APPROACHES TO STUDYING POPULAR OPINION IN THE USSR OF 1920s – 1930s

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The measurement of public opinion has become an essential practice across various fields, evolving from historical methods to modern polling techniques. Politicians have long tried to understand public sentiment through tools like media analysis and direct communication. In democratic societies, this understanding helps with electoral success, while in totalitarian regimes, it often serves to maintain control through surveillance and other strategies.

The article underscores the challenges scholars face in reconstructing public sentiment in oppressive environments where reliable data is scarce. Historians often depend on alternative sources, such as secret police reports, media publications, and personal accounts, to build a nuanced understanding of public opinion.

Our overview has identified various approaches to studying public opinion in the USSR during the interwar period. Some studies focus on representing a range of reactions that ordinary people have to newly introduced state policies and everyday problems. Other scholars highlight complex social dynamics (active and passive resistance, adaptation, apathy, etc.) Moreover, a number of public opinion studies are devoted to the collective identity of different social groups and how it changed under the influence of Soviet propaganda and social engineering. At the same time, some researchers who heavily relied on personal accounts reconstructed people's emotional states under the pressure of totalitarianism.

Overall, exploring public sentiment in oppressive environments allows for a deeper understanding of the nature of totalitarianism and the social resistance under such regimes.

Key words: public opinion, popular opinion, public sentiments, behavior, resistance, USSR, Holodomor.

The measurement of public opinion has evolved into a prominent and even routine practice across various fields, encompassing both scholarly research and practical applications. Sociological surveys are commonly employed to gauge public sentiment, while opinion mining, or sentiment analysis, has emerged as a specialized area within computational linguistics aimed at automatically detecting emotions and opinions in texts.

Historical examinations of public opinion reveal that the instruments utilized by politicians to assess societal attitudes have a long-standing legacy. Notably, Michael E. Woods analyzed the methods American politicians employed during the Civil War era, a time preceding the advent of modern polling techniques. His research highlights several approaches, including the analysis of newspaper editorials, direct conversations with constituents, and private correspondences with political peers and local agents[1].

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[1] Michael E. Woods, "Before Opinion Polling: Tracking Public Sentiment in Civil War-Era Politics", *Journal of the Civil War Era* (December 3, 2019). URL: https://www.journalofthecivilwarera.org/2019/12/before-opinion-polling-tracking-public-sentiment-in-civil-war-era-politics/

The motivations behind measuring public opinion differ significantly between democratic and totalitarian contexts. In democratic societies, politicians seek to understand public sentiment to facilitate electoral success. At the same time, in totalitarian regimes, the emphasis shifts towards societal control, prompting the use of alternative measurement strategies that often involve surveillance and policing of both potential "enemies" and the general population.

This divergence in focus significantly shapes scholarly approaches to the study of public opinion. In the absence of reliable data sources, researchers frequently resort to analyzing secret services reports, publications in media (such analysis has its own specific limitations), written complaints to the party and state control bodies, personal accounts (both written and oral), correspondence, etc. to construct a nuanced understanding of public sentiment in repressive environments.

This article aims to explore and characterize the diverse methodologies employed by scholars in the historical study of popular opinion and sentiment in totalitarian societies, with a particular emphasis on the Soviet Union. Through this overview, we seek to illuminate the complexities of public sentiment measurement in repressive environments and its implications for both historical and contemporary discourse.

The first attempts to measure public opinion in the Soviet Union using sociological methods took place in the 1960s when local Communist party units started commissioning polls from researchers[2]. Later, in the 1980s, several joint Soviet-Western polling projects were organized[3]. However, according to John P. Willerton and Lee Sigelman, these surveys shared several pitfalls, such as non-representative sampling, unasked questions, cautious and invariant responses, and uninterpretable patterns[4], which are to be expected under the circumstances of the lack of freedom of speech. Moreover, in response to the assumptions that there can be no public opinion in a totalitarian society, J. A. Brown, Jr. argued that there is a difference between public opinion and its expression; therefore, the "elaborate effort made by the Communist Party to control public opinion must be interpreted nit as a denial of public opinion but as recognition of it"[5]. At the same time, as noted by Adam J. Berinsky, sociological surveys as such can fail to represent everyone's opinion properly, even in democratic societies, because of exclusion bias, when the thoughts and preferences of those who answered "hard to tell" or "I don't know" are not taken into account[6].

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[2] Darrell Slider, "Party-Sponsored Public Opinion Research in the Soviet Union," *The Journal of Politics* 47 (1), (1985): 214.

[3] John P. Willerton, Lee Sigelman, "Public Opinion Research in the USSR: Opportunities and Pitfalls." *Journal of Communist Studies* 7 (2), (1991): 217–34.

[4] John P. Willerton, Lee Sigelman, "Public Opinion Research in the USSR: Opportunities and Pitfalls", 224, 227–232.

[5] J. A. Brown, Jr. "Public Opinion in the Soviet Union", *The Russian Review* 9, 1 (Jan. 1950): 37.

[6] Adam J. Berinsky, *Silent Voices: Public Opinion and Political Participation in America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). 240 p.

When it comes to the interwar period, the Soviet Union authorities did not use quantitative methods to study the sentiments of the population; however, the state and the party established multi-layered systems for tracking the "political moods" of the USSR citizens. In his book "Cultivating the Masses. Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914–1939", David L. Hoffmann outlined the development of Soviet domestic surveillance practices, including so-called "popular surveillance," e.g., encouraging the ordinary people to police, criticize, and report on each other. He also suggested that the reasons why the USSR government needed to observe people's attitudes reached beyond the realm of control and disobedience prevention. He wrote, "Party leaders' goal of instilling a new type of consciousness—of fundamentally changing the way that people thought and acted–necessitated a thorough understanding of people's thinking, and in conjunction with that, renewed efforts at political enlightenment"[7]. In other words, introducing new policies and ideology required significant propagandistic efforts, which involved deeply analyzing existing beliefs and behaviors.

Notably, when trying to "recover the thoughts and values, hopes and beliefs of 'ordinary people'"[8], Western scholars often employ the concept of "popular opinion" rather than "public opinion." According to R. Nisbet, the difference between these terms can be explained as the "difference between the organized community on the one hand and the mass or crowd on the other"[9]. Moreover, the phrase "public opinion" is mainly used in sociology and, therefore, implies a more structured knowledge, which is almost impossible to reach with the source base available about the USSR of the interwar period.

In particular, Sarah Davies, based primarily on the party and NKVD opinion reports, analyzed the sentiments of the USSR population (mainly Leningrad and the Leningrad region) during the period of the Great Terror (1934–1941) according to the thematic principle: people's attitudes to economic phenomena and policies towards workers (rations, state loans, price increases, deficit, the Stakhanov movement, etc.), attitude to external and internal political processes and terror, attitude to the cult of personality. According to her observations, the workers of various industries were mainly concerned with the basic problems of everyday life, particularly getting food and clothing, and to a somewhat lesser extent, with political and ideological issues[10]. Simultaneously, making assumptions about the moods of whole social groups (workers, intelligentsia, students, etc.) is difficult because they were not homogenous, which is why S. Davies decided to concentrate on typical and recurring themes[11].

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[7] David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914–1939.* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 208.

[8] Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia. Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

[9] Robert Nisbet, "Public Opinion versus Popular Opinion", *The Public Interest* 41, (Fall 1975): 168.

[10] Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia. Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941*, 185.

[11] Ibid, 16.

In turn, Sheila Fitzpatrick actively studied Anti-Stalinist peasant resistance, which arose due to collectivization in the USSR[12]. She emphasized that large-scale organized violent resistance was a rare phenomenon in the 1930s (apparently, she made this conclusion based on the archival materials available for scholars in the early 1990s). Following James C. Scott[13], S. Fitzpatrick highlighted the forms of "everyday resistance," e.g., coping strategies the peasants resorted to in response to the state pressure. Another essential issue she raised is the ways for peasants' accommodation to the new reality, which did not always involve resistance. To deal with the non-homogeneity of the social stratum of peasants, she chose a different strategy than S. Davies: to divide the entirety of peasants into distinct groups, systematically identifying the specific challenges and practices characteristic of each category.

Along with S. Fitzpatrick's works, quite a lot of scholarship dealing with the sentiments of the USSR population is centered around the resistance movement, particularly the above-mentioned "everyday resistance." For example, Lynne Viola singled out the following forms of social reaction to Stalinism: resistance, accommodation, adaptation, silent consent, apathy, internal emigration, and positive support[14]. However, these forms were not internally homogeneous – for example, resistance could be active (rebellions and uprisings) or passive (intentionally delaying work, sabotage, theft, etc.). Her study of "popular resistance"[15] is centered around the motivation for the acts of resistance and their intentionality – aspects frequently covered by the ideological "filters" in the secret police reports.

The concept of "popular opinion" was also used by Mark Allinson[16] to describe common reactions to both domestic and international events in East Germany. Unlike S. Davies, he was less concerned with people's everyday lives and devoted more attention to how society was functioning as a whole, especially under pressure from above. The basis of his research was extensive reporting by the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany), police, and the Stasi.

In addition, D. Brandenberger[17] wrote about the general population's mistrust of official propaganda as a result of Stalinist repressions, especially against people who personified the revolution and the regime. In his opinion, these purges were among

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[12] Sheila Fitzpartick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization.* (New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). 386 p.

[13] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance.* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1985). 389 p.

[14] Lynne Viola, "Introduction", *Contending with Stalinism. Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s*, ed. by Lynne Viola. (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 1.

[15] Lynne Viola, "Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s", *Contending with Stalinism. Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s*, ed. by Lynne Viola. (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 17–43.

[16] Mark Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany, 1945–68.* (Manchester–New York: Manchester University Press, 2000). 178 p.

[17] David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis. Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941.* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2011). 357 p.

the causes of the state propaganda crisis. Based on the reports of the NKVD, the historian reconstructed the confusion and doubts that prevailed in the party ranks and partly even among the population. Finally, at the end of the 1930s, the state leadership was forced to form a new heroes' pantheon and rewrite the official history of the party.

In turn, many Ukrainian historians who studied the sentiments of the Ukrainian SSR population during the interwar period focused on the peasantry. One of the most thorough works devoted to this problem belongs to Volodymyr Ruban. He analyzed the reaction of the Podillia peasantry to the Soviet socio-economic innovations of the 1920s and 1930s (grain procurement campaigns, industrialization, dekurkulization, collectivization, mechanization) and the Holodomor. V. Ruban's model of sentiments and behavior analysis is based on the forms of their manifestation: apathy and passive attitude towards the production process and one's everyday life; connecting foreign policy events with the everyday situation (for example, the expectation of war and the "coming of the Poles"); contemptuous attitude towards representatives of the village and district administration; complaints to party and government bodies; exit from collective farms; rebellion, etc[18].

A vivid example of a social approach to the history of the USSR is the work "Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship" by Mark von Hagen, which analyzes the formation of the Red Army as an institution and the military as a separate social group with its own political culture. The researcher analyzed how the social background of soldiers and officers (for example, their family status before the Bolshevik coup) influenced their views and career prospects. Another important aspect the author considers is the militarization of public life – the penetration of military elements into the general political culture[19]. Similarly, the social identity of peasants who became workers due to active migration processes in the 1920s and 1930s was studied by D. L. Hoffmann[20].

Another approach, which can be considered more "individualistic," was used by Robert W. Thurston, who relied on personal accounts and memoirs to analyze how Soviet society reacted to mass terror. He traced how the feeling of fear, not noticeable in 1935 and 1936, increased significantly in the spring of 1937, along with the feeling of injustice. Other reactions the author cataloged in his article include refusal to take certain jobs (because of the assumption that some positions are riskier regarding potential arrest) and, in contrast, the impression that repressions are justified (although when the person themselves or their close relatives were arrested, they often thought that this was a mistake)[21].

[18] Volodymyr Ruban, *Nastroi ta povedinka selianstva Podillia naprykintsi 1920-kh – pochatku 1930-kh rr.* (Cherkasy, 2018). 260 p.

[19] Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship. The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917–1930.* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 1990). 367 p.

[20] David Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in Moscow, 1929–1941.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press; 1994).

[21] Robert W. Thurston, "Fear and Belief in the USSR's 'Great Terror': Response to Arrest, 1935–1939." *Slavic Review* 45 (2), (1986): 213–34.

Therefore, the analysis of the general population's attitudes and sentiments allows for a deeper understanding of the nature of totalitarianism and anti-totalitarian resistance. All studies we mentioned show the history of the USSR from the perspective of different social groups, reflecting complicated tensions between the government and the population.

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ПІДХОДИ ДО ВИВЧЕННЯ ГРОМАДСЬКОЇ ДУМКИ В СРСР 1920-х – 1930-х рр.

Тетяна СОПРОНЮК

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Вимірювання громадської думки стало важливою практикою в різних сферах публічного життя, розвинувшись від історичних методів до сучасних соціологічних опитувань. Нині політики регулярно намагаються зрозуміти суспільні настрої за допомогою таких інструментів, як аналіз публікацій ЗМІ та пряме спілкування з виборцями. У демократичних суспільствах такі дослідження мають на меті покращити результат на виборах, тоді як у тоталітарних режимах воно часто слугують для збереження контролю над суспільством.

У повідомленні підкреслено проблеми, з якими стикаються науковці під час реконструкції суспільних настроїв у репресивному середовищі, коли достовірних даних про нього мало. У цих умовах історики часто покладаються на альтернативні джерела, такі як звіти спецслужб, публікації в ЗМІ та особисті свідчення.

У роботі описано підходи до вивчення громадської думки в СРСР у міжвоєнний період, якими користуються сучасні науковці. Деякі дослідження мають на меті виявити різні типи реакцій простих людей на нововведені державні політики та повсякденні проблеми. Інші вчені висвітлюють складну соціальну динаміку (активний і пасивний опір, адаптація, апатія тощо). Крім того, частина досліджень громадської думки присвячені колективній ідентичності різних соціальних груп і тому, як вона змінювалася під впливом пропаганди й соціальної інженерії. Водночас деякі дослідники, які значною мірою спиралися на особисті свідчення, реконструювали емоційні стани людей під тиском тоталітаризму.

Вивчення суспільних настроїв у тоталітарному середовищі дозволяє глибше зрозуміти природу тоталітаризму, а також природу опору таким режимам.

Ключові слова: громадська думка, популярна думка, настрої населення, поведінка, опір, СРСР, Голодомор.