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0521313988 - The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization,

1917-1929 - Peter Kenez

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Introduction: The Soviet concept of propaganda

This book is about the development of Bolshevik propaganda. The subject is an important one, because propaganda played a large role in the 1917 victory of the Communists and an even greater part in their ability to retain power during the extremely difficult years of the 1917–1921 Civil War. In the course of the relatively peaceful 1920s, the revolutionary leadership attempted to transform man and society through mass indoctrination.

The subject also deserves careful study because the institutions of mass mobilization became integral parts of the Soviet system. As we examine how the Leninists saw their task of bringing their message to the workers and peasants and how they built their institutions of indoctrination, we gain essential insights into the Russian form of Marxism.

Furthermore, the Soviet Communists were pathbreakers; they introduced a new approach to politics. In the course of the twentieth century, revolutionaries in various parts of the world often found themselves in a situation similar to that of the Bolsheviks in the early part of their rule. Their solutions to problems frequently mirrored Bolshevik solutions. This was not so much because of any conscious copying, though that also happened, but because circumstances dictated essentially similar approaches. The Bolshevik leadership in the Civil War period and in the 1920s was made up of intelligent and articulate people. It is of enduring interest how they defined their problems and how they arrived at their solutions.

The development of Soviet propaganda is an elusive and difficult subject. The greatest problem is that while we all think we know perfectly well what propaganda is, in fact we have no precise definition that would be value free and valid regardless of time or political culture. Social scientists, no doubt unwittingly, have often defined propaganda in such a way as to make their definition into an ideological weapon. They have searched for a definition that covers only the activities of people whose point of view they do not like. Some have insisted that propaganda is something covert; others

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have stressed that propaganda appeals to our emotions rather than to our intellect. At a moment's reflection, however, it is evident that such definitions have nothing to do with the real world, where propaganda is covert on some occasions but overt on others; sometimes propaganda is aimed at our emotions, sometimes at our minds.

The problem is further compounded by the fact that, given the common understanding of "propaganda," the word has become a pejorative term in Western societies. It was not always so. Pope Gregory XV in 1622 set up a College of Cardinals and entrusted this college with the task of overseeing foreign missions for the spread of faith. The new institution was called *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, Congregation for the Propagation of Faith. The church assumed that it had the one and only correct interpretation of faith, of man's place in nature and in history, and therefore regarded the attempt of bringing its doctrine to others as wholly benign. The concept may have been new in the seventeenth century; the phenomenon obviously was not. Ever since people have lived in politically organized societies, some have attempted to influence the mind, and therefore the behavior, of others. In modern Western history, propaganda became a pejorative term only when man accepted as inevitable that human beings would disagree as to the proper organization of society. Under these circumstances, we suspect that our enemies achieve their successes by underhanded methods of persuasion, that is, by propaganda.

An unqualified hostility to propaganda, nevertheless, is not warranted. When we deplore the very existence of this phenomenon, we in effect reject mass society; it is evident that one could not exist without the other. How propaganda is an integral part of the modern world is a large and complex subject that cannot be discussed here. This book, however, illustrates the part played by the manipulation of opinion in one modern polity, the Soviet Union.

Viewing propaganda as the locus of illness in the modern world, the enemies of mass society (whether on the right, like Jacques Ellul,¹ or on the left, like Herbert Marcuse²) make it the focus of their attack. But such views must be rejected, for neither Ellul's aristocratic utopia, posited in the past, nor Marcuse's vague description of an ideal society is a realistic vision of the future. Both thinkers found the political opinions and tastes of the common people appalling and believed that the people lost their way because they had been manipulated by others. The elitism in the writings of both Marcuse and Ellul is barely hidden. Ironically, exactly the same elitism characterizes the attitudes of the successful political propagandist: an unwillingness to believe that people want what they profess to want.

Clearly, propaganda often means telling less than the truth, misleading people, and lying; therefore, a study of Soviet use of this political instrument must reveal some unattractive features of that system. The very decision to undertake a description of Bolshevik methods of indoctrination might seem to some an ideologically motivated enterprise. Yet the goal of

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this book is most certainly not to “unmask” Russian Communism. Although Bolshevik methods and attitudes were original, the Leninists were by no means alone in attempting to influence the minds and behavior of their own people. We form our opinion of the Bolshevik system on the basis of considerations other than the character of its indoctrination methods. It would be difficult to argue that the Bolsheviks’ most reprehensible act was to attempt to bring their ideas to the people.

The greatest problem in attempting a study of propaganda is that the phenomenon does not exist by itself. An abstract discussion of the topic would be no more enlightening than an abstract discussion of altruism, courage, or love. If one defines the subject narrowly and limits the discussion to the use of the media and to explicitly agitational institutions (e.g., the agitational trains during the Civil War), one misses the broader Soviet flavor of propaganda. Also, by discussing methods of manipulation in isolation from policies, one—perhaps inadvertently—creates the impression that Soviet politicians were cynical. In too broad a definition, by contrast, the history of propaganda becomes synonymous with the history of the Soviet state.

To draw a line between a legitimate act of government and a propaganda gesture, between content and form, is often difficult; for example, to win the Civil War, the Soviet leaders introduced policies aimed at attracting support. Lenin’s famous decree on land was, among other things, a propaganda instrument, and revolutionary activists spared no effort to acquaint the peasantry with it. Yet a discussion of Bolshevik land policies obviously cannot be a part of a study of Soviet propaganda.

It is even harder to separate the inherent appeal of policies and the accomplishments of successful agitators. Soviet historians get themselves into a curious paradox when they discuss this issue. On the one hand, they stress that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were superb organizers and propagandists; on the other, they imply that such advantages did not matter. The Russian people supported the Bolsheviks in the Civil War because only the Bolsheviks stood for their interests. If we accept the interpretation of these historians, we must also accept that organizational strength and propaganda skills played no role at all in the outcome. A more convincing interpretation of Bolshevik victory is that the Reds won for a combination of reasons: They were in a position to introduce policies preferred by at least a majority of Russians; they had the perspicacity to see when and where to offer concessions to the popular will; and at the same time they possessed the organizational strength and skill to bring their message to a wide audience. No one can say exactly what the relative role of each of these factors was.

But it was not only the inherent appeal of Bolshevik policies combined with the undoubted skill of the propagandists that produced the desired results. The nature of the political system built by the Bolsheviks clearly made a major contribution. It was easy, for instance, for Soviet newspapers to argue a particular point of view, when the coercive arm of the regime

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had eliminated all the newspapers that might have presented opposing arguments or facts tending to undermine the Bolshevick case. In this study, I will attempt to examine the matter in its political and social context.

Instead of focusing narrowly on propaganda, and trying to establish what it was and what it was not, I will describe the history of those Soviet institutions that have been engaged in the struggle to transform people's opinions and attitudes. By studying the workings of the press, the development of the movie and publishing industries, and so forth, we will be able to form a picture of Bolshevick accomplishments in mass mobilization.

To discuss the matter sensibly, we must abandon the hope of finding a definition of propaganda that would be precise, cover all acts of propaganda and only propaganda, and be usable regardless of time and space. Instead, we must accept the broadest possible definition: Propaganda is nothing more than the attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and thereby behavior. The intent of influencing others is hardly objectionable. When we think we disapprove of propaganda, it usually turns out that we really object to its goals or methods. These methods are frequently repugnant. They include manipulating and distorting information, lying, and preventing others from finding out the truth. We should deplore dishonesty and cheating—though we must be aware that often there are extenuating circumstances—but to rail against propaganda is useless, for it is an integral part of the modern world.

With regard to the Soviet Union, it is not very enlightening to prove that the Bolsheviks carried out propaganda. Of course they did. The task is to analyze the distinctive features of their propaganda and to establish how it fit into the political system.

Soviet publicists are correct when they stress that the October Revolution created a radically new type of political organization: the revolutionary state. In the heady days after their victory, Lenin and his comrades faced problems that were novel; they pursued uniquely ambitious goals; and they built their institutions on untried principles.

One of the unusual elements was the attitude of the leaders of young Soviet Russia toward indoctrination. The Soviet state was more permeated with propaganda than any other. Though such matters, admittedly, cannot easily be measured, it is indisputable that the Bolshevick regime was the first to not merely set itself propaganda goals but also through political education to aim to create a new humanity suitable for living in a new society. No previous state had similar ambitions, and no leaders had paid comparable attention to the issues of persuasion.

Soviet institutions, and to a considerable extent the mentality of leaders who created those institutions, were formed during the difficult days of the Civil War. It is conceded by friend and foe that at least in part the Reds emerged victorious from the life-and-death struggle because they were better than their opponents in getting their message across to the people. The

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propaganda organization, the system of indoctrination introduced at the time of the Civil War, became the basis of a much larger and more elaborate indoctrination network to be built later.

The skill of the Bolsheviks relative to their Civil War enemies is the subject of the first part of this book. It is, however, necessary at this point to pose the question: Why were they more skillful? A simple, though not very enlightening, response would be that they were better propagandists because they were better politicians; they understood the needs of the moment, the nature of the struggle in which they were engaged, and the crucial significance of getting the support or at least the good will of the uncommitted. But why was the Bolshevik side blessed with more able leaders? The Reds were fortunate in that their past prepared them better for the tasks they had to face. A person who spends years in underground struggle, or even in foreign exile editing a small newspaper, will develop a better understanding of the need to get public support than will a general who spends his working hours giving commands. In this respect, the difference in background between the revolutionary and the counterrevolutionary leaderships was extreme. The Bolsheviks were lucky; their enemies were extremely ill-prepared.

The revolutionaries brought with themselves not merely lessons of underground struggle but also some ideological baggage, which in this case turned out to be extremely useful. First of all, they were Marxists. As Marxists, they assumed the perfectibility of man and the possibility of building a just and rational society. Their ideological commitments impelled them to attempt to appeal to the poor and to the hitherto disenfranchised. A Marxist movement was unthinkable before the era of mass politics, before the development of modern means of communications – that is, before the time of modern propaganda.

The socialists believed that in Marxism they possessed an instrument that allowed them to analyze the process of history. They and they alone had access to “true knowledge.” The task of the revolutionaries, therefore, was not to search for knowledge, for that was already achieved. Their duty was instead to bring the fruits of Marxist analysis to the proletariat. This aspect of the Marxist heritage is the most crucial one for understanding the Bolsheviks’ attitude toward propaganda.

The Bolsheviks were not only Marxists but also Leninists. As is well known, Lenin’s most fundamental revision of Marxist thought was the rejection of the notion that the workers in the process of class struggle would develop the necessary class consciousness to bring about the revolution. As Lenin put it in a famous paragraph in *What Is to Be Done?*,

We have said that there *could not have been* a Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, that is, the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions to fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to

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pass the necessary labor legislation, and so forth. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophical, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals.³

From a theoretical, Marxist point of view, Lenin's observation seems questionable. If Lenin was correct, then how can we explain the emergence of class consciousness among intellectuals? What kind of materialist explanation would help to clarify why some intellectuals choose "bourgeois" ideologies whereas others side with the proletariat? If we agree with Lenin that class consciousness comes from "knowledge" rather than from "experience," we have repudiated a fundamental tenet of Marxism and have retreated to Hegel. From a practical point of view, though, Lenin's insight was most valuable; in the given circumstances it was true, and facing reality was a precondition for success.

Lenin's revision of Marxism had far-reaching implications for the development of Bolshevik propaganda. He believed that the workers were to be led, because they were incapable of understanding their own interests unaided. Although he was ambivalent toward the Russian intelligentsia, he assigned important tasks to at least a segment of it. In *What Is to Be Done?*,⁴ he approvingly quoted Kautsky, who wrote: "Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge"—something which only the intelligentsia is likely to possess. In the Leninist conception, the revolutionary intellectuals were above all propagandists, who brought the fruits of their knowledge to the workers.

The instrument used by the revolutionaries to approach and lead the masses was the vanguard Party, Lenin's unquestionably greatest contribution to the theory and practice of revolution making. This was clearly meant to be a manipulative organization, as it aimed to do more than to express the outrage of the oppressed and give form to the already-existing revolutionary spirit. The Party was to lead the proletariat to a successful revolution on the basis of its superior understanding of the process of history.

Lenin at times was wrongly accused of being a follower of the nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary Tkachev. Such an accusation, however, was unfair, for Lenin, unlike his predecessor, did not believe that the elite would actually bring about the revolution. In Lenin's view, the Party alone could not fight a successful battle. The task of the Party was to make the proletariat see its own best interest. Had the Bolsheviks truly followed Tkachev's ideas, they would have had little interest in propaganda.

It is evident that Bolshevik thinking hid a great deal of condescension toward the Russian people in general and toward the proletariat in particular. Lenin and his fellow revolutionaries in this respect were no different from the majority of the Russian intellectuals, who saw little that was valuable in the indigenous culture of the Russian people.

The major elements in the Bolshevik ideological heritage were a clear

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understanding of the important role of ideas in history and a belief that some people knew better than others; therefore, it was unwise to allow people to look after their own interests. These two notions together created a very good attitude for a successful propagandist. Probably all good propagandists must look down at least to some extent on their audience. But in the Bolshevik case, the condescension was extreme. It was evident in all propaganda activities, in the style of Soviet newspapers, in the organization of various campaigns, and in the meticulous care with which exact instructions leaving nothing to local initiative or spontaneity were sent out from the center to the localities. The condescension of the Bolshevik elite toward the Russian people is a major theme of this book.⁵

The Bolsheviks, like most other revolutionaries working against the tsarist regime, were above all propagandists. Under the circumstances, it was natural that they devoted some attention to the organizational, technical aspect of their major activity. They did not have many original insights. Lenin often pointed out that an underground worker must address the proletarians and peasants in a simple language, but this observation was only common sense. Bolshevik thought and practice on the subject did not differ from those of other socialists at the time. For instance, the distinction between agitation and propaganda, an idea that Lenin and later the Soviet publicists made their own, came first from G. Plekhanov, the great Russian Marxist thinker and activist.

Plekhanov wrote: "A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; the agitator presents only one or a few ideas, but he presents them to a mass of people." In *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin illustrated Plekhanov's distinction this way:

The propagandist dealing with, say, the question of unemployment, must explain the capitalist nature of the crisis, the causes of their inevitability in modern society, the necessity for the transformation of this society into a socialist society, etc. In a word he must present "many ideas," so many, indeed, that they will be understood only by a (comparatively) few persons. The agitator, however, speaking on the same subject, will take as an illustration a fact that is most glaring and most widely known to his audience, say the death of an unemployed worker's family from starvation, the growing impoverishment, etc., and utilizing this fact, known to all, will direct his efforts to presenting a *single idea* to the masses, e.g., the senselessness of the contradiction between the increase of wealth and the increase of poverty; he will strive to rouse discontent and indignation among the masses against this crying injustice, leaving a more complete explanation of this contradiction to the propagandist. Consequently, the propagandist operates chiefly by means of the *printed* word; the agitator by means of the *spoken* word.⁶

This paragraph expresses a great deal about Bolshevik attitudes toward propaganda. Lenin assumed that the workers would not understand "complex" explanations of the nature of the capitalist system, and therefore socialist propaganda had to operate on several different planes. Appeals to emotions and demagoguery were acceptable weapons in the arsenal of the

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agitator. At the same time, there was no question of presenting an altogether false picture; the revolutionary agitator was not trained to be a liar.

The distinction between agitation and propaganda is not a helpful one. One suspects that it became part of Soviet parlance only because of Lenin's endorsement of Plekhanov. The Soviet propaganda system has existed on many different planes, from the highly sophisticated Marxist Academy to the sloganeering of wall papers. Such distinctions, however, cannot be meaningfully reduced to a dichotomy. Who was carrying out propaganda and who agitated and on which occasion cannot be established; even if they could be, they would throw little light on the activity. In this study, I will use the terms propaganda and agitation interchangeably.

Aside from Plekhanov's distinction, the Russian socialists have contributed nothing to a theoretical discussion of the techniques of mass persuasion. There was no Bolshevik Goebbels, no Soviet theorist fascinated by the activity itself. As this study will show, Bolshevik successes followed from organizational strength, from dogged attention to problems, and, perhaps most importantly, from an ability of the political system to isolate the Russian people from information and ideas that would have undermined the message. The Bolsheviks never looked for and did not find devilishly clever methods to influence people's minds, to brainwash them.

That the Bolsheviks were not interested in the techniques of mass persuasion followed from their notion of propaganda. They thought of propaganda as part of education. It is noteworthy that in 1920 the supervision of much of this work was entrusted to a body, *Glavpolitprosvet*, that was a department within the Commissariat of Education. Indeed, a synonym for propaganda in early Bolshevik parlance was "political education work" or, according to the contemporary abbreviation, *politprosvetrabota*.

In the view of the Bolshevik leaders, specifically in Lenin's opinion, the Russian people were distressingly backward. This backwardness, rather than the actual political strength of the enemy, was the greatest obstacle to building socialism. The remedy was evident: The people needed to be educated. After 1917, the ever-practical Lenin chose culture and education as major themes of his writings. He wanted the Russians to learn to read and write, he wanted them to enjoy the benefits of Western civilization, and he wanted them to "learn" socialism. Teaching people the fundamentals of knowledge and spreading the Bolshevik message were inseparable in Bolshevik opinion.

The title of this book is *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929*. In what sense can we describe the Soviet Union during the first decade of its existence as a "propaganda state"? And, describing it as such, do we imply that the society was totalitarian? The Soviet Union was a propaganda state because of the extraordinarily significant role played by indoctrination in forming the state and in executing policy. At the time, the Bolsheviks employed such phrases as, "Bring

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enlightenment to the masses,” “Create the new socialist man,” and “Instill class consciousness among the workers and peasants.” To achieve their goals, the new leaders spared neither time nor effort in building an impressive and elaborate indoctrination machinery.

No other political elite before 1917 ever had such an approach. Even in our own times, only communist governments have been fully successful in following the Soviet example. The French revolutionaries at the end of the eighteenth century also thought that they were at the dawn of a new era, and they too hoped to bring enlightenment to their fellow citizens. They appreciated the significance of ideas, and they did not shrink from repression. They did not believe, however, that they possessed a theory that would be able to interpret history and all facets of human behavior. They thought that the mere removal of “unnatural” obstacles would be sufficient to fully develop human potential.

The Japanese modernizers in the late nineteenth century, like many other political elites in our own century, understood that the creation of modernity called not only for the construction of factories and the building of railroads but also for the creation of an extensive education system to instill new values. They therefore encouraged the spread of literacy and attempted to shape the educational system to their own purposes. However, the efforts of these modernizers to change the mentality of the people pale in significance by comparison with those of the Soviet leadership.

As in so much else, the First World War was a turning point in the history of propaganda. The war imposed extraordinary hardships on the belligerents. It was a war in which the solidity of the home front was crucial. All the participating countries, with varying degrees of intensity and success, experimented in the difficult new art of mass mobilization. The democratic countries of the West had an edge. By common consent, they were more successful than the autocracies: They had a larger store of experience in appealing to the common people, and they possessed better instruments for reaching an audience. Adolf Hitler was most impressed. He came to be obsessed by the importance of propaganda, and he always regarded the performance of the Allies, especially the British, as a model to be followed.

The goals and themes of war propaganda were utterly predictable: The propaganda aimed at (1) arousing hatred against the enemy, (2) preserving the friendship of allies, (3) winning the good will and cooperation of neutrals, and (4) demoralizing the enemy.⁷ To achieve these concrete and always limited goals, the propagandists, to put it mildly, did not hesitate to wash away the distinction between truth and falsehood. For example, the British press provided pictorial “evidence” of enemy atrocities by reprinting photos of the victims of 1905 tsarist pogroms, and they invented stories about the Germans using their own corpses to make soap.⁸ (This grisly invention was an uncanny precognition of the not-too-distant future when the Germans in fact would make soap out of human bodies.) Such petty but

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nonetheless effective deception dominated the propaganda of all belligerent nations. The future leaders of the Soviet state were, of course, well acquainted with wartime propaganda. To them, the success of such efforts seemed to be yet another example of the ability of the bourgeoisie to mislead the working classes.

Bolshevik attitudes toward propaganda differed not only from that of the liberal and democratic governments but also from that of the Fascists. The followers of Hitler and Mussolini, of course, well appreciated the significance of mobilizing the masses. Goebbels, among others, wrote lovingly about mass persuasion. Fascist propagandists were contemptuous of the common people and believed that the views of the public could easily be manipulated. It did not disturb them at all to lie. They thought that covert propaganda was likely to be more effective. Indeed, unlike the Bolsheviks, the Fascists never advertised their activities. It cannot be disputed that Goebbels and his colleagues employed extremely powerful techniques of mass mobilization. Posters, torchlight parades, and mass rallies were essential aspects of German and Italian life in the 1930s. Indeed, one cannot even talk about Fascism without alluding to modern methods of mass persuasion. It is also true that there were numerous superficial and significant similarities between Communist and Fascist propaganda. Some of the similarities were due to Fascist imitation of successful Communist techniques, but most of them followed from the fact that Fascists and Communists faced similar problems and operated in political environments that had much in common. Neither hesitated to repress.

In spite of these similarities, however, Fascist and Bolshevik propaganda remained fundamentally different. The source of that difference was that the Germans and Italians, unlike the Bolsheviks, possessed no all-encompassing ideology. Indeed, fascism was an intellectual void. There was no set of doctrines to be applied to all aspects of human experience—no set of doctrines with a pretense of predictive power that could be presented to intellectuals as a self-contained whole. The Fascists were far less ambitious than their Bolshevik competitors; they lacked the passionate desire to educate. They could not have wanted to foist on others an entire world view, for they scarcely had one themselves beyond the nebulous vision of a “thousand-year Reich.”

Among all organizations, it was the Catholic Church with which the Bolsheviks had most in common in matters of propaganda. Like the Catholics, the Bolsheviks saw nothing shameful about attempting to change the people's mind. On the contrary, they considered bringing their message to the people a necessary and noble task of every Party activist. Indeed, how could it be otherwise, since the revolutionaries believed that they knew what the future of mankind would be and also the fastest and best way to that utopia? It is striking that only Communists and Catholics have proclaimed proudly that they were propagandizing.

There are also important differences between Communists and Catholics.