

The Kopeck Press: Popular Journalism in Revolutionary Russia, 1908-1918 by
Felix Cowan, University of Toronto Press, 2025

Personally, I am not a fan of historical parallels: they are often too good and too artificial to understand either the past or the present. However, when reading Felix Cowan's *The Kopeck Press: Popular Journalism in Revolutionary Russia, 1908-1918* I kept thinking of how many similarities one can find to the current Russian and indeed global state of affairs of the press.

Cowan's book takes readers on a journey through the penny press of the late Russian empire, showing in detail how journalists saw their audiences, how the newsrooms operated and how journalists sensationalised the news they reported for the sake of profits. Most importantly, the book delves into the debate about the treatment of the tabloid press in the pre-Revolutionary Russia and shows how journalists were, seen and, most importantly, wanted to see themselves as agents of change in the Russian society. This element of the book is very well supported by the archival findings.

The book's argument takes us back to the state of the late Russian empire where, first, the political situation allowed for the emergence of the penny press with multiple voices and arguments freely shoot into the public sphere and, second, demographically the market for such a press emerged precisely at the post-1905 revolutionary years. This lucky coincidence gave birth to the class of media outlets that wanted to speak to the lower classes of the empire, be the shapers of their worldviews and the partners they would find comfortable to talk to. Cowan did a tremendous work digging out from the archives all the relevant publications, including letters to the newspaper – the most valuable source of audience's opinion in the studies of Russian and Soviet press of the 20th century. Natalia Roudakova's brilliant study of the late Soviet press (*Losing Pravda*, 2017) showed interaction between audiences and journalists a pinnacle of editorial processes and the reasons why even in the heavy propaganda state journalists enjoyed reputation of truth seekers. Cowan does very similar argument by showing how the interaction between the penny press staff and their audiences through letters to the editorial team helped address many critical problems of the time that impacted lower classes in the empire.

Cowan shows that just like today's tabloids the penny press in the imperial Russia was keen on sensationalism that triggered debates in society about the low culture of the poorly uneducated masses that endangers the high culture of the capitals and their high-quality press. And like today these debates illuminate more essential issues that haunt our societies: inequality, corruption and lack of representation that can halt the process of democratisation. No surprise, as Cowan shows, the penny press became the crucial link in connecting the new audiences around the empire – that previously couldn't afford broadsheets – with the issues that in a certain form would affect them – rights of women, workers' problems and everyday unfairness felt by millions of Russian citizens at the time. Cowan shows how the first and most famous penny press newspaper *Kopeika* gave birth to the generation of cheap newspapers in cities and towns across the empire. Not all of them were profitable, but the capitalist market helped them find their niche and prosper, until the revolutions of 1917 that undermined it.

The importance of Cowan's book is the revival of debates around the nature of the press in developing democracy. The author engages in the fruitful argument and disagreement with previous authors, Jeffrey Brooks and Louise McReynolds and convincingly fills the gaps that were left by the previous generation of scholars.

Finally, the book resonates a lot with the situation in today's Russian and more broadly global press. As sensationalism seems to be the sole driver of cash to the media outlets whose financial models were significantly undermined by social media, the book invites us to think outside the box of 'bad' tabloids and 'quality' press. The book convincingly demonstrates that the form of sensationalist editorial framing brings more than just disinformation of audiences. At times, this is the only way to engage audiences in the productive conversation about the societal problems and place this debate across the class divides. This certainly requires patience and open-mindedness in the ability to see not just the brands but news making as the process done in line with certain rules and where everyone is capable of making mistakes – either a high brow media or a small kopeck newspaper. The political economy of small media, as Cowan's book showed, provided the foundation for the springing of multiple newspapers across the country that found their readers and sources of money. That, in many ways, is the answer to today's problems of independent Russian media – find the link to the key audiences who would be willing to engage emotionally and financially with them and support their operations.