



Olga Velikanova, *Popular Perceptions of Soviet Politics in the 1920s: Disenchantment of the Dreamers*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 272 pag., ISBN 978-1-137-03074-0

The views of the Soviet population on Bolshevik policies and projects in the interwar period have been for a long time an attractive topic for historians. Yet, only recently, with the “archival revolution” and gradual opening of post-Soviet archives, which followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, historians got access to the documents which can shed some light on these issues and provide adequate source basis for analysis. Olga Velikanova is one of the historians who use newly opened documents in order to uncover the Soviet popular opinions. Most of these sources, such as the OGPU *svodki*, police reports, letters of the Soviet population to newspapers and to Soviet leaders, have undeniable biases and should be treated critically in order to analyze views “from below”. The author of the reviewed book is well aware of these shortcomings of her sources and follows a critical approach to them. Olga Velikanova focuses her attention on popular opinions and perceptions of Soviet politics in the 1920s. More specifically, she concentrates on Soviet campaigns of mobilization and traces the reaction to them and their assessment by the Soviet population.

Overall, there are two main case studies in Velikanova’s book. Three chapters analyze the Soviet war scare and mobilization campaigns, provoked by fears of foreign intervention. The key phenomenon in this part is the war scare of 1927, which was triggered by the break in the Anglo-Soviet diplomatic relations.

Was the fear of foreign intervention in 1927 a genuine belief of the Soviet leadership? Or was it just a scam in order to justify harsh mobilization and Stalin’s unleashing of oppression against the opposition among the Soviet top? Historians have long discussed this



issue, providing conflicting interpretations. Even though the views of the Soviet leadership, “from above”, are not central to Velikanova’s account, she still provides some interesting and, in certain respects, innovative insights into the issue. Thus, the author goes beyond the usual question which previously bothered historians, whether the Soviet leadership genuinely believed that there was a danger of imminent and forthcoming war. Velikanova’s answer to this question is that there was no unanimous opinion and there were different views among the Soviet leadership on the possibilities of foreign intervention. For instance, the OGPU and the Comintern considered that there was a real danger to the Soviet state in 1927, while the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs and the military did not perceive the war threat as immediate (46-49). At the same time, in Velikanova’s analysis, Stalin turns out to be on the side of the alarmists.

Regardless of the answer to the question on the sincerity of Soviet leadership in their fear of war, it resulted in a propaganda campaign which sought to mobilize the Soviet population. Eventually, as Olga Velikanova demonstrates, in 1927 the war scare, coupled with domestic threats (terrorist attacks and defeatist moods of the population), provoked a mass operation which aimed to “strengthen the rear”. Originally, the mass operation started with the repression of “former people” – noblemen, former White officers, landowners, and priests –, but eventually also targeted Cossacks, members of the old intelligentsia, peasants, etc. (69). In the end, although using incomplete data, Velikanova estimates the number of victims of the operation at about 16,000 (73). It should be noted that the mass operation of 1927 is almost unknown in current historiography. Therefore, Olga Velikanova’s contribution to the issue is highly welcome.

Nevertheless, what interests Velikanova most in her study was people’s reaction to the propaganda and mobilization campaign, launched by Soviet leadership under the pretext of foreign threat. As she shows, the reaction was far from what authorities expected. While there were many cases of pronouncements by the population in support of Soviet power, Velikanova concludes that there were numerous instances of negative reaction to Soviet authorities and their propaganda campaign. Since large sections of the Soviet population, especially in villages, maintained complicated relations with Soviet

power, they often had no interest in defending it and in some cases welcomed the possibility of its defeat, even at the hands of foreign intervention. Another unexpected consequence of the Soviet alarmist campaign was the economic behavior of peasantry, which under the conditions of threats of upcoming war preferred to save the grain and withhold it from the market, in order to prepare for wartime shortages. As a result, poor supply of food to the market resulted in the grain crisis of 1927-1928. Soviet leadership interpreted the grain crisis as kulak sabotage and responded with grain requisitions. Within this interpretation Velikanova even goes as far as to suggest that the war scare and economic response of peasantry triggered the chain of events which eventually led to the end of NEP and the beginning of Stalin's 'Socialist offensive' (88). While the author may sometimes overstate the centrality of the war scare to the development of the Soviet system, she deserves credit for attracting readers' attention to this factor, which historians frequently downplay or simply ignore.

Another key chapter in the book is the story of the Peasant Union movement or rather the attempts to create it and the pronouncements in favor of its establishment. The chapter allows Velikanova to argue against the historiographical approach which sees Soviet peasantry as politically passive. On the contrary, the author suggests that the peasantry developed a rather strong political consciousness, of which the Peasant Union movement was one of the most vivid manifestations (159). In Velikanova's interpretation, the willingness to establish peasant organizations stemmed from the dissatisfaction with Soviet policies in villages and the generally skeptical, if not hostile, Bolshevik attitudes towards peasantry. Analyzing the demands expressed by the peasantry or on its behalf, the author distinguishes several goals of the Peasant Union of 1926-1927: changing the ratio between agricultural and industrial goods, decreasing the agricultural tax, organizing the Peasant Union based on the model of trade unions, furthering peasants' political demands, etc. (144-145). While Velikanova convincingly demonstrates how and why the peasantry articulated these demands, nevertheless, the impact and scale of the Peasant Union movement remain unclear. Eventually, the main source for its analysis are OGPU documents, which usually tend to overstate anti-Soviet pronouncements and create unified "enemies" of Soviet power out of separate, often unrelated manifestations. The examples of peasant movements which Olga Velikanova provides in her book



do not unequivocally resolve the issue, since they were mostly regional organizations which operated on a limited scale. Similarly, the question of the leadership in the Peasant Union movement cannot be answered unambiguously. Was it a case of mobilization “from below”, as Velikanova suggests? Or were there involved other actors, such as students, teachers, other members of the intelligentsia, who are also featured in the narrative of the organization of the Peasant Union movement?

Overall, Olga Velikanova concludes that the Soviet mobilization campaigns of the 1920s failed to unite society around the new socialist values. “The voices from below illustrate a lack of *Soviet identity* among the population” (191). Indeed, these conclusions logically come out from Velikanova’s analysis. At the same time, the author notes that there were a variety of popular opinions on Soviet politics, ranging from enthusiastic support, passive compliance to indifference, opposition, and hostility (189). In the book she mostly prefers to cover in more detail the “negative” popular perceptions of Soviet policies. This focus helps Velikanova to suggest some of her most interesting arguments. Yet, a detailed analysis of the “positive” opinions could also have opened in the study other promising directions.

Olga Velikanova’s book is an interesting study with thought-provoking arguments, which also brings to the reader’s attention some previously unknown sides of the history of Soviet politics and society. Velikanova’s research is a solid contribution to the promising, yet methodologically challenging, field of Soviet popular opinion studies. It provides new insights into popular reactions to the Soviet project and suggests certain unorthodox explanations of the evolution of Soviet policies.

Alexandr Voronovici