

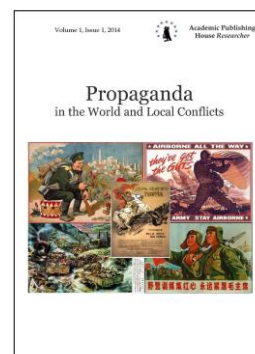
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The Influence of the Legal Press on National-Cultural Life in Chernihivshchyna during the Period of German Occupation (1941–1943)

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Abstract

This paper addresses the effect of the legal press on the national-cultural life of Chernihivshchyna during the period of German occupation (1941–1943), as well as its significance for the local population in tough wartime conditions. The author researched the major newspapers that shaped public opinion in the region at the time. In researching the press, the author identified some of the key areas linked to deploying a new ideology – and, as a consequence, a new worldview – in society (e.g., anti-Semitic agitation, all-out criticism of the Soviet system, touting the delights of living in Germany, stimulating relocation to Germany for work, etc.). To this day, there remains open the issue of the locals' real attitude toward the occupiers, as well as the reasons behind the local population's active collaboration with the Germans. For the most part, this was associated with some of the locals having had a problem with the law during the pre-war period, some having fallen victim to Stalin's repressions, some having been variously oppressed by Soviet power, some just trying to survive in tough wartime conditions, etc. It is also important to note that a nascent hope was kindled among the locals that with support from the German leadership it would be possible to have an independent Ukraine. Up until a certain point, the Fascists were tolerant of the unfolding Ukrainization process in the occupied areas (e.g., use of the Ukrainian language in the media and in the cultural-enlightenment sector; coverage of nationalist ideas and slogans; establishment of clubs, theaters, and schools; preferential treatment in employment based on ethnicity).

Thus, the activity of a major portion of Ukrainian newspapers during the occupation period was of a propagandist nature. The most welcome topics to hear about included news about events at the front, victories won by German troops, support for the ideas of Fascism, and agitation for cultural-artistic and awareness-raising activity, which, where done properly, was instrumental in heightening the Ukrainians' sense of national consciousness. This type of source has proven to help gain a deeper insight into the prevailing sentiment of society and explain the locals' attitude toward the "new order".

Keywords: newspaper, authority, occupation, regime, mass media

1. Introduction

At present, a fair amount of attention is devoted to exploring the occupation period's mass media, a historical source that can provide a deeper insight into the events, social phenomena, and

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people of the tough period of 1941–1943. There is a wide pool of publications of a local and regional nature on the subject that remain to be researched.

Relatively recently, in 2007, the pool of research on the subject was supplemented by a historical-bibliographical study by K.M. Kurilishin entitled ‘The Ukrainian Legal Press during the Period of German Occupation (1939–1944)’. The work investigates the period’s Ukrainian legal press as an integral and independent phenomenon in the occupied areas – General Governorate, Zakarpattia, Reichskommissariat Ukraine, and Transnistria (Kurilishin, 2007). A list of newspapers is provided in an article by B.I. Chernyakov, ‘The Periodical Press in Occupied Ukraine’, without dwelling in detail on any specific periodical (Chernyakov, 2005). G.E. Grechenko provides information on certain occupation-period newspapers in his work ‘Chernihivshchyna in the Pages of the Occupation-Period Newspapers’ (Grechenko, 1999). V.M. Negoda has singled out from The Ukrainian Polesye 12 major sections containing some of the more interesting materials on the period’s life in Chernihiv Oblast (Negoda, 2012).

Much of the print material in the archives of Chernihiv has been preserved to our day, containing quite a large number of articles related to the subject under examination. The media’s effect on the people’s consciousness and actions in any period is beyond question. It, therefore, makes sense to continue researching this particular type of source when it comes to exploring a certain period in history. The pages of the occupation-period press provide information with regard to various events that took place around the world at the time, manifestations of xenophobia against Jews and Roma, sharp criticism of Soviet power and its cultural-enlightenment and economic policies, and other awareness-raising topics.

2. Materials and methods

Most of the material on the subject was derived from the following occupation-period newspapers: The Ostershchyna News (regional news), The Pryluky News (urban and rural news), The Ukrainian Polesye (provincial news), which in February of 1942 was renamed into The Chernihiv Courier, The Nizhyn News, The New Path, The New Snovsk Newspaper, The Novgorod-Sivershchyna Ukrainian News, and The Voice of Novgorod-Sivershchyna. Worthy of particular attention are The Ukrainian Polesye, The Ostershchyna News, The Pryluky News, and The Nizhyn News, which, apart from covering news from the front lines and from around the world, devoted a significant amount of attention to the popularization of Ukrainian culture. Of major importance is the way living in Germany was covered in the ‘Letters from Germany’ section, which told the reader about how comfortable it was to live in Germany, how clean German streets and how great German roads were, how beautiful houses were in German cities and villages alike, etc. For example, here is an excerpt from a letter published in The Pryluky News: “We didn’t have to be told or pointed to the fact that we were entering an area run by the Reich – it is a thrilling experience for anyone visiting Germany for the first time. There is a huge difference between Ukraine and this country! Each of their villages looks like a town, with their neat little houses all arranged in a smooth manner, as if spaced out along a cord – not like ours, always scattered around without order. They have lots of flowers on their windows and by the roadside. What I have always found particularly awesome about this land is how clean everywhere is ...” (‘Visti Priluchchini’, 1943. № 19. P. 1). It is hard to tell how many people exactly relocated to Germany in hopes of a better life during that time after having read about it in the papers – what is for sure is that there were many. For comparison or for another reason, the local papers spoke about the boorishness of the locals, their lack of safety arrangements in daily life, etc., which was attributed to their Soviet upbringing.

Materials from the press can help get an idea of the state of affairs in the period’s education sector. The fall of 1941 witnessed the implementation of school reform, with secondary and incomplete secondary schools closing down and elementary four-grade schools and educational institutions focused on turning out graduates for blue-collar jobs opening up. There was a particular focus on putting in place courses for turning out agronomists and courses of the German language. There were in operation a number of institutions of higher learning. The period’s newspapers devoted a large amount of attention to the activity of Prosveshchenie [‘enlightenment’], a non-governmental organization with a cultural-enlightenment focus. The Pryluky News carried an article entitled ‘A Revival of National Culture’, devoted to its establishment: “<...> Today, when the doors are wide open for us to engage in productive labor, all

of the general public, with assistance from the district's Council of Prefects and the Department of Education, must set out, as soon as possible, to organize in each district and village the work of the Ukrainian society Prosveshchenie. The purpose of this organization is to help meet the spiritual needs of the Ukrainian people and unite the masses to combat ignorance and boorishness. The rural branches of Prosveshchenie must identify and bring together talented people, and put the time and effort into creating the national chorus, orchestra, and theater. In turn, the district organization of Prosveshchenie, which has at its disposal better cultural means, can assist the rural branches in organizing lectures on general educational and professional topics. Ideally, it should be ensured that all this work gets as much visibility as possible. In addition, there is a need to organize mobile sound cinema and arrange tours by the Ukrainian city theater so that country folk can enjoy top acting. We are convinced that, as the hearth of the spiritual culture of the Ukrainian people, Prosveshchenie will find a broad response among the majority of residents in our district" (*«Visti Priluchchini»*, 1941. № 11. P. 1).

In working with the period's newspapers, the author primarily employed analysis and synthesis, with use also made of content analysis – to trace key trends in the emergence of particular thematic articles.

The author's analysis of the legal press helped identify the following essential tenets promoted in the period's newspapers: applauding the present and condemning the former leadership, anti-Semitism, and Ukrainization. Consequently, not all newspapers of the period continued operation after the German occupiers had been ousted. Nonetheless, there are quite a large number of copies that have survived to this day, which can provide an informative window into the period's events.

3. Discussion and results

Anyone looking through the pages of the period's newspapers will notice the active use of the Ukrainian language, which may have been a key factor behind the locals' desire to use this particular mass medium. In addition to the above-mentioned areas of propaganda, the period's newspapers were also instrumental in drawing the people's attention back to religion, theater and cinema, and Ukrainian literature, which helped cultivate in the locals an accepting attitude toward the new leadership. The following excerpt from an article entitled 'Down with Bolshevism', published in *The Ukrainian Polesye*, serves to illustrate the criticism of Soviet power: "<...> This pathetic Marx–Lenin–Stalin doctrine has sought to assault both the body and spirit of our nation. Russian Bolshevism, in association with the Jews, have been feeding to us all kinds of high-sounding slogans about "a happy, well-off life under the sun of the Stalin constitution", declaiming to the world that they stand for peace and harmony in the world. Bolshevism has always been portrayed as if it were a single, direct protector of people. Yet, they have never told us what they have done with the billions earned with the rough hands, sweat, and blood of our workers and peasants and at the expense and deprivation of the intelligentsia" (*«Ukrains'ke Polissya»*, 1942. № 3. P. 1). To draw the attention of the peasantry, a large amount of consideration was given to the subject of the Holodomor, including the causes and effects thereof. Considering that most of the peasantry did not have access to quality primary education and could only base their judgment on what the media told them, bringing the subject up had given rise to questions and doubts regarding Soviet power among many of them.

The occupation leadership had a well-thought-out tactic to draw the locals' attention to its programs. For instance, an article entitled 'In the Town Square' covers an event that is based on an action scenario designed to facilitate the desired result: "<...> At 11 a.m., the bullhorns started to summon residents to the town square, which was decorated with national German flags. By the local commandant's office, a loudspeaker system had been set up on a vehicle to replay music at a designated time. They replayed various German songs and marches, and some time later, via the same loudspeaker, they read out the text of Adolf Hitler's new agricultural law, with consecutive translation into Ukrainian provided. The locals gathered at the commandant's office were handed out postcards and portraits of their liberator Adolf Hitler, brochures entitled 'Ukraine in Jewish Claws', and other materials to take home" (*«Visti Priluchchini»*, 1942. № 37. P. 1). The article notes the presence at the event of a large crowd of residents, who appear to have enjoyed it. Covering the event in the paper was aimed at reinforcing the locals' awareness of the German

leadership's "solicitude" for their well-being. The newspaper sought to have an additional effect on the locals to inspire them with a belief in their victory.

A special place in the period's newspapers was occupied by articles devoted to the region's cultural life. For instance, The Nizhyn News carried a story about the birth of the Kropivnitsky Ukrainian National Drama Theater and its repertoire: "<...> The Nizhyn City Theater went into operation on October 26, 1941 with a comedy entitled 'Ostalis' v Durakakh' ['the duped']. Over the period the theater has been in existence, it has staged plays such as 'Natalka Poltavka' ['Natalka from Poltava'], 'Zaporozhets za Dunaem' ['a Zaporozhian beyond the Danube'], 'Naimichka' ['a hired girl'], 'Bestalannaya' ['a hapless maiden'], and other classic Ukrainian plays". D. Stepnoi, the article's author, goes on to give a critical assessment of the actors' performance and point out the flaws. The article concludes with the following: "<...> The repertoire should include plays by Western European playwrights, but not potboilers like the insipid 'Synochek' ['sonny']. In the future, our theater must break out of the narrow bounds of ethnographism and depiction of everyday life (with its kielbasa and liqueur glasses) and embark on a broad path of realism and historicism, with a focus on the heroic past of the Ukrainian people" ([«Nizhins'ki Visti», 1942. № 4. P. 2](#)).

Later issues published the theater's repertoire and the names of the main actors. For instance, on January 6, 1943 The Nizhyn News displayed the following information under the headline 'The Ukrainian Drama Theater': "January 6 – 'Voskresenie' ['Sunday']; January 7 – Concert; January 8 – Concert of the Kharkov Troupe; January 9 – 'Za Dvumya Zaitsami' ['after the two hares']; January 10 – 'Svatan'e na Goncharovke' ['matchmaking in Goncharovka']. Beginning 4:30 p.m." ([«Nizhins'ki Visti», 1943. № 2. P. 4](#)).

An indispensable element in the residents' cultural life was cinema. The Nizhyn News reported about the plans to show a number of newly released movies, like 'Veselye Brodyagi' ['happy vagabonds'] and 'Malye Devushki – Bol'shie Khlopoty' ['petit ladies – major nuisances']. ([«Nizhins'ki Visti», 1942. № 4. P. 1](#)). It was not without criticism of Soviet culture and its tastes, of course. For instance, an article entitled 'Bring on New Movies' stated: "<...> The whole time, Bolshevik filmmakers produced "politically consistent" movies, intended to educate the viewer in a Communist spirit. All the viewer was shown was the country's "successes" and "achievements". He was shown bountiful crops in the fields – yet, he had no bread at home; he was shown large department stores – yet, there was nothing to buy; he was shown luxurious resorts – yet, he had never been there; he was shown abundant fish catches – yet, he had forgotten what fish tastes like. He was continually reminded of the watchful eyes of the NKVD, always engaged in the fight against "enemies of the people", who were everywhere. <...> Our viewers have already seen a number of foreign films. What may strike them is the absence of political lies in them. The movies are based on daily life in the West; they are full of good humor, easy to watch, and relaxing" ([«Nizhins'ki Visti», 1942. № 7. P. 2](#)). The use of theater and cinema, the two essential strands in the propaganda aimed at promoting Ukrainian culture and Western lifestyles, helped reshape the locals' attitude toward the relatively new leadership.

Another major area of focus for the newspapers was Ukrainian folklore, which was gradually fading into oblivion under Soviet power. For instance, an article entitled 'Collecting Folklore' stated: "As the unwritten lore of the people, folklore is rightfully seen as a mirror of social-political life in a given era. <...> To the endless robbing of the Ukrainian peasantry, committed at the behest of Moscow, the people have responded: "Give us bread, give us salo". To which they have only heard: "There isn't much to give". Much of the caustic writing is aimed at the collectivization process. For instance:

Ukrainian	English translation
"<...> V Berezivtsi doshch ide, V Yaroshivtsi sliz'ko – Ne khodit' v kolgosp, Bo viselitsya bliz'ko"	"<...> It's raining in Berezovka, It's slippery in Yaroshovka – Don't go to the kolkhoz, Lest you be hanged soon".

Another major subject covered in the period's folklore was the tragic events of the Holodomor:

Ukrainian	English translation
“<...> Sedit' baba na ryadni I rakhue trudodni – Nema korovi, nema svini, Odin Stalin na stini”.	“<...> There’s a woman sitting on her bed- cover She’s counting her workdays – She’s got neither a cow, nor a pig, Just a portrait of Stalin on the wall”.

The article notes that kolkhozes had more layabouts in them than hard-workers:

Ukrainian	English translation
“<..V kolkhoze khorosho zhit', – Odin rabotaet – sem' lezhit”.	“<..It’s so nice working in the kolkhoz, – With one guy working – and seven guys lying down”.

Attention was inescapably drawn to the moral decay in society as well:

Ukrainian	English translation
“<...> Na to volya dana vsem, chtob zhenilis' raz po sem”.	«<...> Being married seven times, is what liberty is all about”.

Some of the period’s “Soviet citizens” were capable of making a rather bold joke, too:

Ukrainian	English translation
“<...> Blagodarim ottsa – gruzina, za to chto obul nas v rezinu”.	“<...> Let’s thank our father, the Georgian guy, for shoeing us in rubber”.

At the end of the article, the author speaks of the need to gather folklore as something of great literary and historical value. The author calls folklore the pearl of the Ukrainian soul, and suggests engaging the intelligentsia and teachers in the process of gathering folklore material («Nizhins'ki Visti», 1942. № 6. P. 3).

The period’s legal press sought to extol the new leadership and discredit the former one. It did not cover the occupiers’ atrocities. For instance, the newspapers provided zero coverage of the mass murder of Jews in Pryluky in May of 1942. Considering that most of the locals had witnessed and knew about those tragic events, the newspapers chose instead to focus attention on spring work, on improvident actions on the part of Soviet power, on the delights of living in Germany, etc.

The press played a significant role in the life of residents in the occupied areas. It kept them distracted and entertained, exposing them to all kinds of information aimed at winning them to the side of the Germans. Many of the residents in the occupied areas supported the German leadership. These individuals feared the return of Soviet troops, many feeling deep concern at the prospects of possible retribution from the Red Army. Kiev resident N.V. Gerasimova wrote in her diary about how rumors of the Soviets approaching sent shivers down the spines of some of those people. The punishment was persecution, arrest, and torture, which also could be faced by women found to have had a relationship or sexual intercourse with the enemy. There were cases of entire families willing to relocate to Germany due to fear and uncertainty (Ribchenko, 2013: 133). These sentiments were the result of the people being tired of hardship after having been continually harried by peril, insecurity, and fear.

4. Conclusion

What gives relevance to exploring the subject through the prism of media coverage during the occupation period is that it helps restore historical memory, achieve accurate and balanced assessments of past events, and reconstruct the daily life of ordinary Ukrainians at the time. A focus on resolving a range of issues, finding answers to various questions, conducting awareness-raising activity aimed at ordinary citizens, and providing the basic emotional and moral support they needed in tough wartime conditions – this pretty much sums up the media’s activity in the period 1941–1943. In addition, of importance was the presence of nationalist ideas, which had found their way into the newspapers to stir up the people’s patriotic sentiment and give them hope for independence. The use of the Ukrainian language in cultural-enlightenment activity and in the media played a major role in boosting the Ukrainians’ self-image, helping revive and promote their ethnic culture. The revitalization of church life and revival of traditional Ukrainian customs and

practices helped remind representatives of that generation of Ukrainians of and reinforce in their memory the many pages of national history. The focus on invoking the top names in Ukrainian literature and representatives of the national-patriotic movement and attempts to familiarize the population with European culture played a definite role in shaping patriotic sentiment in Ukraine.

Based on the above, at present there is relevance in the issue of the state's information policy. Of continuing importance for all categories and ages in society are the areas of national-enlightenment activity by the media dealing with popularization of national culture, exploration of national history, analysis of national errors, and utilization of the national experience in all areas of domestic and foreign activity. In the future, information resulting from independent (as much as it is possible) and objective activity by the media will help reconstruct past events and restore the people's historical memory.

Factoring out Fascist ideology, which permeated most of the information at the time, one can learn from the occupation-period newspapers that during that time the locals, likewise, attended school, read, went to the cinema and theater, followed the events with empathy, showed compassion and dignity, planned, and dreamt – i.e., life went on. While certain pages in the lives and history of their people will never be known, it may still be possible to trace a number of common trends and then draw meaningful conclusions based on them.

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