

## Imagining the Future in Russia's February Revolution

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**Bericht von:** Steven Müller, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena

The aim of the workshop was to explore the February Revolution exclusively through the analysis of one type of source, the popular press (daily and weekly newspapers, partly journals as well), in order to grasp expectations for the future at this critical juncture, the end of Tsarism. The participants presented an analysis of the character and major ideas of a single newspaper to the workshop as a point for discussion and comparison. The idea was to look at just a short time span, in order to grasp, in the form of 'snap shots', the variety of instant reactions to the Revolution and so to reconstruct „futures past“.

GABRIELE FREITAG (Berlin) opened the workshop, emphasising the relevance of investigating immediate expectations and options of different organisations, actors and parties in a setting of crisis, war and revolution. FRANZISKA SCHEDEWIE and DENNIS DIERKS (Jena) pointed out that the workshop's aim was the preparation of an edited volume, including exemplary newspaper articles in English translation, as well as the conference papers as analyses. An edited source book should complement existing collections that look upon the revolution from the retrospective formed by subsequent developments. The second aim was to focus only on February and March 1917 for being able to grasp the variety of voices as immediate responses to the first break of tradition across the Russian Empire. Therefore, two analytical tools were proposed: First, a concentration on first reactions in the press as one type of source only. Referring to modern media history, newspapers are essential for forming and communicating public polit-

ical discourses, especially after the abolition of press censorship. The second tool was the concept of „future expectations“, which referred to Reinhard Koselleck's concept of „Futures past“. The sudden openness of future, as implied by the revolutionary breakdown of the autocracy, combined with the freedom of the press, also implied the opportunity of expressing and implementing concepts of what was considered a „better future“. Newspapers were also platforms for different groups of the population and reflected centre-periphery-relations. Analysing these types of sources, enables historians to pursue and compare aspects such as the spreading of rumors, the degree of information, or the images and identification of enemies.

HEINZ-DIETRICH LÖWE (Heidelberg) presented the newspapers „Rech“, „Russkie Vedomosti“ and „Utro Rossii“ as liberal, albeit with different tendencies. These newspapers disclosed future expectations within their respective primary views of what was to be considered an „ideal revolution“. The cadet-oriented newspaper „Rech“ supported a state model, in which, like the German model, everything must be based on law and a constitution. It added a distinguished, radical, grass-root democratic principle of politics, which was elementary for holding together the intelligentsia. Party politics was seen as less important than building a civil society. Their convictions were rooted in experiences of the Revolution of 1905. All three newspapers welcomed the revolution, but also warned of the dangerous effects of splintered sovereignty. For „Utro Rossii“ the published position was that the revolution was accomplished by the Duma with the support of the army and not by the people in general. LUTZ HÄFNER (Bielefeld) analysed the appraisal of the revolution in newspapers of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. Due to a heterogeneous membership structure and a geographically widespread distribution with more than 120 newspapers, no single voice could be extracted, except for the overall demand for land and freedom. The Socialist Revolutionaries were no Marxists and could therefore not single out a determined path into the future. Häfner distinguished the revolutionary semantics in the newspapers,

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emphasising their social role: With financial support through donations by their party members, papers like „Delo naroda“ shaped the term „democracy“ even for the illiterate party adherents.

ANASTASIA SURKOV (Berlin) outlined how the revolution arrived at the provincial, industrial town and old spiritual centre of Vladimir. The chosen newspaper „Staryi Vladimirets“ normally presented itself as very liberal and intellectual. Astonishingly, at the revolutionary outbreak, the newspaper refrained from any of its own comments and limited itself to printing only available official documents or articles from other newspapers. The revolution appeared to come as surprise to Vladimir; the future was described using terms like „sunrise“, „opening“ and „freedom“. MARGARETE ZIMMERMANN (Jena) compared impulses that two Orthodox clerical journals from Tula in Central Russia and Tobol'sk in Western Siberia derived from the revolution. For the church, future expectations were subject to the idea of divine dispensation, as opposed to a human need to control one's own fate. At the same time, the clerical journals welcomed the revolution. Topics tackled were church-state relations, local self-government in the parishes, elementary schooling and the attitudes towards the war. Both dioceses saw the exchange of their bishops, albeit under different circumstances, as the Revolution provided the possibility both to sack unwanted bishops and elect new ones.

JÉRÉMY CARO (Bremen) gave an overview on Jewish press in Ukraine, which greeted the revolution with mocking poetry about the Tsar and generally emphasised Jewish rights. FRANZISKA SCHEDEWIE (Jena) analysed articles from the newspaper „Donskie Oblastnye Vedomosti“ edited in Novocherkassk of the Cossack Don Region. Her findings confirmed Caro's results that poetry and poetic language played a significant role during the first days, in order to fill the sudden vacuum and win the minds and hearts of readers for leading figures, who emerged to take control and use newspapers as their mouthpieces. The newspaper documented the activities of potential new leaders and ways of dealing with the representatives of the old order, who were marked e.g., as

„guilty before history and society“. While the outlook into the future was generally liberal, the language was at times harsh and radical.

The contributions by INGEBORG BALDAUF (Berlin) and DENNIS DIERKS (Jena) displayed the range of possible reactions from liberal to conservative in the Muslim press. BALDAUF focused on the conservative Muslim journal *Al-Izoh* in Tashkent, which could only be established after censorship had been abolished. Although it is impossible to determine individual authorships, it becomes obvious that the contributors of the newspaper belonged to exclusively male, religiously-educated segments of society, which had not received any other, „modern“ education. All articles were written in Muslim prose and dealt with religiously dominated expectations for the future, including the introduction of the Sharia as legal basis. While the land question played no role and the continuation of the war was supported, modernisation and food shortage were viewed with a critical eye. In general, it can be said that this newspaper represents an isolationist standpoint in a differentiated Muslim press. The most important liberal Muslim newspaper „Tercüman“, published in Bakhchysarai on the Crimean Peninsula and discussed by DIERKS, displayed a completely different self-conception and conception of the future. The newspaper's outlook was still strongly coined by its first editor and well-known leader of the Muslim reform movement with a typical „imperial biography“ Gasprinskii (†1914). Because of the newspaper's peripheral location, news from the centre reached the authors late. In an unclear situation, (false) rumors and chaos were perceived as dangers, and „Tercüman“ set itself the task to calm down the population and call it to its patriotic duties. It appeared as a mouthpiece of the centre and of the Provisional Government in the periphery. In conjunction with other papers, the „Tercüman“ only repeated the centre's slogans and failed to develop an active, creative position of its own.

The Moscow issue of the tabloid paper „Gazeta Kopejka“ was presented by PHILIPP SCHOLZ (Jena). As the name implies, this paper was read by the masses and its printing quality was low. Articles were keen to

produce sensation and even took up scandals sent in as rumors by the readers. The paper held back with comments at first, but changed its position as quickly as the masses supported the revolution: From then on, the Tsar's behaviour was decried, and the authors served the prevailing revolutionary mood of their readers. Significant of the images of the future in this paper was the fact that there was a strong blurring and incoherence of the understanding of political concepts: Terms like „tsar“ and „republic“ were likely to be combined in articles designating the political order for the future.

PASI IHALAINEN (Jyväskylä) focused on the period between the abdication of the Tsar and constitution of the Finnish parliament. He dealt with future expectations in the Finnish party newspapers, in particular the social-democratic newspaper „Työmies“, the radically peasant-oriented „Maakansa“, and the conservative „Uusi Suometar“. These Finnish newspapers operated in a highly politicised environment. They quoted Russian papers, however in spite of their close proximity to Petrograd, their reports were relatively late. This can most likely be explained by language gaps and consequently the inability to understand the revolutionary events in detail. In particular, the course of events led to the adoption and coining of terms, which differed and changed in the ways these were understood, and which were intermingled also with other scholarly traditions, especially the Swedish and German. The newspaper provided evidence that there was little demand for full independence before the Bolshevik Revolution. IHALAINEN pointed out that analysing the newspapers revealed some important facts previously unknown and now questioning established narratives, concerning e. g. the activities of Alexandra Kollontai in Finland. ALISTAIR DICKINS (Manchester) showed that the revolution initiated a phase of optimism for the authors of the Socialist Revolutionary party newspaper „Izvesiia Krasnoarskogo Soveta“. The editors of this newspaper were strongly against the Provisional Government and the continuation of the war and in this way more radical than Soviet leadership in Petrograd. The Russian society was referred to as divided into „narod“

(people) and bourgeoisie, with the „narod“ as the only legitimate bearer of the revolution. Strikingly, the authors lionised the narod as the true force of the revolution, but simultaneously feared its capability of violent uprisings and pogroms. The authors' future expectations were coined by historical experiences, but also reflected current events like the food riots in Krasnoarsk in 1917.

The contributions to the conference showed that the February Revolution, as well as the weeks that followed, were characterised by optimism as well as concern about the ongoing war and potential violence, and the impression prevailed of an open and undetermined process. Analysing the newspaper articles as snap shots within a limited time span reveals and refines social, political, linguistic, religious and ethnic variation within the Russian Empire. Future expectations were determined considerably by past experiences, local situations and the mental dispositions in different social environments. By concentrating on one event and one type of source only, it becomes possible not only to reconstruct the different milieus, but also – by means of analysing terms and ideas – to describe future expectations in a period of transition.

### Conference Overview:

Gabriele Freitag (Berlin): Welcome address

#### *Introductory Panel*

Franziska Schedewie / Dennis Dierks (Jena): Introduction

Anton Reshetov (St. Petersburg): Historical discourse on the pages of Russian newspapers in March 1917 - Note: not held due to illness

#### *Political party press*

Chair: Gabriele Freitag (Berlin)

Heinz-Dietrich Löwe (Heidelberg): The liberal newspaper Rech.

Lutz Häfner (Bielefeld): The Socialist Revolutionaries' Central Organ „Delo Naroda“ and the conception of a social revolution of the whole people in 1917.

#### *Reactions in the press across the Empire*

##### *Centre and Western Siberia*

Chair: Raphael Utz (Jena)

Anastasia Surkov (Berlin): „Russia free

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through the will of the people! The country's genius will lead the people to happiness!" – Reactions and expectations in Vladimir, March 1917, as from the daily newspaper „Staryi Vladimirets“.

Margarete Zimmermann (Jena): „Let's act like socialists!" Reactions towards the February Revolution 1917 and visions of the future in the diocese Tobol'sk.

#### *South*

Chair: Dennis Dierks (Jena)

Jérémy Caro (Bremen): A Time of Political Innovation? Jewish Press in Ukraine.

Franziska Schedewie (Jena): Donskie Oblastnye Vedomosti.

#### *Muslim Press*

Chair: Franziska Schedewie (Jena)

Ingeborg Baldauf (Berlin): The Tashkent journal Al-Izoh after the February Revolution.

Dennis Dierks (Jena): „Historical and serious days and our duties." Tercüman's reporting on the February Revolution.

#### *Student panel*

Chair: Franziska Schedewie (Jena)

Philipp Scholz (Jena): Gazeta Kopeika

#### *North and East*

Chair: Joachim von Puttkamer (Jena)

Pasi Ihalainen (Jyväskylä): The international and national future in the Finnish party press from the abdication of Nicholas II to the opening of the Finnish parliament in April 1917.

Alistair Dickins (Manchester): Between Pogroms and Class Struggle: The Conflicting Scripts of a Local Revolution in Siberia.

#### *Roundtable: Future Expectations in the Press*

Tagungsbericht *Imagining the Future in Russia's February Revolution*. 06.04.2017–08.04.2017, Jena, in: H-Soz-Kult 26.07.2017.