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Propaganda at Home and Abroad (East Central Europe)

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This article discusses the content and impact of various propaganda strategies which were used in East Central Europe by warring powers, local political parties and national organizations during the Great War. For Russia and Germany, the most important aim was to use the conflict to strengthen their influence in the region. For the representatives of national movements, the war provided an opportunity to propagate the idea of national rebirth, first as loyal allies of Russia, and after 1917 as separate entities to build their own states. Russian defeat, German victories and, later, the Russian Revolution were reflected in the propaganda of Bolsheviks as well as nationalists, who fought against the “foreign war” and created the visions of future peace in independent states or as parts of a Russian revolutionary republic. The Germans likewise promised victory and freedom, but only to the Baltic noblemen.

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Introduction

The outbreak of the First World War occurred at a time when [propaganda](#) was not highly appreciated by the European powers. The question of public opinion was ignored, as war was considered a matter for professionals, generals, soldiers and diplomats. Traditional approaches to war, however, were mixed with fears caused by the unclear attitude of local peoples towards the conflict, which could threaten the complex and fragile system of mobilization and [transportation](#) of the armies. In particular, there was suspicion among the Russian authorities that the war could provoke the next Polish uprising in the Kingdom. The acts of sabotage and strikes occasioned by military defeat in [Russia's war with Japan](#) in 1904-1905 prompted [Russia](#) to turn towards propaganda.

Poland

Tsarist Propaganda

After the outbreak of war, the main task of Russian propaganda was to gain the Poles' support. The Russians worked intensely to create an appeal to the Poles. The final text of this appeal, better known as the appeal of [Nikolai Nikolaevich, Grand Duke of Russia \(1856-1929\)](#), which was announced on 14 August 1914, proclaimed an "hour of resurrection and the brotherly reconciliation of Poland with Great Russia," accomplished thanks to the victories of the tsarist army, "whose legions were marching from the shores of the Pacific Ocean to the northern seas." [Poland](#) and Russia had to defeat the common enemy together, just like in 1410, when they beat the German Teutonic Knights in the Battle of Grunwald. The rebirth of Poland "free in belief, language and self-government" was promised, though with the wish that Poland would respect the similar rights of the nations to which it was tied by history.^[1] This document was to serve as a signal for [Britain](#) and [France](#) that Russia had already begun its offensive at the Polish front.

The Grand Duke's proclamation made a great impression on the Polish members of the [Duma](#) and the Council of State. Thanks to their efforts it was published in the whole Kingdom of Poland. [Polish newspapers](#), among them the political organs of various parties, wrote about the appeal as an epoch-making historical event.^[2] Although the aim of Russian propaganda - to gain Polish support during the autumn campaign - was clear, the appeal had an unexpected influence on Polish society. The language of the appeal pleased the Poles because it was the first time that Russia spoke to them directly and not as an officious higher power.^[3] The effect, positive from the Russian point of view, was weakened by the announcement of the annexation of Eastern Galicia, which was

occupied by Russia in September. Some of the followers of National Democracy were joyful, whereas the majority of society feared for the future of Lvov as a Polish national center. Russian propaganda praised the victory in Galicia, announcing its unification with the “motherland” and defining it as “indigenous Rus” which deeply shocked Polish public opinion.^[4]

German Propaganda

After the conquest of the Kingdom and the establishment of occupation authorities, the main task of the German propaganda was to calm the mood behind the frontline, gain the Poles’ support in the war against Russia and create an allied Polish army, which would be controlled by Germans and Austrians. The occupation authorities gave permission to organize Polish national demonstrations and allowed the establishment of Polish façade political institutions. All these efforts were supposed to convey the impression that an independent Polish state was being reconstructed. In reality, the occupation powers wanted to delay the moment of passing on the power to the Polish people indefinitely. Most important was the mobilization of Poles in the so-called *Polnische Wehrmacht* (Polish Forces). Support of the activity of Polish national organizations was crucial in this regard. The Polish language, forbidden by the Russians in schools and offices, was soon introduced in these institutions. Control of higher education was passed to the Poles and, as a result, the University of Warsaw and the Polytechnic were re-opened as Polish-speaking institutions. From that moment the organization of political parties and national demonstrations was allowed. Polish national emblems and flags were also tolerated.^[5]

A new stage of the Central Powers’ policy was supposed to come with the Act of 5 November 1916, in which the monarchs of Germany and Austria-Hungary proclaimed the rebirth of an independent Polish state. The Governor-Generals Hans von Beseler (1850-1921) for Germany and Karl Kuk (1853-1935) for Austria-Hungary announced, in the name of their emperors, the establishment of an independent state in the form of a constitutional monarchy. For the occasion the Germans organized a ceremony in the Royal Castle. A German orchestra played Polish national hymns, *Boże coś Polskę* and *Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła*, to the confusion of some of the Polish guests; they did not approve of the fact that Germans had used Polish national symbols as a propaganda tool.

The situation changed after the February Revolution in Russia. A declaration of the Provisional Government on the Polish cause announced the foundation of a future independent Polish state within a political union with Russia, with its borders based on the ethnic grounds. It also foresaw the creation of Polish national military forces, which required a more effective reaction from the Central Powers. It came to the creation of Polish structures of power in 1917 - the Provisional State Council and the Regency Council – which the German leaders merely considered a propaganda measure. The occupation regime needed to conceal the catastrophic results of the severe economic exploitation of the Kingdom by German military institutions and to focus the Poles’ attention on the political sphere. Polish politicians tried to go through the existing political frameworks to demand real power. Maintaining a stable political situation necessitated tactical propaganda and caused problems

for the invaders.^[6]

Propaganda of National Organizations

After the outbreak of war, the dominant moods in the Kingdom were loyalty to Russia, state-patriotism and feelings of civic duty. These found their expression in enthusiasm for Russian soldiers, a skillfully conducted mobilization and the failure of insurrection plans, which were prepared by a few conspirators. The pro-Russian attitude was also a result of the effective propaganda of National Democracy, which was supported by prominent writers and journalists who dubbed the war a conflict between Slavism and Germanism. National Democrats aimed to propagate the idea of the unification of all Polish territories under Russian rule and of further political liberties for the Poles. For the time being, they preferred not to advocate for independence. The actions of Józef Piłsudski's (1867-1935) Riflemen induced indifference and hostility in the Kingdom. The Polish Riflemen were called "fratricides" or "Prussian henchmen." In contrast, Polish society treated the Russian army as "its own" because their fathers and brothers served in it. The Riflemen, who fought against this army, were considered enemies by the common people.

In 1915 the defeat and destructive impact of the Russian retreat led to the breakdown of pro-Russian sympathies. After the conquest of the Kingdom by the Central Powers, the national parties began a patriotic campaign. The Act of 5 November 1916 favored national rebirth. Polish society at large believed in the possibility of reconstructing an independent state but were inquisitive as to when this act would take place, what the borders would be and which political system the future state would have. Legionnaires in the Polish Forces accepted the act with enthusiasm, viewing it as a result of their sacrifice on the frontline. For propaganda reasons, the Germans allowed the legions to enter Warsaw on 1 December 1916. The population expressed their joy, but only in presence of Piłsudski's First Brigade; other brigades were treated as Austrian units. This reaction was due to the intense propaganda efforts of Piłsudski's followers. The Germans' hasty attempt to mobilize the Poles in the *Polnische Wehrmacht*, just after the 5 November act, caused general disappointment.

The *Polska Organizacja Wojskowa* (POW, Polish Military Organization), an organization, created by Piłsudski at the beginning of war in the Kingdom for sabotage and intelligence-gathering, began to play a significant role in autumn 1916. The POW was partly an underground army with a clearly political inflection. It started an anti-mobilization campaign, claiming that the lives of Polish soldiers were only at the Polish government's disposal.^[7] The POW also created modern propaganda which strongly influenced society, providing them with simplified slogans which were suitable to Piłsudski's aims. The message was clear: Poland had to regain its independence; Russia was the worst enemy. Therefore, the Central Powers, which fought against Russia, had to be seen as allies. After the February Revolution the POW changed its attitude towards the Germans who were now treated as dangerous invaders. Negative slogans underlined a rapid change of POW propaganda which began to deem Germans the robbers of Poland. The new material mocked Polish political institutions as a façade in cooperation with the invaders. The events of 1917 proved the effectiveness of Piłsudski's

propaganda. When Piłsudski was arrested and imprisoned in Magdeburg, the POW could legally protest for his liberation in the Austrian occupation zone due to German-Austrian conflicts. The national propaganda at the time presented Piłsudski as a national leader, a martyr for the Polish cause.^[8]

The Baltic Territories

German Propaganda

In May 1915 the German army entered the Baltic territories. The view of well-disciplined German soldiers entering Vilnius on 18 September 1915, in comparison with the chaotic retreat of the Russians, made a strong impression on the inhabitants. The appeal of the temporary military governor of the city, General Alexander Graf von Pfeil, called Vilnius “the pearl of the famous Kingdom of Poland” and expressed compassion for the Polish population’s sufferings. This declaration was almost instantly rescinded, to the confusion and offense of the Poles.^[9] To gain Lithuanian sympathies, the Germans recruited lower administration officials from Lithuanians from East Prussia. However, German plans for a future annexation of Lithuania were soon revealed.

At the same time, the Baltic German noblemen of [Latvia and Estonia](#) intensified their national propaganda, founding the *Baltischer Vertrauensrat* (Baltic Trust Council) in Berlin. This institution began to prepare plans for the annexation of Baltic lands by the German Empire. Its activists fashioned their Baltic countrymen as martyrs. The persecution of the local German minority by Russia was portrayed as a national catastrophe, which only German military intervention could stop. The Trust Council published numerous books and pamphlets which promoted Courland as a “primaeval German region.”

After the February Revolution, when the Provisional Government began to introduce autonomy in the Baltic governorates, the Germans took a liberal approach to the Baltic nations. The new German policy was, however, limited to the establishment of self-government institutions, dominated by the Germans, whose main task was to cooperate with the occupation authorities. Similar activities took place in Latvia in 1917 and in Estonia in 1918. In February 1918 the whole Baltic territory was occupied by the German army. The Germans attempted to influence native Latvians by coopting the local clergy of all religions. In addition, Baltic Germans organized numerous demonstrations intended to show mass support for the idea of establishing a new German state in the Baltic area. The power of the Baltic self-government institutions (*Baltische Landesräte*), assembling Germans and their Latvian and Estonian collaborators, grew beginning in April 1918. Directing their propaganda exclusively to the German population, the Germans ignored the strength of Latvian and Estonian nationalism. Defeat in the west in autumn 1918, however, forced Germany to seek an agreement with the Latvian and Estonian national parties.

Propaganda of National Organizations

In Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia local national organizations welcomed the outbreak of war with unconditional support for Russia. Latvian support for Russia was a result of the anti-German attitude of the population, which expected that with Russian help the Latvians would be able to reduce the influence of the German minority. The tsar's propaganda convinced the Latvians that Russian victory was certain and imminent. The Estonian national movement established numerous economic and social institutions to support the Russian army.^[10] The most important was the Northern Baltic Committee, founded by Jaan Tõnisson (1868-1941), which looked after [refugees](#) and gained supplies for soldiers. At the same time, local sections of the Committee propagated [nationalist](#) ideology throughout Estonia. In Lithuania the War Relief Committee, founded in Vilnius on 21 November 1914 under the leadership of Martynas Yčas (1885-1941) and Antanas Smetona (1874-1944), fulfilled a similar mission. With Russian financial help, this institution, apart from rescuing refugees, spearheaded a nationalist education initiative. In September 1915, as a result of the German offensive, the Committee split into two groups: a smaller one led by Smetona, which acted in Vilnius under German occupation, and the majority led by Yčas, who moved to Petrograd. These two Lithuanian organizations were in contact with each other via Lithuanian patriots in [Sweden](#) and [Switzerland](#).

German conciliatory gestures towards the Poles in the Vilnius area, although they quickly ceased, enraged Lithuanian national activists, who removed the Germans' appeals from the streets, which were directed to the Poles.^[11] In doing so, Lithuanian nationalists wanted to assert the purely Lithuanian character of Vilnius. Soon, the Polish-Lithuanian conflict intensified. The Germans changed their policy and began to support the Lithuanians in order to weaken the strong Polish influence. Both sides used hostile propaganda, accusing each other of hypocrisy and servility towards the invaders, and took every measure to gain a dominant position in the future Vilnius.

In summer 1915, with the consent of Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, the Latvians created their own national military formations. Jānis Goldmanis (1875-1955) and Jānis Zālītis (1874-1919) made an appeal which referenced the "cultural rebirth of Latvia" and called volunteers to the new military units. Latvian society responded enthusiastically. Jaan Tõnisson proposed the creation of Estonian units, following the Latvian example. However, an Estonian battalion only came into being during the February Revolution. Estonian soldiers supported the nationalist movement and organized demonstrations for autonomy. As the front line moved closer and the mood in Estonia worsened, Bolshevik agitation became more and more effective; the nationalist movement was unable to react properly. The movement lost its grip on the soldiers who more willingly accepted Bolshevik slogans. Estonian parties passively watched the Bolsheviks march to power, waiting for elections to the Russian Constituent Assembly. During the Bolshevik Coup in November 1917, Estonian society watched events unfold without any reaction. When Bolshevik power broke down during the German attack of 25 February 1918, the Estonians proclaimed independence and organized a national celebration to welcome the Germans as their future allies. This, however, did not alleviate the harsh German occupation which lasted until November. In Latvia national activists were also not able to organize a demonstration in Riga until 17 November 1918 when the Germans began to evacuate.^[12]

Lithuanian society treated the national movement as pro-German and looked towards the propaganda of “victorious Russian democracy.” The Kerenskii offensive raised expectations for return of the Russians. Antanas Smetona’s speech in Berlin on 13 November 1917 could have been a turning point in Lithuanian-German relations. His pronouncement mainly called for the creation of an independent Lithuania within its ethnic, not historical, borders (except Vilnius, which could not be considered ethnically Lithuanian) and the promise that all future Lithuanian governments would maintain close contacts with the Germans. Smetona’s view, however, did not alter anything in the Germans’ attitude towards the Lithuanian state. After Lithuania’s proclamation of independence on 16 February 1918, the German authorities forbade all celebrations of that occasion. This act was of great importance in the context of the Polish-Lithuanian conflict because independence had been proclaimed in Vilnius which was supposed to confirm its Lithuanian identity.

Finland

Tsarist Propaganda

On the eve of the First World War, Finland was an autonomous Grand Duchy attached to the Russian Empire. On 16 September 1914 Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia (1868-1918) approved the “Program of legal measures concerning Finland.” The document announced a quick unification of Finland with Russia and the liquidation of the Finnish constitution and the rights on which autonomy was based. This return to the policy of Russification shattered the Finns’ hopes for strengthening their autonomy which had been stimulated by the Russian appeal to the Poles. The authorities initially permitted the publication of the text of the Grand Duke’s proclamation to the Poles in the Finnish press. The Finns hoped that Russia’s next step would be a similar proclamation for Finland. Nonetheless, a Finnish journal which quoted the appeal to the Poles was financially punished. The aftermath of this event was a strict prohibition on quoting the appeal in order not to “stimulate false hopes.”^[13] A course of intense Russification replaced any efforts to win over Finnish public opinion, which sympathized with Germany during the war.

Propaganda of National Organizations

Martial law, introduced after the outbreak of war, made it impossible to propagate national slogans. The 27th Royal Prussian Riflemen Battalion’s recruitment center, created by Finnish volunteers, did popularize Finnish independence in Germany. At the same time, other Finnish volunteers went to Russia to fight against the Germans but the Russians did not trust them and no Finnish formation was created. During the war the demands for Finland’s separation from Russia steadily intensified. After the February Revolution a strong rivalry emerged between middle-class rightists and the social democratic party. Blocks of “whites” and “reds” came into being, both using propaganda as a political weapon. “Red” and “white” Finns considered their own views as the only legitimate and legal ones, treating their opponents as criminals. Civil war was never formally declared.^[14] Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim (1867-1951) emphasized that he had begun his armed action against the Russian

army, which still occupied parts of the Finnish territory, although the Bolshevik government recognized Finnish independence. On this basis he claimed that the war in Finland in 1918 was a war of independence against the Russians and native “rebels” and that solely the “reds” were to blame. Under the pressure from Mannerheim, the Germans’ participation in the civil war was possible only with the condition of their subordination to the Finnish command. Mannerheim extorted from the German commander, General Rüdiger von der Goltz (1865-1946), an “announcement to the Finns” in which the Germans explained that they wanted only to support the Finns in their fight against the invaders and not to intervene in Finnish internal affairs. For the “reds,” the fight for power in Finland was simply a “revolution.” Both sides used brutal propaganda. The “red” press presented cruelties of the “white butchers” under the leadership of Mannerheim, calling him a “workers’ executioner” or “white devil.” The white journals responded to these accusations, describing the murders of “red Russkies.” The abusive language used by both sides resulted in a growing brutalization of the war, which manifested in the killing of prisoners of war and acts of terror against civilians. “White” propaganda had a strong influence on the image of the civil war in public opinion. For many decades, it has been a widespread belief that the war was one of independence against Russia, ignoring the fact of German participation.^[15]

Bolshevik Propaganda

The Bolshevik party was weak in Latvia and Estonia in 1914, though it had a stronger influence in Latvia. After the outbreak of the war, Latvian Bolsheviks attacked the tsar’s propaganda, claiming that tsarism used the Latvians’ patriotism to the benefit of the bourgeoisie. They also opposed the creation of Latvian military units. The party treated the war as an **imperialist** conflict in which the international working class should not participate, preserving its strength for the future revolution. Estonian Bolsheviks also expressed their hostile attitude towards the Russian Empire. Efforts to organize riots against tsarism failed as the proletariat remained loyal to the authorities.

After the February Revolution of 1917, Latvian Bolsheviks began a propaganda offensive, this time against the nationalist ideas of the independence parties. The independence program was defined as reactionary, chauvinistic and nationalistic. In the Soviets (councils), slogans of class struggle were propagated. The first stage of class struggle was supposed to be the obtainment of political and social rights by the proletariat. The main aim was the creation of a socialist state based on a completely new economic and political order. The Bolshevik party was to be the strongest representation of the working class. In order to control the political situation, the Bolsheviks were to achieve domination in the councils. Therefore, the main slogan became “all power to the Soviets.”

The Latvian Bolsheviks used its many press organs as propaganda tools. These included *Cina*, which began appearing in Riga in May 1917, and the newspapers *Okopnaia Pravda* and *Brīvais Strēlnieks*. In Estonia, the most important Bolshevik newspapers were the *Kiir* (Torch), the *Tööline* (Worker), the Russian-language *Utro Pravdy* (Morning of Truth) as well as the *Zvezda* (Star). During the Labor Day demonstration on 1 May 1917 in Tallinn, a crowd of hundreds of thousands carried

mainly Estonian national flags, among which the red flags were hardly visible. The Bolsheviks reacted with only a small protest, reminding that 1 May was an internationalist holiday and that displaying national flags at that time “did not harmonize with the ideas of internationalism.”^[16] In Estonia in the second half of 1917 the Bolsheviks appeared as very efficient organizers of mass demonstrations directed against democratic national institutions and in support of the Provisional Government. Bolshevik propaganda ably portrayed pro-independence Estonian activists as “the enemies of language and Estonian autonomy” or “bourgeois nationalists.” Contradictions between these slogans had no importance in the chaos of public meetings in the street. Accusing the Estonian parliament of non-democratic formation, the Bolsheviks assigned themselves the role of the guardians of democracy. Preparing for the coup in Petrograd, the Bolsheviks spread the news that Aleksandr Fedorovich Kerenskii (1881-1970) and Lavr Georgievich Kornilov (1870-1918) were going to give the capital city back to the Germans and that only Lenin’s party had tried to stop them.^[17] After the coup in October/November 1917, the Bolsheviks immediately put out propaganda against their rivals, calling them “gangs of counter-revolutionary bandits.” Since then the noun “gang” was used as a blanket epithet for all anti-Bolshevik organizations. Executions of enemies of the Soviet power were deemed the “sharpening of the class struggle.” The conference of Latvian national parties was called a “dark machination of the bourgeoisie.” Unconvinced Estonian soldiers were persuaded by numerous agitators to support the Bolshevik cause. Bolshevik propaganda was largely effective because there was no response from the anti-Bolshevik side. The Provisional Government was discredited in the eyes of Estonians by its inability to win on the frontline.

For Bolsheviks the notion of nation meant a useful propaganda tool. In February 1918, as the Germans were victorious, the Latvian and Estonian Bolsheviks returned to anti-German propaganda. They accused the Baltic Germans of conspiring with the enemy. This accusation was copied directly from tsarist propaganda. Persecutions of this national group, which were considerably more drastic than in 1914, followed. The most important representatives of local Germans were imprisoned and later deported to Siberia as traitors of the Soviet State.^[18]

Conclusion

Propaganda as a tool of strategy and policy proved to be very successful in the years of the First World War, especially in East Central Europe. The warring powers - tsarist Russia and Germany - used in their propagandistic appeals to the Polish population various words and ideas to influence public opinion and create an impression of patriotic duty in the fight for the tsar or Kaiser. The national parties of the region proposed more radical independence programs in their propaganda only when one of the invaders was clearly defeated and the support of second was guaranteed. National leaders saw the war as a time of the great emotional chaos which could be exploited in political power-jockeying. The most brutal language was used in Bolshevik Russia and in Finland, where the both sides of the [civil war](#) described the other hatefully as bandits, murderers and traitors. The brutalization of the language of propaganda became one of the long-lasting side-effects of the war.

Notes

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4. ↑ Achmatowicz, Polityka Rosji 2003, pp. 311, 368-369, 372, 380; Kidzińska, Agnieszka: Lojaliści z Kongresówki wobec rozwiązania austro-polskiego [Loyalists from the Polish Kingdom towards the Austrian-Polish solution], in: Grinberg, Daniel/Snopko, Jan/Zackiewicz, Grzegorz (eds.): Lata Wielkiej Wojny. Dojrzewanie do niepodległości 1914-1918 [The years of the Great War. The Maturation to the independence 1914-1918], Białystok 2007, p. 320.
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6. ↑ Pajewski, Odbudowa Państwa 2005, pp. 113-114; Lewandowski, Społeczeństwo 2007, p. 49.
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8. ↑ Nałęcz, Polska Organizacja Wojskowa 1984, pp. 48-49, 67, 71, 87, 89-90, 103, 135, 150; Snopko, Społeczeństwo wobec legionów 2007, pp. 292-293; Lewandowski, Społeczeństwo 2007, pp. 48-51.
9. ↑ Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje Pirmojo pasaulinio karo metais 1915-1918. Dokumentų rinkinys [Lithuania under the German occupation during the First World War. Documents], Vilnius 2006, p. 62, quoted after: Kasperavičius, Algis: Rozwój dążeń niepodległościowych Litwinów na litewskiej prowincji w latach okupacji niemieckiej (1915-1918) [The Evolution of the independence tendencies of Lithuanians in the Lithuanian country during the German occupation (1915-1918)], in: Grinberg/Snopko/Zackiewicz (eds.), Lata Wielkiej Wojny 2007, p. 115.

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12. ↑ Paluszyński, *Estonia* 2007, pp. 139-141, 175; Paluszyński, *Łotwa* 1999, p. 114.
13. ↑ Achmatowicz, *Polityka Rosji* 2003, pp. 57-60, 68, 292-294.
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17. ↑ Paluszyński, *Estonia* 2007, pp. 82, 94, 96, 98, 106, 115-116, 126; Bleiere et al., *History of Latvia* 2006, p. 86.
18. ↑ Paluszyński, *Estonia* 2007, pp. 143, 153-154; Bleiere et al., *History of Latvia* 2006, p. 90.

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