską 1919–1920* (Warszawa, 2008), 65–6.

at least in the Polish case – their attitude was no different from that of the Allied Powers.

At the same time, however, as has already been mentioned, the Bolshevik leaders publicly presented entirely different projects for resolving the issue of the self-determination of nations, including Poles. Thus, on 18 October 1918, at a rally in Petrograd, Trotsky announced the following development: “The historic hour has struck. The time is coming when our brothers in Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine, and also hopefully in Finland, will join under the banner of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR)”.¹⁷ A month later, an article by the People’s Commissar for Nationality, Stalin, appeared in the official organ of the Commissariat for Nationality Affairs, *Zhizn natsionalnostey* [Жизнь национальностей]. The date of publication of this programmatic text (17 November) bearing the meaningful title ‘Divide’ [Przegroda]¹⁸ was not accidental. This happened a few days after the ceasefire in Compiègne and at the end of the fighting on the fronts of the Great War, and after the Bolsheviks had torn up the Treaty of Brest. It was a time when, as a result of the fall of both the Austro-Hungarian and the German empires, independent states were established in their territories and also in the regions under German occupation. Among them, Poland, which on 16 November notified the coalition governments and others of the constitution of the Polish state. At the same time, Germany was engulfed by revolution, which fuelled the hopes of the Bolsheviks for close cooperation with Germany to achieve a revolution in Europe. In this conveyance of the ‘flame of revolution’ ‘the divide’ [*przegroda*] was constituted by newly emerging states, the self-determination of which was not socialist. On 17 November, Soviet troops began a march to the West, following the German troops’ retreat from the so-called areas of Ober-Ost [Ober-Kommando der Ostfront]. The goal was to take control of Belarus, the Vilnius Region, and Latvia and Estonia.

Stalin began his article by stating that “a divide was created between socialist Russia and the revolutionary West in the form of the occupied oblasts”; meaning that “Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Bessarabia, Ukraine and Crimea, the bourgeois-nationalist

¹⁷ Cited after Wiktor Sukiennicki, ‘Przyczyny i początek wojny polsko-sowieckiej 1919–1921’, part 2: *Bellona*, xlv, 3–4 (1963), 152.

¹⁸ Stalin, *Dziela*, 177–8.

'governments' continue to drag their miserable lives out of the grace of the Western imperialists who are in the throes of their own decline". It is worth paying attention not only to the language of vulgar propaganda, the lies, distortions and contempt for "dwarf-like" "national governments" and "petty kings", but also to the list of countries towards which Soviet Russia did not hide their imperialist designs. These far-reaching goals were hidden under the slogans of "the waves of a mighty revolution in Russia and the West". Finally, Stalin so declared: "We have no reason not to believe that the counter-revolutionary divide between the revolutionary West and socialist Russia will finally be swept away". Stalin's text undoubtedly reflected the intentions of the Bolshevik leadership, and the fragment with the names of the newly formed nation-states openly revealed Russia's plans.¹⁹

One might ask in which enunciations the Bolshevik leaders expressed their actual attitudes and intentions. Were they in those pronouncements addressed to audiences in the West, where there was talk of a desire for peace and the right of nations to self-determination, or could they be found in speeches meant for closer to home, as in the article discussed above? Later events would show that the answer was unequivocal.

From the end of 1918, the occupation by the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army of the territories abandoned by the German army was a cause of concern for Poland. The collision of the two newly created state organisms was becoming a reality. The Chief of State and Commander-in-Chief, Józef Piłsudski, was aware of the imminent dangers facing a resurgent Poland. As a fighter for Polish independence hailing from the Polish Socialist Party, he understood the meaning of such terms as *revolution* and *socialism* utterly different from that of the Bolsheviks. As a former conspirator cooperating with Russian revolutionaries, as well as a prisoner and a Siberian exile, he had come to know both Russia and its people in both a negative and a positive sense. Piłsudski believed that any overly strong Russia posed a threat to Poland regardless of its political system. Therefore, he set himself to strengthen the Polish state and move Bolshevism as far as possible from the yet-to-be-established borders.

The first armed clashes, which took place at the beginning of 1919, marked the beginning of the Polish-Soviet War, which though never

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

formally declared, lasted almost two years. This was a war where Poland had to face not only the armed forces of the Red Army, already seasoned from fighting on the fronts of the Russian Civil War, but also the enormous pressure posed by Soviet propaganda. However, it should be clearly emphasised that the Bolsheviks had imposed the propaganda war on Poland earlier, before any military operations had taken place. The first manifestation of this may be Stalin's article cited above; in fact, intense agitation was directed at Poles even before the establishment of the Polish state, e.g. in the circles of Polish refugees in Russia. The goal of that psychological war, waged against both civilians and soldiers, was the Sovietisation of Poland, which was *in statu nascendi*.

The rulers of Red Russia knew that it would be possible to achieve these goals if indoctrination also extended to the West. The implementation of the Soviet plans was to be made possible, apart from the armed forces, by a uniquely tailored propaganda system. After the Bolshevik coup – as Peter Kenez aptly noted – a “state of propaganda” was born.²⁰ An efficient propaganda apparatus was created within a short period of time, proving the importance of this activity by the rulers. Not only the army, and not only the political police called Cheka [ЧК – *cherezvychayka*] along with the entire repressive system, but also *agit-prop* was to be a weapon used to pacify the Russian population; and conquer the world. From the earliest days after the October coup, revolutionary agitation and propaganda were directed through various channels.

III

From the beginning of the war between the Republic of Poland and the RSFSR, Bolshevik authorities were centred not only on military and political matters but also on their diplomatic and propagandistic efforts. Moscow spared no expense when it came to propagandising the course of events unfolding on the Polish-Soviet front.

On 10 February 1919, the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Georgy Chicherin, wrote a note to the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ignacy Paderewski. It contained an assurance that the

²⁰ See Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State. Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge–London–New York, 1985).

Soviet republic strove for friendship with all nations and that “it has always desired and earnestly wishes to maintain a peaceful and good-neighbourly relationship with the Polish people”. It was also believed that both states could settle all disputed issues (including territorial) “in an unconditionally peaceful spirit” and “remove all causes of the conflict”.²¹ Let us note that in the document cited, the Soviet government was addressing not only the Polish government but all social groups identifying or sympathising with the Left. It was not so much about the Polish communists, whom Moscow did not have to convince of anything, but the Polish Socialist Party [Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, PPS]: willing, though not in its entirety and not unreservedly, to take at face value Soviet assurances about peace efforts.²²

On 18 February, Commissioner Chicherin, in a note sent to the governments of Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan and the United States, made assurances on the love and desire for a peace guided by the RSFSR. At the same time, he described Poland as a country whose troops “regardless of clear evidence of a desire for peace on the part of the Soviet Republic and the Soviet Republics of Lithuania and Belarus” were violating the borders and threatening those republics “bound together by an unchanging cordial friendship”.²³ Let us recall

²¹ *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich* (hereinafter: DiM), ii: *Listopad 1918 – kwiecień 1920* (Warszawa, 1961), doc. 72 (text in Russian).

²² Between August 1919 and April 1920, the PPS campaigned in the Sejm, in the press and at rallies to make peace with Soviet Russia. Although the PPS was not a unified party, at that time it strongly advocated making peace with the RSFSR, but it equally condemned the communists and their actions (for example, proclaiming a general strike). The situation changed dramatically in the summer of 1920, when the Red Army directly threatened Poland. At that time, the entire Polish Left (with the exception of the communists) agreed that Bolshevism is not a leftist ideology, but a denial of socialism. Russia was accused of “dictating the proletariat” and returning to imperialism. Cf. Artur Leinwand, *Polska partia socjalistyczna wobec wojny polsko radzieckiej 1919–1920* (Warszawa, 1964), especially chap. III; Andrzej Friszke, *Państwo czy rewolucja. Polscy komuniści a odbudowanie państwa polskiego 1892–1920* (Warszawa, 2020), especially chap. 6. One of the authors aptly noted that “in August 1920, in the outskirts of Warsaw, the illusions of most Polish socialists as to the real nature of Soviet propaganda and phraseology used by the Russian leaders were irretrievably dispelled”, see Grzegorz Zackiewicz, *Polska myśl polityczna wobec systemu radzieckiego 1918–1939* (Kraków, 2004), 164–5. This perception of Bolshevism distinguished Polish socialists from Western European socialists.

²³ DiM., ii, doc. 77 (text in Russian).

that the last two republics had governments actually appointed by Moscow under the principle of “socialist self-determination”. Poland was referred to in an apparently conciliatory tone – recognising the existence of the Polish state – but at the same time blaming it for having started the fighting. This was a significant declaration and an important signal for the wider world, representing the beginnings of a diplomatic and propaganda war with Poland waged by Russia in the West. From this time onwards, Chicherin would be vigilant over the preparation of information about the ongoing conflict so that only the Soviet point of view was known outside the Bolshevik state. Over time, such an informational policy would reap tangible rewards for Bolshevik Russia.²⁴

Both notes were issued when Russia was turning its ‘peaceful’ face to the West for tactical reasons. The collapse of the revolution in Germany meant that the Bolshevik leadership had to temporarily postpone the idea of the Sovietisation of Poland and a European revolution. All the time, however, work was being carried out on the Sovietisation of the so-called ‘Okraina’, wherein the ‘revolutionary’ government of Poland would join the Soviet governments of Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, existing since the end of 1918, in line with the revised intentions of Moscow, and in circumstances that were more favourable to the Bolsheviks.²⁵

From a military point of view, the year 1919 was a period of Polish successes on the Polish-Soviet front. Poles took Belarus and a part of Lithuania including Vilnius, and western Ukraine. Let us return, however, to the propaganda facts. During the calm period at the front, in the winter of 1919/20, the Bolsheviks began a so-called ‘peace offensive’. It was a large-scale action, aimed more at currying favour with the West than a domestic audience. More importantly, the spectacular campaign to conclude peace with Poland was conducted simultaneously with intensive preparations for decisive military actions.

²⁴ Cf. Leinwand, *Czerwonym młotem*, 71.

²⁵ The fall of the German revolution temporarily disrupted the plans of the Bolsheviks. As the researcher of the discussed issues noted, “With the defeat [of the Spartacist uprising in Berlin], the hope for the highest stakes in the struggle the European revolution, for the linking of ‘red’ Moscow with ‘red’ Berlin were dashed. Thus – temporarily, of course – the Polish ‘dividing’ became less important”. Andrzej Nowak, *Polska i trzy Rosje. Studium polityki wschodniej Józefa Piłsudskiego (do kwietnia 1920 roku)* (Kraków, 2001), 99.

The Soviet 'peace offensive' was conveyed through various channels and had many aspects. The same content was expressed in different ways depending on the audience. And so, diplomatic documents were sent from Moscow containing a peace offer for Poland, whereas on the other end of the scale, there were *agitkas* aimed at the citizens of Soviet Russia with an unequivocal anti-Polish message (including satirical drawings and poems by Mayakovsky).

Among the notes addressed to the Polish government, mention may be made of: the note of Commissioner Chicherin to Prime Minister Leopold Skulski of 22 December 1919, with its proposal to begin peace negotiations immediately;²⁶ the declaration of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR to the government and the Polish nation of 28 January 1920, signed by Lenin, Trotsky and Chicherin (this document is remarkable for its ideologised language, different to the diplomatic, although not free of revolutionary slogans, messages from the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs);²⁷ and the appeal by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee [Vserossiyskiy Tsentralnyi Ispolnitelnyi Komitet] to the Polish nation on 2 February. In this extensive text of agitation, the issues raised earlier, now directly, were developed to make the message understandable to the 'masses'.²⁸

However, Chicherin's texts addressed to the West are particularly important for the subject under consideration here. On 10 February, an appeal to the "working masses of the Entente countries" was published. In addition to repeating the constantly used slogans, it included, among others, the statement that "the dark forces of Europe" are vigorously seeking to "push Poland into war against Soviet Russia". The People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs concluded with an appeal to the workers of the Entente countries, reminding them that it is up to them to change the policy of their governments.²⁹ Such content would appear more and more often in diplomatic documents compiled in Moscow, as well as in communist journals and brochures, where next to concoctions of lies and half-truths were placed Soviet demands that had been formulated with ruthless honesty.

²⁶ See *Powstanie II Rzeczypospolitej*, 536.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 539 (text in Russian: DiM, ii, 568).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 540–1 (text in Russian: DiM, ii, 572–3); see also Leinwand, *Czerwonym młotem*, 80–2.

²⁹ DiM, ii, 582–3 (text in Russian).

The note, which was a response to the situation at the front, also warrants attention. On 7 March, the Poles occupied Mozyr [now Mazyr, Belarus] and Kalenkowicze [now Kalenkavichy, Belarus] in Polesie, and on the same day, the People's Commissariats for Foreign Affairs of the RSFSR and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkrSSR) issued a communiqué to the Entente countries. The signatories, Chicherin and Christian Rakowski, made assurances on the peaceful intentions of both Soviet republics. An obstacle in the "great task of reconstruction" were Poland's "unjustified aggressive actions". At the same time, the authors emphasised that they wanted "Poland to be a strong and flourishing country". The Soviet Republics of Russia and Ukraine do not want to threaten the development of Poland, "their only goal is self-defence against invasion".³⁰ It would be a pattern used in communist propaganda throughout the entire period of the Polish-Bolshevik war: an aggressive Poland towards a peaceful socialist Russia. Depending on the needs, some modifications were applied; for example, there were texts written about a Poland of capitalists and landowners or about a Poland which was a tool in the hands of the Entente. The Bolsheviks managed to convey their message in a highly suggestive and nuanced way, depending on the addressees. Such a picture and assessment of events could have been attractive to Europeans who were desirous of peace.

I have cited just a few examples from the wide-ranging 'peace offensive'. The olive branches of Commissioner Chicherin were only one aspect of the Soviet propaganda directed abroad during the war with Poland. The second powerful conduit of propaganda was one of the most important institutions active in the field of propaganda war – the Third International, established in Moscow less than eighteen months after the Bolshevik coup. This organisation was tasked with implementing the ideal of a world revolution. Dreams that the flame of revolution would spread throughout Europe, and then the world, might have seemed utopian. However, the activities of Communist International showed how, by what methods and means, ideas could be transformed into concrete actions.

The emergence of the Communist International was a counter-balance to the Socialist Workers International, that is, the Second International constituted in 1889. A significant distinguishing feature

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 637–8 (text in Russian).

of the Third International was its complete subordination to the Soviet Communist Party. Dependence on the ruling Bolshevik party in Russia manifested itself both on the ideological, political and diplomatic levels, as well as on the organisational and material levels.³¹ All important decisions concerning, for example, the financing of the activities of the International were made at meetings of the party's Politburo, which also included the leaders of the Comintern.

The 'export' of the revolution took place not only by way of a flow of ideas, the transmission of propaganda (both in a slightly veiled form through diplomatic channels and via strictly agitation activities, such as the distribution of printed materials), and military operations (the revolution brought on the Red Army bayonets); but also thanks to the significant financial commitment of the RSFSR. The Bolsheviks spared no money on this activity. In a plundered Russia, devastated by war, and plagued by poverty, hunger and disease, the authorities devoted considerable sums to activities aimed at indoctrinating both their own society and manipulating foreign opinion. Also goods of which there was a permanent shortage, such as fabrics or paper, ended up not in shops but being channelled towards the service of the *agit-prop*. The money and valuables looted in long struggles during the revolution and the civil war did not serve the starving Russian citizens but supported other countries' revolutionary movements and subversive activities. Such practices were possible in a state with one-party governments where expenditure, even the largest, was not subject to oversight. This lack of oversight resulted from the elimination from public life of institutions established to decide on the most important matters in the state and to control the activities of the authorities.³² Financial documents show the Comintern's expenses. For example, a bill for the period between April and August 1919 with the annotation 'top secret' shows the sums of valuables and money from a "secret account" that had been transferred abroad.³³ Even

³¹ *История Коммунистического Интернационала 1919-1943. Документальные очерки*, ed. Александр О. Чубарьян (Москва, 2002), 11.

³² The most important act here was the dissolution of the democratically elected Constitutional Assembly (Constituency) on the day after it had been convened, that is on 6 Jan. 1918.

³³ During this period, a total of 3,423,500 rubles were transferred abroad, including 3,223,500 in the form of valuables, and 200,000 rubles in cash. An account statement reveals that 500,000 zlotys were transferred to England at that

this one document makes it possible to appreciate the scale and scope of the activities of the newly created state. At the same time, one of the letters from internal correspondence (on the print headed notepaper of the secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Comintern) relates about the methods of smuggling jewels: “We need leather for [making] soles, in which we will hide valuables, especially diamonds”.³⁴ There were also other hiding places for valuable parcels.³⁵ The money funnelled from Bolshevik Russia to the West supported the already operating local communist parties; and enabled the creation of new ones. Soviet agents distributed revolutionary literature translated into many languages and contributed considerable sums to newspapers published in various countries. The most famous is the case of the *Daily Herald*, a British extreme left magazine that received a grant of £75,000 from the Bolsheviks.³⁶

The first congress of the Third International was held in Moscow on 2–6 March 1919, but it was only after its deliberations that the

time, with 300,000 rubles to France; 200,000 to Holland; 200,000 to the Caucasus; 1 million to the Balkans; 300,000 to Italy; 300,500 to Germany – 300,500, to Hungary – 21,000, to Austria – 305,000, to America – 297,000. *Коминтерн и идея мировой революции. Документы* (Москва, 1998), 150–1. This is the testimony of only one such ‘package’; there were many more, and at different times.

³⁴ *Коминтерн и идея*, 153.

³⁵ When Francis Meynell, a director of the London *Daily Herald*, agreed to transport two strings of pearls to the United Kingdom, he hid them in a jar of butter. John Reed, in turn, received diamonds worth one million rubles in January 1920 for distribution in the USA. Particularly telling is the case of the People’s Commissar for Foreign Trade, Leonid Krasin, who brought jewels worth more than seven million rubles to England in his luggage. See Robert Service, *Spies and Commissars: The Bolshevik Revolution and the West* (New York, 2011), quoted after the Polish translation: *Szpieczy i komisarzy. Bolszewicka Rosja kontra Zachód*, transl. Mirosław Bielewicz (Kraków, 2013), 311–12.

³⁶ Carroll, *Soviet Communism*, 180–1; Richard H. Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1917–1921*, iii: *The Anglo-Soviet Accord* (Princeton, 1972), 270–3. Robert Service writes that when George Lansbury travelled to Moscow in February 1920 and mentioned that his *Daily Herald* was in financial trouble, he was offered money to save the paper from falling into the hands of anti-Soviet socialists. Lansbury gave a speech at a meeting in Moscow and congratulated the communists on their achievements in rebuilding the economy. As part of this deal, he agreed to assist in the publication of translated pamphlets of Russian communist leaders. As for the *Daily Herald*, the plan worked, the paper went left-wing and promoted direct political action in Great Britain (pages after the Polish edition: *Szpieczy i komisarzy*, 312–13).

structures of the Comintern began to be organised. An Executive Committee was formed with one of the first divisions – the International Propaganda Department, and a translators' office convened.³⁷ The organ of the Executive Committee of the Communist International was the *Kommunisticheskiy Internatsional* [Коммунистический интернационал], which was published from 1 May 1919 in Russian, French and German, and later also in English and other languages. The journal contained, among others, documents, reports, resolutions, appeals and other propaganda materials of the Comintern.

For almost a year, the Polish question was barely mentioned in the publications of the Third International.³⁸ It was only with the beginning of the Soviet 'peace offensive' that the issue of war with Poland was clearly reflected in the propaganda of the Comintern. At this point, it is worth emphasising once again that the Bolsheviks skilfully differentiated their message depending on their audience. Apart from propaganda aimed at local citizens (different for the civilian population and for soldiers or individual nationalities), let us note that the diplomatic notes of Commissioner Chicherin sounded softer and even the harsher ones were, after all, conciliatory in nature. On the other hand, the Comintern enunciations addressed to the "workers of all countries" were unambiguous and much more militant in tone. To express this issue differently – the former are messages addressed to Western politicians and diplomats, focusing on matters to persuade them to exert pressure on Poland 'in defence' of Soviet Russia. The latter type of manipulation of the opinion of the West involved exciting the working classes with simple rhetoric to counteract possible aid for Poland through strikes and pressure on their own governments. These massive *agit-prop* actions would prove to be highly effective.

On 17 February 1920, the *Kommunisticheskiy Internatsional* published an extensive text entitled 'To the Workers of All Countries. Concerning the Polish Question'; a text which was undoubtedly the official stance of the Third International (i.e. the official position of the authorities

³⁷ Г.М. Адибеков, Е.Н. Шахназарова, К.К. Ширина, *Организационная структура Коминтерна 1919–1943* (Москва, 1997), 9–10.

³⁸ In *Коммунистический интернационал*, 6 (Oct. 1919) an article by Feliks Kon was featured titled 'Polonia militans', and a more in-depth article by Julian Marchlewski 'Польша и мировая революция', part 1: *ibid.*, part 2: 7/8 (Nov./Dec. 1919).

of Soviet Russia). The piece was signed by Grigory Zinoviev, the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Comintern and a close associate of Lenin. At the beginning of the text in question, there was the following sentence:

The governments of France, England and America, who for four years had waged a bloody war allegedly in the name of democracy, freedom and the establishment of perpetual peace between nations, are now pushing Poland into a war with Soviet Russia, the same Poland, which had received freedom and independence not at the hands of these imperialist governments, but only thanks to the Russian and German revolutions.³⁹

There are at least three fundamental lies in this one sentence. First, it is not true that Poland owed its independence to the Russian and German revolutions. On the contrary, the revolutionary governments recognised only Red sovereignty and wanted to impose such sovereignty on many states against their will. Secondly, the slogan, already known from Chicherin's notes, about the "pushing of Poland" into war against Soviet Russia by the Western imperialists is untrue. Piłsudski's eastern policy involved the implementation of his and his political camp's independent visions and plans. Thirdly, the mention of the Great War was a mendacious simplification.

Zinoviev's article deserves attention not so much for the 'analyses' of the situation in Poland (about the government with Piłsudski, a member of the Polish Socialist Party, "who shoots workers" and about the "Polish reaction", whose oppression of the "popular masses" was "worse than the oppression of the tsarist rule"), as a task posed for "workers of all countries". After the reassurance of Soviet Russia's desire for peace, the following calls were made:

Now it is your turn, fellow workers of all countries! Polish workers spoke out against the war through demonstrations and strikes. Glory to Polish workers who fulfil their duty in the most difficult conditions! French and English workers! This is your affair; support the Polish proletarians fighting against the war. Save Poland from the horrors of war. Help the Polish workers to free their country from the yoke of its overlords and from the intrigues of the Entente. Help Soviet Russia avoid a new war. The Executive Committee of the Communist International calls on you to fight against the new military adventure planned by the French

³⁹ *Коммунистический интернационал*, 20 (1920), 1393 (text in Russian).

imperialists. ... Down with the international looters! Long live the international proletariat!⁴⁰

With surprising effectiveness, the Soviet 'peace offensive' was transplanted into Western Europe. For example, in Vienna, in the communist periodical *Świt* (an organ of the Polish Workers' Council), on 5 February 1920, the proclamation 'To the Workers of all Countries'⁴¹ was published, where the authors wrote that "in the Republic of Poland, the bloody orgies of reaction have reached a terrifying degree". Further revelations and appeals also sound familiar:

Proletarians of all countries! We call on you to organise protest rallies against the reactionary Polish governments and the governments of the coalition states, at whose will the counter-revolution is murdering workers in Poland. The reaction is international, workers' solidarity must be international. ... Comrades! Suspend the shipment of ammunition to Poland for a criminal war that eats up the remnants of a destroyed country. ... The proletariat of Russia and Poland does not want war. The proletariat of our country wants the Polish government to accept the peace offer made by Soviet Russia.

The response to the calls for solidarity with Bolshevik Russia was not only the 'moral' support expressed at rallies organised by trade unionists and leftist party activists in many European countries. The tangible benefits to the Soviets included the growing refusal to load munitions and war materials intended for Poland.⁴² There were also acts of sabotage and arson, such as the burning down of a munitions factory in Austria, noted in a report of the Polish attaché in Vienna.⁴³

Great Britain was a central focus for the Soviet government and was under the exceptional 'care' of the Comintern propaganda. Among all

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1397–8.

⁴¹ Text in DiM, ii, 592–3.

⁴² According to the information accompanying the above appeal, in the first half of February 1920, railway workers in Vienna, under the influence of agitation, refused to load rifles intended for the Polish army. *Ibid.*, 593–4.

⁴³ Here is an excerpt from a report from 30 April 1920: "The fire of the munitions factory in Hirtenberg, which is almost probably the action of the local communists against the supply of ammunition to Poland for the war against Russia, points to the communist union of both countries. In the worker's circles in Vienna-Neustadt and the surrounding area, threats have been made against all factories that continue to supply war material for Poland; they will be burnt to the ground". *Sąsiedzi wobec wojny 1920 roku. Wybór dokumentów*, ed. by Janusz Cisek (Londyn, 1990), 152.

the countries of Western Europe, the most intense ‘peace offensive’ was carried out there. The scale of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic’s ‘investment’ indicates the orientation of Bolshevik politicians and propagandists in terms of the British reality, where it was deemed that their efforts would pay off. In Britain ruled by a coalition government, although the conservatives were the most numerous party in parliament, the Left was a significant, visible and noisy force. Labour Party representatives, in their parliamentary capacity, most often, and most emphatically, made pronouncements on issues related to Bolshevik Russia and its relations with Poland. Social moods were also radicalised, which was reflected in the activity of strong and resilient trade unions.⁴⁴

During 1919 and 1920 (with the culmination in the spring and summer of that year), the pro-Soviet propaganda activity of the ‘Hands off Russia Committee’ organisation intensified. Later the Council of Action was formed. ‘Hands off Russia’ activists collaborated with the Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party and with trade unions.⁴⁵ In conjunction with the press campaign conducted primarily by the *Daily Herald*, significant mobilisation and pressure were achieved on Lloyd George’s cabinet to end all aid to Poland. At the same time, the Polish legation in London was inundated with acts and resolutions adopted at numerous meetings organised to express solidarity with Bolshevik Russia and condemn Polish ‘aggression’.⁴⁶

One of many such letters is dated 25 February 1920. It is an official letter addressed to the Polish consulate general (typescript on paper with the imprint “The National ‘Hands off Russia’ Committee”) with the headline “PEACE WITH RUSSIA”. Its content is an instant reaction to current events:

⁴⁴ Andrzej Nowak estimates that the Labour Party and the opposition liberals “actually represented nearly 40 percent of the British population”, see *id.*, *Pierwsza zdrada Zachodu. 1920 – zapomniany appeasement* (Kraków, 2015), 355–6.

⁴⁵ See Maria Nowak-Kiełbikowa, *Polska – Wielka Brytania 1918–1923. Kształtowanie się stosunków politycznych* (Warszawa, 1975), 202–3; L.J. Macfarlane, ‘Hands off Russia. British Labour and the Russo-Polish War, 1920’, *Past & Present*, xxxviii, 1 (Dec. 1967), 126–52.

⁴⁶ Some idea of the size of this action is provided by a collection of about 600 pages, sent in 1920 to the address of the Polish legation in London, located in the Archiwum Akt Nowych (hereinafter: AAN) w Warszawie, Ambasada RP w Londynie („Hands off Russia”, i–iv). And yet, it is not a complete set.

In spite of the decision of the Supreme Council on February 24th, the Imperialists of France and Poland, together with the Churchill Gang in England, are intriguing to prosecute the war against Russia, which will involve Europe in another war. This danger will continue until the blockade of Russia has been raised completely, and full diplomatic relations established. The French and Polish imperialists are undoubtedly the greatest hindrances to peace with Russia.⁴⁷

The letter continued with a warning to the French and Polish Governments that “organised Labor in Great Britain ... will oppose by every means in its power their nefarious intentions”.

The above text requires a short comment. The authors referred to the findings of the Allied Conference in London, which were in accord with the political line of Lloyd George seeking to establish relations and economic cooperation with the RSFSR, and unfavourable for Poland and the countries of the region defending their independence. The British Prime Minister, who had already begun negotiating with Bolshevik Russia by pursuing a ‘realistic’ policy summarised under the slogan “peace through trade”, actually managed to impose his stance on his allies. The situation was commented on the next day in an editorial featured in the London newspaper *The Times*. Coming out against Lloyd George, the text ended with predictions of future events with an ominous conclusion: “The path will have been opened for Lenin”.⁴⁸ This was a completely different reaction to the outcome of the Supreme Council meeting than the comments found in the letter of 25 February. The latter, paradoxically, were close to their hated government in terms of the stance towards Bolshevik Russia and Polish-Soviet relations. Let us also note that some of the phrases and epithets in the text entitled ‘Peace with Russia’ (e.g. those about the French and Polish imperialists) are ‘imports’ from the propaganda enunciations of the Comintern.

The document in question has a relatively mild eloquence compared to the later proclamations. One example is the resolution sent at the beginning of March from Manchester to the Polish envoy, Eustachy Sapieha. The “Hands off Russia” Committee demands total peace with Russia. The letter, full of strong expressions and threats, ends with a warning against the continuation of the current policy by the “Polish

⁴⁷ AAN, Ambasada RP w Londynie, 419, 106–7.

⁴⁸ Cited after: Ullman, *The Anglo-Soviet Relations*, iii, 32.

imperialists". Otherwise, the very name of the Polish government "will stink in the nostril" for every member of the trade unions in the United Kingdom.⁴⁹

In the West, and especially in the United Kingdom, the propaganda campaign achieved larger and more vehement dimensions, culminating between the May and August of 1920.

Looking from a slightly different angle at the Soviet 'peace offensive', whether in diplomatic letters or Comintern texts, or leaflets and brochures printed in Russia and distributed in the West, or activities inspired from the East and carried out in many European countries, one has to ask the question for the reaction of the audience, for the reasons behind the rejection or acceptance of Bolshevik optics. Many addressees of the *agit-prop* believed in the sincerity of Lenin, Trotsky and their associates when they expressed their desire for peace. The Bolsheviks knew that the message of peace was a balm for the yet unhealed wounds of the Great War. They were also able to convince a large part of European opinion that it was Polish imperialism that was a threat to peace on the continent. It can be concluded that Chicherin fulfilled the task entrusted to him, as well as the goal he had set himself in the note to Lenin written in mid-February 1920, which is worth quoting once more: "If there is to be a war, it is absolutely necessary that the blame for its outbreak be placed on the Polish Government".⁵⁰

Józef Piłsudski and those in his circle were among those who treated the Soviet peace offer with the greatest distrust. This did not arise from, as the Bolshevik propagandists would proclaim, the ill will on the part of the Polish authorities, but from the good understanding of the situation at hand. The Soviet 'peace offensive', launched in December 1919, was an obvious ploy to play for time. The Bolsheviks needed this smokescreen to regroup their troops. After the victories on the civil war fronts (the defeat of the Volunteer Army), troops were concentrated on the south-west and west fronts. Piłsudski received accurate data on preparations for an attack on Poland collected by an efficiently functioning intelligence service.⁵¹ Reports have survived, detailing the number and types of troops and armaments concentrated

⁴⁹ *Sąsiedzi wobec wojny*, 149–50.

⁵⁰ Cited after: Nowak, *Polska i trzy Rosje*, 508.

⁵¹ Wojciech Materski, *Na widenie. II Rzeczpospolita wobec Sowietów 1918–1943* (Warszawa, 2005), 58–9.

on the Polish front.⁵² The solution chosen by the commander-in-chief was a pre-emptive strike, which had to be made as soon as possible before Bolshevik Russia managed to muster its forces.

Coming back to *agit-prop*, it should be noted that in Bolshevik enunciations directed primarily abroad, but also at the 'internal propaganda front', the lies about peaceful intentions towards Poland were strong to the fore. On the other hand, in the message to their own society and to the 'workers of all countries', the intention to Sovietise Poland and other countries constituting an obstacle to the march of the world revolution was spoken and written about with brutal honesty.

IV

On 25 April 1920, the so-called Kiev Expedition, i.e. the offensive of the Polish Army in Ukraine together with the emerging allied army of the Ukrainian People's Republic, commenced. The propaganda response on the part of the RSFSR can be compared to an assault, and Polish successes reinforced this violent reaction at the front. There is no doubt that a new version of the propaganda war had begun with the new chapter of armed struggle.

On May 18, the appeal of the Executive Committee of the Communist International 'To the proletarians of all countries!'⁵³ was published. Its first words are: "Workers of all countries! In the East, there is again going to be bloodshed". From the extensive text, it is worth highlighting a few characteristic motifs. To the question, "Who is behind those new atrocities?", there is an easy-to-predict answer; that it is Poland which "in reply to the peace proposals issued by the Soviet government, responded with a treacherous assault on Ukraine". Readers learn that "Poland has started the war to loot

⁵² The report of the Supreme Command of the Polish Army for the Military Committee of the Sejm of 13 Feb. 1920 begins as follows: "From 22 December 1919, i.e. from the date on which the government of the Russian Republic of Soviets first proposed to the Polish Government to enter into peace negotiations, the main command of the Red Army transferred the following forces to the Polish front ...". The types of regrouped troops were listed. The report for the head of state of 13 Feb. 1920 included detailed information about the "strengthening of the anti-Polish front by the Bolsheviks from January 3 up to today". (Both documents, from the Józef Piłsudski Institute of America, are published in *Sąsiedzi wobec wojny*, 145–8.)

⁵³ *Коммунистический интернационал* (14 June 1920), 1861–4.

the Ukrainian peasants and give their land to the Polish landowners". The "governments of all the coalition states" are indicated as responsible for starting "this new war". "They all to a greater or lesser extent cooperate with the Polish invaders and bandits". An interesting motif, repeated also in other enunciations, is the call of the addressees to participate in the crusade. "The workers of all countries, it will be up to you to end the war in the shortest possible time with the defeat of Polish capitalists and landowners". Appeals follow, including to the workers of "munition factories" in France, Italy, England and America, so that they would not produce for Poland "not a single cartridge, not a single rifle, not a single cannon", and to transportation workers, railwaymen, sailors and porters, not to let "any equipment or food" be sent to Poland. The workers of Germany and Austria are reminded that only a revolution can "free them from the yoke" of their "own capitalists and free them from the noose thrown around" their "own necks by the Versailles-Saint-Germain peace treaty". So we can see several goals being stated at one time: the imperial goals of Soviet Russia combined with the revision of the treaty or – even better – with the overthrow of the Versailles system. One can also see the stoking of Franco-German animosities: "German railwaymen! Do not let trains from France enter Poland. Gdańsk port workers! Do not unload ships destined for Poland". There is also a call to the railwaymen of Austria and workers of Romania, Finland and Latvia. Most attention has been paid to Polish workers who were being convinced that "Victory of the worker and peasant will be the victory of the Polish proletariat, conjoined with Russian workers and peasants by way of a bond of fraternity and alliance".

It is striking how powerful the driving force behind the militant propaganda was. The orders of the leaders of the Comintern were carried out by probably the majority of the workers of these countries, except for the workers of Poland.

The Bolsheviks were able to spread agitation literature abroad as well. The discussed proclamation with the text of 17 February, entitled 'To the Workers of All Countries. Concerning the Polish Question', was translated into English and published in the form of a 14-page-brochure.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ *The Third International to the Workers of all Countries. Concerning the Polish Question* (Moscow, 1920).

Another way to gain supporters from foreigners was to invite them to Russia. The authorities were able to ensure that the guests saw only what the hosts wanted to show them and that information about their country came only from the appointed people. In this way, the Bolsheviks 'brought up' quite a large number of intellectuals focused on Soviet Russia (such as the famous John Reed), whom Trotsky called "fellow-travellers", and Lenin – "useful idiots".⁵⁵ British union activists who were hosted in Moscow in May 1920 came from a different milieu, but they were no less useful to the authorities of the RSFSR. The British delegation was most solemnly received. The front page of the *Pravda* [Правда] daily featured texts entitled 'Nash privet' and 'Our greetings'.⁵⁶ The Bolsheviks hoped that the guests would repay by promoting communism in their home countries.

After the period of Polish successes at the front (including the capture of Kiev), the scales of success tipped to the Soviet side. At the end of May, the Red Army launched a counteroffensive in Ukraine, and the Polish Army was in retreat and had to withdraw from Kiev on 10 June.

On the same day, Trotsky, who could not yet have known about the withdrawal of the Poles, sent a letter to Chicherin in anticipation of a possible ceasefire and the mediation of England. The head of the Soviet armed forces wrote to the chief of diplomacy about the need to "prepare in the West an opinion favourable to us in connection with possible interference by the Entente". Further, the creator of the Red Army called for the launch of "a holistic campaign explaining both individual facts and giving an overall picture of Anglo-French cooperation with the Polish nobility and the lies told to the English and French working masses by Lloyd George and Millerand". He concluded his arguments as follows: "I believe that such a campaign, carried out simultaneously by our foreign missions with all the energy that we can muster, would be of great help in the event of a formal diplomatic intervention of the Entente in our war with Poland". The same and similar themes were raised by Trotsky when addressing the editors of *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* [Известия] dailies, and this time in a commanding tone.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Tolczyk, *GUŁAG*, chap. 'Pożyteczni idioci i prorocy apokalipsy'.

⁵⁶ *Pravda* (18 May 1920), 1.

⁵⁷ *Польско-советская война*, chart. 1, ed. И.И. Костюшко (Москва, 2004), doc. 59, 66. See Leinwand, *Czerwonym młotem*, 125–6.

The response to Trotsky's postulates was immediate. The very next day, the note signed by Chicherin and Rakowski from the governments of the RSFSR and the UkrSSR to the governments of Great Britain, France, Italy and the United States was announced. It began with the following categorical statement: "The financial, military and technical assistance that Entente governments are giving to the Polish government at a time when it is carrying out an unjustified aggression against Russia and Ukraine makes these governments fully responsible for all the consequences of their undertaken stance".⁵⁸ Later parts of the text were followed by an escalation of lies presented in an equally uncompromising tone. The authors write about the "barbaric behaviour of the Polish military authorities", which was supposed to surpass "the most terrible acts of vandalism" of the Great War period. Chicherin – here in the role of a humanist and erudite – was rendering garments expressing profound grief over the fate of Kiev, where "the Polish command decided to perpetuate their memory ... following the example of Herostrates". It was conveyed to the world that "the beautiful cathedral of St. Vladimir, this unparalleled pearl of religious architecture and a unique monument with priceless Vasnetsov frescoes, had been destroyed by Poles during the retreat only because they had wanted to vent their anger on, for example, inanimate objects". Thus, as a result of the "disgusting vandalism" of the Poles, "the treasury of human civilisation had been deprived of a unique work of art". Facts that had not actually happened were described and commented on with indignation.⁵⁹ The authors probably did not

⁵⁸ DiM, iii, doc. 44.

⁵⁹ In a statement of the General Staff of the Polish Army of 29 June 1920, it was stated: "Because in recent times false information has been spread from Bolshevik sources that the Polish army, on leaving Kiev, demolished St. Sophia's Cathedral, Volodymyr's Cathedral, the water supply station and the electric station; and other utility buildings. We declare that all these reports are a fabrication. Our troops, when leaving Kiev, only demolished the bridges on the Dnieper". The church and the cathedral were "untouched by the Polish army; while the Bolsheviks, by bombing the city, damaged Volodymyr's Cathedral with three heavy artillery shells". *Pierwsza wojna polska (1918–1920). Zbiór komunikatów prasowych Sztabu Generalnego*, ed. by Stefan Pomarański (Warszawa, 1920), 249. On the "alleged arson attacks in Kiev", reported on even ten years after the said events, Lev Kopelev wrote in his memoirs later. Лев З. Копелев, *И сотворил себе кумира* (Харьков, 2010²), quoted after: *Bożyszczka mojej młodości*, transl. Grażyna Strumiłło-Miłosz, Ewa Niepokólczycka, and Edward Klimczak (Warszawa, 1990), 21.

anticipate that any of the addressees of the note would be able to check the truthfulness of the report in situ.

The text mentioned above is interesting for one more reason. All the accusations hitherto directed against the Bolsheviks (barbarism, vandalism, and the destruction of cultural heritage, the demolition of sacred objects) have been blamed on their enemies. Soviet politicians and propagandists consistently used portraits of Polish imperialists in their message. The latter, accused of the worst crimes, were to be a counterbalance to the peaceful and cultured Bolsheviks. Such measures discredited Poland in the eyes of the West. The answer to the question of whether it is worth supporting aggressors who pursue adventurous policies seemed obvious.

This does not mean that the official Soviet message was the only one that reached Western Europe. Setting aside the Polish reports at this point, I would like to draw attention to the opinions of British observers residing in Poland. They had the opportunity to get acquainted with the situation in situ, unlike politicians residing in London or other Western European capitals. For example, a British envoy in Warsaw, Horace Rumbold, in reports sent to Lord Curzon, gave flattering reports on the behaviour of Polish troops in Kiev in May 1920. In one of the dispatches, he referred to the opinion of an officer of the British Military Mission who stated that "it would be a mistake if uninstructed public opinion in Western European countries were to urge the withdrawal of the Poles from Ukraine under the present circumstances as such a withdrawal would result in anarchy".⁶⁰

However, reports that had been 'lost' in the offices of diplomats and politicians and had not reached the public opinion in the form of multiple propaganda messages weighed much less (or not at all). The Bolsheviks knew this very well. They translated all political, diplomatic and military activities and their evaluations into the communicative language of propaganda, which could also be crude and primitive.

Between 19 July and 7 August 1920, during the Red Army's most significant successes on the anti-Polish front, the Second Comintern Congress held its debates in Petrograd and Moscow. On these occasions, Karl Radek presented a comprehensive study entitled

⁶⁰ The National Archives, Kew, Richmond (hereinafter: TNA), FO 688/3, 247.

‘The Polish Cause and the Third International’.⁶¹ In the climax of the Polish-Bolshevik war, a message was sent out into the world, containing a discussion of the history of Poland in Marxist shades; and with a concoction of fantasy and sincerity. Radek declared the recognition of Poland’s independence by the Third International, assuring that Russia did not intend to conquer Poland “in the event of the defeat of White Poland” and that the independence of Soviet Poland [sic!] would be fully respected. Such a Poland was granted the right to govern its relations with Soviet Russia and Soviet Germany independently. It concluded as follows: “The Poland of urban and rural workers, Poland united with Soviet Russia and with the world proletariat – will be a member of this revolutionary International, a union of revolutionary countries”. The quoted words should be placed in a military and political context, i.e. the Red Army approaching Warsaw and with the ‘Polrevkom’ (Polish revolutionary government) established by the Soviets operating on Polish territory.

At the same congress, on 19 July in Petrograd, the proclamation entitled ‘Don’t Give Arms to the Polish Overlords’ was approved.⁶² The extensive text calls, among others, for workers to engage in street protests against any aid to “White Guard Poland” and “any interference in the affairs of Soviet Russia”. Another document from the sessions of the Second Congress is the appeal ‘To the Workers of England and France’,⁶³ in which, among others, the progress of the labour movement in both countries was assessed. In the first case, the assessment was positive (the Council of Action was praised); and in the second, the assessment was poor. Among the numerous slogans ending the proclamation, three are deserving of special attention: “Down with the English and French governments of plunderers – imperialists. Long live the dictatorship of the proletariat in England and France! Long live Soviet England and Soviet France!”

The ‘Appeal to the Red Army’,⁶⁴ adopted at the request of Giacinto Serrati, was largely devoted to the war with Poland. It is worth quoting the final part: “Brothers of the Red Army! Know that your fight against

⁶¹ *Коммунистический интернационал*, 12 (1920), 2173–88.

⁶² AAN, Międzynarodówka Komunistyczna (photocopy); DiM, iii, 181–4 (text in Russian).

⁶³ *Коммунистический интернационал*, 13 (1920), 2601–6.

⁶⁴ AAN, Międzynarodówka Komunistyczna (photocopy).

the Polish overlords is the most just war in history. You are fighting not only for the cause of Soviet Russia, but also for the cause of all working mankind". This appeal was published in the *Kommunisticheskiy Internatsional*, and the Polish translation was printed in 100,000 copies by the Publishing House of the Political Department of the 16th Army.⁶⁵ Apparently, the Bolsheviks cared more for supplying their soldiers with propaganda literature than equipping them with arms.

The *agit-prop* campaign, carried out abroad from the end of April, gained momentum. Great Britain came to the fore once again, where the rally and leaflet activity of the Left was exceptional. The emotions were so strong that it could be said without the slightest hint of exaggeration that the peace offensive morphed into a campaign of hatred towards Poland. The Polish legation was inundated with offensive letters and resolutions. Here, for example, workers gathered at the May Day meeting in Birmingham "most emphatically condemn Imperialist Poland for its most despicable action in attacking Soviet Russia". The Assembly threatened to use "every means in its power to prevent men, munitions or money being sent to the aid of Poland".⁶⁶

The sympathisers of Bolshevik Russia, as instructed by the Comintern, expressed their sentiments not only in words but also in deeds. Port workers in Gdańsk, Hamburg, and London refused to load not only weapons but also other goods bound for Poland.⁶⁷ Agitators were especially active in the ports. An example of this activity may be a Spartacist leaflet from Gdańsk, from the decisive period of the Polish-Soviet war. You can read there, among others: "You must immediately declare a boycott and a blockade of Poland". "No food supplies and war materials for Poland! No troop train through Danzig! Long live solidarity! Long live the world revolution!"⁶⁸

At the same time, the Bolsheviks sent a diplomatic communiqué to the world, one that was seemingly sensible and objective; and not

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ AAN, Ambasada Polska w Londynie, 420, 8.

⁶⁷ One of the most notorious actions of this type was the strike of the London dockworkers on the ship 'Jolly George' carried out on 10 May 1920. There is an entire chapter of Harry Pollitt's (a British Communist) jargon-filled autobiography (*Serving My Time*) devoted to these events. It is worth paying attention to the author's expressions taken straight from the Soviet propaganda and the descriptions of the atmosphere of general agitation.

⁶⁸ This is the English translation of a German flyer. TNA, FO 688/7.

only in the form of the diplomatic correspondence mentioned above. In 1920, the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs published in the State Publishing House the French translation of a collection of 89 documents relating to Polish-Soviet relations. Preceded by an introduction, Chicherin's *The Red Book* included references to documents related to the negotiations in Brest-Litovsk (January 1918). In this way, attempts were made to reach diverse people in terms of their backgrounds and education; in other words, Western addressees.⁶⁹

The Polish side had no chance of countering the Soviet propaganda discourse disseminated among most European countries. Vigorous activity in this field required considerable financial resources, which Poles did not have, as well as undemocratic activities, which Poland did not agree to. The creation of a highly centralised structure, called the "general staff of the world revolution" during the Second Congress of the Comintern, was possible in a police state. Just like decisions on important state matters made arbitrarily in a group comprising a small number of people.

Polish diplomats understood the importance of the situation, as evidenced by reports from various capitals informing about the ubiquitous Bolshevik propaganda. For example, an envoy to Bern, Jan Modzelewski, in a report to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued in the most critical period of the summer of 1920, noted:

The total lack of propaganda from our side, which could present our Ukrainian offensive in the correct light, when compared with the intense agitation created among the majority of English workers, firmly convinces that the Polish army moved eastward only under the banner of Polish imperialism, in order to annex and economically exploit the rich Ukrainian lands.⁷⁰

Poland's attempts to counteract it were modest and ineffective. Neither the steps taken by Polish diplomats nor the non-institutional activities⁷¹ could compete with the powerful machine of Bolshevik

⁶⁹ *Livre rouge: recueil des documents diplomatiques relatifs aux relations entre la Russie et la Pologne: 1918–1920* (Moscou, 1920).

⁷⁰ AAN, Ambasada RP w Londynie, 418, 13–14.

⁷¹ In the correspondence between the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Polish legation in London, there appears the figure of a certain Mieczysław Kozłowski, who on his own initiative left for the capital of Great Britain in order to conduct anti-Bolshevik agitation there, which involved his contacting a number of English

propaganda. Only the military victory of the Poles in the battle on the outskirts of Warsaw in August 1920 could bring it to a grinding halt.

The Polish-Bolshevik war ended with peace negotiations in Riga, culminating in signing a peace treaty between Poland, Russia, and Ukraine on 18 March 1921. A detail not recorded so far in historiography was the efforts of the British left-wing to send a delegation to the Riga conference. The trade union congress has passed a resolution on this issue, so stating that “the British Labour Delegation ... presence [in Riga] will be the best guarantee against any unjust and unwarrantable claims submitted by and on behalf either of Poland or Russia”.⁷² In September 1920, there was an exchange of correspondence on this subject between a representative of the Council of Action and the secretary of the Prime Minister. The question was settled with a negative decision: “The Cabinet ... had decided that they could not recognise the right of anybody to take part in the foreign policy of the country which was exclusively the business of the Government of the country”.⁷³

V CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, let us repeat the question about the reasons for the success of Soviet propaganda in the West. Dariusz Tołczyk, in a book devoted to the Western perception of the Soviet system, included reflections that may bring us closer to the answer. Here are two sentences I think worth quoting: “In 1917, when the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd, in the imagination of the West, two great myths intertwined: the myth of the revolution and the myth of Russia” and “World public opinion became the object of systematic Bolshevik propaganda influence, busily mystifying the image of Russia”.⁷⁴

The above apt reflections represent a helicopter view of the issue in question. Considering, in particular, the issue of the Soviet Union’s effectiveness in shaping the opinion of the West concerning the Polish-

associations, and sending out and distributing appeals, brochures, etc., see *ibid.*, 135; AAN, The Hoover Institution, Polish Embassy in London, 800/33/0/-/38, scan 633.

⁷² TNA, CAB 21/179, 45.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷⁴ Tołczyk, *GUŁAG*, 27, 45.

-Bolshevik war, it should be remembered that, of course, no polls or opinion surveys were conducted during the period in question. All in all, we do not know how numerous (even with an imperfect approximation) were the groups of communist supporters. The British move to defend Soviet Russia was not conspicuous; but it was significant: the Left could effectively blackmail its own government; and the government allowed itself to be blackmailed.

The most important reasons for the Bolshevik successes were, first, their enormous commitment in a material, organisational and conceptual sense. The author of the 'Outline of the emergence, development and present state of the Communist International', compiled at the end of 1921 in the *Deuxième Bureau* of the General Staff of the Ministry of Military Affairs, writes about two main centres of propaganda activity in close contact with one another. They were: the Executive Committee of the Communist International in Moscow and the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.⁷⁵ Contemporary research confirms the accuracy of these observations. As mentioned above, both organs worked in parallel, complementing each other. Moscow's actions were revolutionary: the rule of law, appearances, honesty and decency were not considered. When necessary, the propaganda machine pushed forward like a bulldozer. On the other hand, the *agit-prop* creators were perceptive and attentive and possessed a certain finesse (like Chicherin, when so called upon). In short: the Bolsheviks knew how to scare, terrorise, and also seduce. What is also important, in the times prior to cell phones and computers, communists in various countries communicated extremely efficiently with each other and – for example – created the groundwork for a significant boycott of supplies destined for Poland. This stemmed from the good organisation of the propaganda system, and – above all – from the network of trained agents. Agitators, political workers, agents, spies – these functions were close to each other, and sometimes even the same.

The second reason for the success of Soviet propaganda is 'objective': post-war traumas, poverty, hunger and a genuine fear of a new war contributed to the radicalisation of the public mood throughout Europe. Bolshevik lies about peace, freedom, and the right of nations to self-determination flourished in this fertile ground. After the hellish

⁷⁵ Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe Wojskowego Biura Historycznego, Oddział II Sztabu Generalnego, 7166.

experience of war, many were attracted to the promise of heaven on earth. People believed because they wanted to believe. On the other hand, on hearing about the atrocities of the revolution, some could not (or did not want to) believe them. Here, spatial distance played an important role. For the average inhabitants of Western Europe, the distance from the theatre of revolutionary and military operations was too great to perceive these far-off issues and struggles in real terms. Only those who happened to be close by got a chance to see the conflict and understand it for themselves. As Lord d'Abernon so wrote:

The Soviets wanted, first of all, to benefit as much as possible from the alleged superiority of their army over Polish troops. It was so conspicuous that no one could see the slightest pacifist intentions in the tactics of the Bolsheviks. Hence, the whole of Central and Eastern Europe was simply astounded at the gullibility and blindness of pockets of Western European public opinion, which, for incomprehensible reasons, did not perceive the attendant danger.⁷⁶

The following paradox should also be noted: on the one hand, a desire for radical change, the dream that revolution would bring liberation. This was the Left's dream. On the other – a utopian, often a subconscious drive to restore 'the good old days'. If the Holy Covenant could not be resurrected, then at least an equilibrium of sorts could be achieved. Since the old empires had been brushed aside, perhaps Soviet Russia came to represent the rational alternative being preferable to irrational and irresponsible countries with their exorbitant demands; nations such as Poland – those 'troublemakers'. Peace with Russia would be a much better solution. Peace through trade.

The listed reasons for the success of the Bolsheviks are perhaps trivial. One could probably add a lot of justifications, which would most likely turn out to be just as banal. Or perhaps, to paraphrase the words of Hannah Arendt, one should speak of the banality of propaganda. After all, even the most aggressive, shocking and appalling examples of propaganda were very often instances of banality. Was that not the power of their attraction in the first place?

transl. Barry Keane

⁷⁶ [Edgar Vincent] D'Abernon, *Osiemnasta decydująca bitwa w dziejach świata pod Warszawą 1920 r.* (Warszawa, 1932), 114.

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