

Russian Revolutions in Print: The Fate of the Ethnic Press

Joseph Lenkart

Мы самоубийством кончать не желаем и потому этого не сделаем. Мы ясно видим *факт*: «свобода печати» означает *на деле* немедленную покупку международной буржуазией сотни и тысячи кадетских, эсеровских и меньшевистских писателей и организацию их пропаганды, их борьбы против нас.¹

V.I. Lenin

Although these candid sentiments were expressed in a letter to Gavriil Miasnikov in 1921, Lenin's thoughts on printing and publishing, before and after the Russian revolutions, would fundamentally alter the cultural landscape by reshaping the printing press as the “inseparable” literary organ of the party.² In order to achieve this revolutionary goal of total consolidation, an extensive publishing apparatus was created to cultivate, manage, and disseminate information to numerous ethnic and cultural groups, with distinct linguistic and historical narratives. We can postulate that this consolidation of the press underwent three distinct stages: (1) the initial period of euphoria and confusion (often mixed with a dose of hopeful thinking), where a multitude of new publications was established; (2) a period of coexistence of Bolshevik and local press; and finally (3) a systematic and total dismantling and clampdown of press publishers that did not conform to party orthodoxy and homogeneity.

Accomplishing the third stage was fraught with challenges, but ultimately the party managed to create a centrally-administered publishing outlet from which networks of producers and consumers of revolutionary publications emerged. As we reflect on the 100-year anniversary of the Russian Revolutions, the impact of these revolutions on local publishing cultures, and the impact of local publishing cultures on the revolutions, still reverberate in Russia, Central Asia, and eastern Europe.

The successful integration of Soviet designs on the press and information management in every city, region, and republic is a testament to its reshaping of centuries-old center-periphery relationships established in the sixteenth century. Inheriting this multiethnic and multicultural state, the Bolsheviks encountered ethnic and cultural groups with differing levels of publishing output and printing cultures. Notable examples of strong printing cultures

1. V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., 55 vols. (Moscow, 1965 [1958]), 44: 79. “We have no wish to end with suicide and therefore will not do it. We see the obvious fact: “freedom of the press” means, *in effect*, the immediate purchase by the international bourgeoisie of hundreds and thousands of Cadet, Socialist-Revolutionary, and Menshevik writers and the organization of their propaganda, their struggle against us.”

2. *Ibid.*, 12: 99–105.

include the Armenian, Georgian, Jewish, and the Baltic traditions.³ Another such encounter was with the peoples of Volga-Ural region. Due to their dominant role as the largest Muslim group in pre-revolutionary Russia, the Volga Tatars and their vibrant printing culture are discussed in this essay as an example of local ethnic press consolidation. As with other aspects of the 1917 revolution, it was Lenin's views on the press, and the early developments in the establishment of Soviet printing that determined the course of this culture's publishing framework.

Lenin would reveal his thoughts on printing and information management in the directive that appeared in *Izvestiia* on October 28, 1917. In "Dekret o pechati," Lenin outlined three provisions to stem the "torrent of filth and slander," and to prevent the counter-revolutionary press from obscuring "the consciousness of the masses."⁴ These provisions included the following: (1) only those publications can be suppressed that (a) call for open resistance or insubordination to the Workers' and Peasants' Government, (b) sow sedition through demonstrably slanderous distortion of facts, and (c) instigate actions of an obviously criminally-punishable nature; (2) publications can be proscribed, temporarily or permanently, only by decision of the Council of People's Commissars; (3) the present ordinance is of a temporary nature and will be *repealed* by a special decree as soon as normal conditions of social life set in.⁵ These decrees, however, were not repealed, but rather strengthened for long-term subjugation of the printing press.

In the same directive, Lenin emphasized the temporary nature of this decree by stating: "As soon as the new order becomes consolidated, all administrative pressure on the press will be terminated and it will be granted complete freedom within the bounds of legal responsibility."⁶ Lenin's statements of tolerance and freedom, and the temporary nature of these provisions were never borne out in practice during and after the revolution. With the introduction of this conceptual framework, the Soviet state envisioned all publishing cultures subservient to the goals of the Communist Party, including the Tatar press, which had been rejuvenated by the easing of the censorship apparatus

3. To explore these rich publishing cultures, see Önnik Eganyan et al, *Mayr ts'uts'ak hayerēn dzeragrats' Mashtots'i Anuan Matenadarani*, 7 vols. (Erevan, 1984); Vrej Nersessian, *Catalogue of Early Armenian Books, 1512–1850* (London, 1980); A. Z. Abramishvili, *Gruzinskaia periodika: annotirovannyi katalog gruzinskoï periodiki, 1819–1917 khrianiashcheisia v GPB im. M.E.Saltykova-Shchedrina* (Tbilisi, 1968); Shlomo Shunami, *Bibliography of Jewish Bibliographies*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1965 [1936]); Janice Pilch, "Baltic National Bibliography," *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 2, no. 3–4 (April 2002): 51–94.

4. Lenin wrote, "экстренные меры для пресечения потока грязи и клеветы, в которых охотно потопила бы молодую победу народа желтая и зеленая пресса," see V. I. Lenin, "Dekret o pechati," *Izvestiia*, October 28, 1917, 2. ("Emergency measures to stop the flow of dirt and calumnies, in which yellow and green press would willingly sink the young victory of the people").

5. *Ibid.*, 2. Emphasis added.

6. *Ibid.*, 2.

after the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the prospect of new revolutions on the horizon.⁷

These press provisions were aimed at limiting contrary ideological narratives that appeared in the central and regional press before, during, and after the revolution, as well as at reducing the number of newspapers in circulation. A sampling of articles that appeared in *Nasha gazeta* and *Turkestanskiia vedomosti* sheds light on the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary rhetoric in Turkestan before the revolution, and on the struggle for the minds of ethnic and religious minorities in Russia. For example, in *Nasha gazeta*: “Nikolai i tsvety” (a satirical poem about Tsar Nikolas II, who cared only about flowers and not his people), “Pesnia o krasnom znamenii” (this poem calls for women to make red banners), “Vse dlia pobedy” (an article that chastises the Tsarist regime for keeping the people in slavery), and “Bud’te na-strazhe” (a short article that warns against the bourgeois press and its propaganda). In *Turkestanskiia vedomosti*: “V ogne i bure” (a religious nationalistic call to fight the dark forces), “Zaem svobody” (an advertisement for war bonds, which calls for the enemy to be destroyed), and an appeal printed, *unusually*, in both Russian (Cyrillic) and Uzbek (Perso-Arabic script) to the people of Turkestan of all ethnicities not to give in to the agitation and to trust Aleksandr Kerenskii and the Provisional Government on land reform issues.⁸ These articles represent a sample of the voluminous chorus of voices in print, echoing differing political aspirations and ideologies during the initial stages of the revolution.

With the onset of the Russian Civil War and without a centralized mechanism to convey the revolution, the early Soviet printing and publishing sector, in addition to a shortage of funds, lacked skilled editors and journalists, especially those with expertise in languages other than Russian.⁹ From a Soviet perspective, a series of dramatic measures were needed to regain control of publishing and printing in Central Asia, Russia, and the Caucasus.¹⁰ During the years 1921–23, the Communist Party Central Committee took an active role in assessing the state of party newspapers and their role in educating the masses.

As the result of NEP reforms, by March 1, 1922, the number of newspapers was reduced from 803 to 382.¹¹ Furthermore, without clear ideological guidance from the Central Committee, newspapers and subcommittees began

7. Albert Resis, “Lenin on Freedom of the Press,” *The Russian Review* 36, no. 3 (July 1977): 274–96.

8. Isaak Lazarevich, “Nikolai i tsvety,” *Nasha gazeta*, April 2, 1917, 2; A. Bogdanov, “Pesnia o krasnom znamenii,” *Nasha gazeta*, April 2, 1917, 2; “Vse dlia pobedy,” *Nasha gazeta*, April 23, 1917, 1; “Bud’te na-strazhe,” *Nasha gazeta*, April 23, 1917, 1; “V ogne i bure,” *Turkestanskiia vedomosti*, January 6 (19), 1917, 2; “Zaem svobody,” *Turkestanskiia vedomosti*, August 29, 1917, 2; “Vozvanie,” *Turkestanskiia vedomosti*, August 29, 1917, 2.

9. To further explore early Soviet information management struggles in Central Asia, see Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, 2015), chapter 6.

10. For a detailed look at the financial aspect of newspapers during this period, see Mathew Lenoe, “NEP Newspapers and the Origins of Soviet Information Rationing,” *Russian Review* 62, no. 4 (October 2003): 614–36.

11. V. I. Verkhovskii, “Iz istorii partiinogo rukovodstva pechat’iu (1921–1923 gody),” *Voprosy Istorii KPSS*, no. 3 (1959): 139.

criticizing one another for publishing errors and the lack of organizational support.¹² In an effort to stem these losses and correct doctrinal differences, the Central Committee directly intervened and created special committees to oversee a network of central newspapers with parallel regional versions of these newspapers in local languages. Newspapers outside this network were closed outright, or were not financially supported by the Committee, which amounted to the same thing.

As part of these efforts, the Central Committee also conducted a census of all trained journalists in 1921.¹³ By 1923, these specialists were directed to areas with the greatest need: Kyrgyzstan, Crimea, Siberia, and other regions in the Soviet Union.¹⁴ As part of this effort, Tatar journalists and editors were sent to these locations. With these structural reforms, the Central Committee firmly established a printing and publishing structure, which amplified the party's ideology and strengthened its reach among ethnic groups in Russia. While reporting the success of these reforms at the 12th Communist Party Congress, Stalin remarked: "The press lives by its own means and has become a sharp weapon in the hands of the party."¹⁵

With the network of newspapers, the interpretation of the revolution was based on central newspapers, translated into local languages and administered through party outlets. With the establishment of *Pravda*, 130 Bolshevik newspapers and periodicals were founded in sixty-five cities.¹⁶ These newspapers were in the main languages of the republics: Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, Armenian, Georgian, Azeri, and others.¹⁷ The themes and issues that appeared in *Pravda* were reflected in the regional press, thus mimicking local flavor with a *Pravda* main body. In the Caucasus newspapers, *Pravda* articles were either reprinted, summarized, or edited for local audiences. Since the sustainability of these regional publications was viewed as a high priority by party leadership, the responsibility to oversee these publications was placed directly under the local party Central Committees in Baku and Tbilisi. In April 1917, forty thousand issues of *Pravda* were sent through a special forwarding committee, which was set up within the structure of the Tbilisi Central Committee.¹⁸ With a strong administrative structure and distribution network, the revolutionary message was brought to the regions, already adapted and interpreted for the ethnic groups in the Caucasus.

The "sharp weapon" developed by the party was able to alter the trajectories of thriving local publishing cultures. As indicated before, one such culture among many was the Volga Tatar press, which began to emerge in the

12. *Ibid.*, 140.

13. *Ibid.*, 145.

14. *Ibid.*, 146.

15. *Ibid.*, 151.

16. S. A. Andronov, *Bol'shevistskaia pechat' v trekh revoliutsiakh* (Moscow, 1978), 240.

17. *Gazety Moskvy, Leningrada i stolits soiuzykh respublik*, vol. 1, *Gazety SSSR 1917–1960: Bibliograficheskii spravochnik* (Moscow, 1970), 248–260. See Research Publications, Inc, and New York Public Library, Slavonic Division, *Newspapers from the Russian Revolutionary Era: Temporary Guide to the Microfilm Collection*, 13 vols. (Woodbridge, 1984).

18. Suren Sarkisian, "Iz istorii nalazhivaniia izdaniia Bol'shevistskoi pechati," *Lra-ber Hasarakakan Gitut'yunneri*, no. 12 (1983): 3–9.

nineteenth century.¹⁹ As the dominant Muslim group in pre-revolution Russia, the Volga Tatars were undergoing a cultural, religious, and political transformation. Serge A. Zenkovsky traced the roots of this revival to the Legislative Commission summoned by Catherine II in 1766.²⁰ Zenkovsky cites legislative reforms initiated by Catherine II in 1776 and 1788, which removed restrictions placed on Tatar merchants and paved the way for the establishment of Tatar social, religious, and cultural institutions as the main catalyst for century-long Tatar cultural revitalization. As he states: “This legislation and new attitude of the Russian Government toward the Moslems led to their social and religious emancipation, and were of such far reaching significance that they brought about the economic and cultural revival of the Tatar people in the nineteenth century, and determined the direction taken by the Tatar society in its development throughout the period prior to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.”²¹ One aspect to this development was the establishment of a multifaceted printing culture, which included religious, political, and *belles lettres* printing. These modern developments were fueled in part by the Tatar merchant class, which contributed significantly to the proliferation of the Tatar printing press. With the influx of funds from Tatar businessmen, the development of the Tatar press became an outlet to revolutionary and reformist movements that challenged and coexisted with the Bolsheviks.²²

In addition to economic and cultural revitalization, Tatars played a “mediatory role” within the empire in the center-periphery relationships with other Muslim minorities. According to Galina Yemelianova’s critical analysis of this role, the dualism “allowed them, from the late nineteenth century, to generate specific national forms of modern development within the Russian state.”²³ The cultivation of this centuries-long mediatory role enabled the Volga Tatars to manage a vast network of economic, political, and social relations with other Turkic Muslim groups in Central Asia. Moreover, significant growth during this period in the establishment of religious printing and publishing took place. Tracing this revivalism in the Volga-Ural region from the early nineteenth century to 1990s, Nadir Devlet noted the pronounced impact of pre-revolution liberalization efforts on shifting religious identities and the construction of mosques and religious institutions of learning during this period.²⁴ It was this flourishing cultural landscape that the Bolsheviks encountered and successfully interrupted in terms of the direction of its development, confining it to the party’s identity and homogeneity of state printing.

19. R. R. Gainanov, R. F. Mardanov, F. N. Shakurov, *Tatarskaia periodicheskaia pechat' nachala XX veka: Bibliograficheskai ukazatel'* (Kazan', 2000), 5–32.

20. Serge A. Zenkovsky, “A Century of Tatar Revival,” *American Slavic and East European Review* 12, no. 3 (October 1953): 303–4.

21. *Ibid.*, 304.

22. Serge A. Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960). See: Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 1998).

23. Galina M. Yemelianova, “Volga Tatars, Russians and the Russian State at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century: Relationships and Perceptions,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 77, no. 3 (July 1999): 449.

24. Nadir Devlet, “Islamic Revival in the Volga-Ural Region,” *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* 32, no. 1 (1991): 108.

The initial euphoria and confusion after the February revolution produced a staggering growth in serial publications; fifty-six new publications (fifty-one newspapers and five journals) appeared, and only a few took a pro-Bolshevik stance. During 1918–19, fifty-two new publications appeared as part of this growth in the Tatar press. Moreover, between 1920 and 1921, eighty-seven new publications were established, and these publications were entirely supported by private funds.²⁵ Overall, between 1918 and 1924, 256 new Tatar language newspapers and journals came into circulation.²⁶ The proliferation of the Tatar press was due to the revival of the Tatar literary tradition and the growth of nonreligious literature in the Tatar language.²⁷

After the initial excitement of the revolution and a period of coexistence, however, the Tatar press encountered the “sharp tool” of the party. The manifestation of this tool took many forms but had a clear purpose. As Nadir Devlet states: “The Soviet authorities considered that there was no further need to come to an understanding with Muslim representatives. Muslim communist leaders were no longer entrusted with the role of potential bridges with the non-communist Muslim society: in fact they were then systemically arrested for ‘nationalistic deviation’ and replaced by Russians.”²⁸ The Bolsheviks used a similar tactic against the nearby Chuvash printing culture.²⁹ With differing revolutionary goals and local aspirations for self-determination (as espoused by early party doctrine), Tatar society and other ethnic groups came through their printing press in direct conflict with the revolution because they did not adhere to shifts in party identity, ideology, and/or changing priorities of the party leadership.³⁰

Perhaps the figure that best embodied this struggle to interpret the changing revolution to the local masses was Mirsaid Khaidargalievich Sultan-Galiev, a prominent Tatar party official and frequent contributor to *Zhizn' natsional'nostei*. In his informative study of Sultan-Galiev, Gary Guadagnolo pinpoints a key moment at the Twelfth Party Congress when the local reflection of the revolution clashed with Stalin’s view of the nationalities question.³¹ Sultan-Galiev’s interpretation, as articulated in *Zhizn' natsional'nostei*, ran contrary to the centralization efforts advocated by Stalin, which sealed his fate.³²

In their desire for a centralized press network, the Bolsheviks forced many journalists, literary figures, artists, and scientists to move to Central Asia. After the completion of the Soviet consolidation of Central Asia, the Tatar press moved abroad. Nevertheless, this brief period saw the multifaceted Tatar press interacting with the revolutionary machine, before and after the

25. Gainanov, *Tatarskaia periodicheskaia pechat'*, 18.

26. *Ibid.*, 19.

27. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

28. Devlet, 108.

29. V. I. Zyrianov, “Gazety” in *Entsiklopediia chuvashskoi zhurnalistiki i pechaty* (Cheboksary, 2014), 81–84.

30. Gary Guadagnolo, “‘Who Am I?’: Revolutionary Narratives and the Production of the Minority Self in the Early Soviet Era,” *Region* 2, no.1 (2013): 69–93.

31. *Ibid.*, 78–79.

32. *Ibid.*, 78.

consolidation of printing and publishing in the Soviet Union. Similar interactions, where free local press coexisted, albeit briefly, with the centralized Bolshevik one, occurred in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Baltic region.

The founding of the All-Union Book Chamber on April 27 (May 10), 1917 provided the Bolsheviks with another long-lasting tool to control local publishing cultures and force those cultures to channel their narratives of the revolution through a single outlet, the Communist Party.³³ The All-Union Book Chamber was primarily established to track print materials published within Bolshevik-controlled territory. As part of its mission, the Book Chamber was tasked with compiling detailed statistical reports and control copies of printed publications.³⁴ In the early period after its founding, the Book Chamber was exclusively focused on Russia proper (RSFSR). According to *Knizhnaia statistika sovetskoi Rossii 1918–1923*, it tracked published materials during three main periods: 1918 to September 1920, September 1920 to 1922, and 1922 onward.³⁵

Due to rapid growth in publishing, the Book Chamber was eventually forced to become selective in documenting the output of published materials. This resulted in inaccurate bibliographic processing and statistical errors. For example, the 1923 *Knizhnaia letopis'* registered 13,380 non-periodicals (except flyers), whereas the Book Chamber processed 20,141 titles.³⁶ During this period, the chamber's statistics reveal the absolute predominance of Moscow and Leningrad as publishing centers, while the output of the rest of RSFSR was labeled simply as "other places."³⁷

A closer examination of the statistics produced by the Book Chamber for the years 1918–23, shows the growth of Gosizdat (the State Publishing House) as the leading publisher. In 1922, the statistics show it having 19 percent of market share, and by 1923, Gosizdat's publishing output was at 24 percent of market share.³⁸ Besides domination in sheer volume, the founding decree of the state's foremost publisher placed all private press under its control. Gosizdat was responsible for drawing up a unified publishing plan, directing other publishing houses, supervising book distribution, and planning paper production.³⁹

Although the initial infrastructure of the Book Chamber was a work in progress, its long-term goal reflected the Lenin's goal of centralized control of publishing and disseminating information to the masses. We can observe this centralization process at the local level during this period in *Pechat', radioveshchanie i televidenie Tatarii (1917–1980)*, which contains a collection of archival documents and party directives on printing, and statistical reports on the local ethnic press during six distinct periods in Tatar printing history.

33. P. A. Chuvikov, "Printing" in *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (New York, 1979), 20: 544–545. Correction: P. A. Chuvikov, "Vsesoiuznaia Knizhnaia Palata" in *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia* (Moskva, 1978), 5: 459.

34. *Ibid.*, 459.

35. Nikolai Fedorovich Ianitskii, *Knizhnaia statistika sovetskoi Rossiia: 1918–1923* (Moscow, 1924), 4–5.

36. *Ibid.*, 4.

37. *Ibid.*, see "Diagrammy."

38. *Ibid.*, 8.

39. *Ibid.*, 3–5.

According to this source, 1926–32 was characterized as a period that marked “the fight against the recurrence of nationalism, with a right-wing deviation, and on the education of Soviet people in the spirit of communist ideology and Soviet patriotism.”⁴⁰ Publications that were founded during and after this period were the culmination of the Party’s design on printing consolidation through a single outlet, managed by central committees, and through the creation of the book chambers.

As the first director of the Book Chamber, N. F. Ianitskii placed great emphasis on the importance of statistical analysis of printed materials. Upon close examination, archival documents revealed that Ianitskii emphasized that “the socialist country cannot afford not to have bibliographical statistics.”⁴¹ In his view, it was of *absolute essence* that the bibliographic work conducted in Russia should closely align with the work being done in other republics.⁴² He envisioned a centralized model that tracked content and oversaw the national bibliographic publications throughout the Soviet Union. In addition, he advocated for the inclusion of languages that used Perso-Arabic and Hebrew scripts in *Knizhnaia letopis’*, with the end goal of documenting published materials from all of the republics. Within the context of the revolutions, the All-Union Book Chamber was a vital component in controlling the number of copies, editions in various languages, and the flow of information to masses. It effectively and efficiently became the dominant force in interpreting the revolution for the masses. Through this prescribed model of publishing, Soviet republics were forced to participate in advancing the revolution across regions and cultures.

The Russian Revolution had a profound impact on the numerous ethnic groups in the imperial periphery. When these groups encountered the revolution, brief periods of euphoria often followed but soon gave way to loss of identity and ability to communicate this encounter freely in print. The impact of the revolutions in the periphery on local publishing cultures remains a fascinating area of exploration. With an information network tied to its party ideology, the Soviet state moved to secure the political landscape with a powerful publishing machinery, which had no equal in the field. It sought to control the flow of information in any format through administrative and structural oversight. In doing so, the Communist Party interpreted the revolution to the masses and provided a controlled outlet for consumers of information to interact with the revolution. The end result was the establishment of a printing and publishing culture directly supervised by the Central Committee.

This culture has survived its founding fathers, and it now serves the needs of political establishments in Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. The latest sign of its evolution is the decree by Vladimir Putin that signaled the merger of *Rossiiskaia Knizhnaia Palata* (Russian Book Chamber) with the

40. F. I. Agzamov, ed., *Pechat’, radioveshchanie i televidenie Tatarii (1917–1980): Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Kazan, 1981), 4.

41. C. A. Karaichentseva and E. M. Sukhorukova, *N. F. Ianitskii—Direktor Knizhnoi palaty (1921–1931)* (Moscow, 2013), 321.

42. *Ibid.*, 333. Emphasis in original.

Russian News Agency TASS.⁴³ The impact of Lenin's provisions on the preeminent role of the press as a state's most potent tool of exerting control on lives across borders and cultures continues in the 21st century.⁴⁴

43. "O nekotorykh merakh po povysheniiu effektivnosti deiatel'nosti gosudarstvennykh sredstv massovoi informatsii," Kremlin.ru, at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19805> (accessed November 1, 2016).

44. On the other hand, the book chambers and publishing cultures in independent Central Asia and the Caucasus have undergone similar realignments to reflect current political designs on information management. See Grant G. Harris, "The Fate of the Book Chambers and National Bibliography in the Former Soviet Republics since 1991," *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 11, no. 1 (January 2010): 1–9. Also see Alexander Dzhigo and Alexandra Teplitskaya, "National Bibliographies of the Post-Soviet Central Asian States," *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 8, no. 4 (2007): 3–17.