SOCIAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY

DOI: 10.46340/ephd.2025.11.1.1

BLASPHEMERS OF THE TSAR AND GOD: THE "OFFENSIVE CASES" OF EARLY 20th-CENTURY YEKATERINOSLAV

Serhii Savchenko[1], PhD in History; Oleksandr Vysotskyi[2], D.Sc. in Political Science, PhD in History

[1] *Ukrainian State University of Science and Technologies, Ukraine*

[2] *Oles Honchar Dnipro National University, Dnipro, Ukraine*

Corresponding author: Oleksandr Vysotskyi; Email: vysalek@gmail.com

Citation: Savchenko, S., & Vysotskyi, O. (2025). Blasphemers of the Tsar and God: The "Offensive Cases" of Early 20th-Century Yekaterinoslav. *Evropský filozofický a historický diskurz*, *11*, *1*, 5-20. https://doi.org/10.46340/ephd.2025.11.1.1

Abstract

This study aims to reconstruct the "voice of the people" in early 20th-century Yekaterinoslav Province by analyzing cases of verbal offenses against the imperial family, religious institutions, as well as state authorities. Using archival police reports and legal documents, the research examines of how these offenses functioned as both spontaneous outbursts and structured forms of social protest, revealing broader societal tensions. The objective of the present study is to explore the role of blasphemy and political insults in expressing dissatisfaction with tsar Nicholas II's perceived weakness, misfortune, and failure to meet traditional expectations of rulership. By placing these offenses in the context of popular culture, anti-monarchism, and delegitimization of power, this study challenges traditional revolutionary interpretations that frame them solely as symptoms of class struggle. Instead, it argues that many participants did not reject monarchy as an institution but rather criticized the reigning sovereign's perceived incompetence. The increase in documented offenses was not only a reflection of growing unrest but also a consequence of expanding police surveillance and bureaucratic mechanisms that politicized expressions of frustration. The findings provide new perspectives on popular geopolitics, showing that admiration for foreign powers, particularly Japan, sometimes accompanied anti-monarchical rhetoric. Additionally, this research enhances the understanding of how informal communication networks helped spread oppositional sentiment, further undermining the legitimacy of autocratic rule. By examining these overlooked sources, the study reinterprets the intersections of popular culture, local history, and political resistance in the late Russian Empire.

Keywords: local history, traditions, popular geopolitics, regional history, popular culture, social protest, insults, obscene language, delegitimization, anti-monarchism.

Introduction

Among the documentary collections of the early 20th century, the reports of district police officers and accompanying documentation detailing cases of insults against the imperial family, the Church, and religious institutions hold particular research value. Despite the fact that these sources are based on unverifiable information (rumors, eavesdropped conversations, speculations), their significance for reconstructing public

sentiment surpasses that of traditional sources such as village verdicts or loyal addresses. The methodological advantage of these documents lies in their mass nature, which neutralizes the "single witness effect," as well as in their non-public character, minimizing populist rhetoric – though not entirely eliminating other forms of informational distortion. Of particular value is the authentic oral speech of critics of the authorities, preserved in these reports, which emerges through the lens of bureaucratic discourse.

Our focus is on a body of documents from Yekaterinoslav Province in the early 20th century, housed in the State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region. It is important to note the significant limitations of this source base, caused by the partial destruction of the archive in 1941. These limitations include fragmentation, disrupted informational connections between documents, and the absence of complete investigative cases despite the presence of individual procedural documents (reports, official correspondence, witness testimonies). This article attempts to answer the question: Can an almost destroyed archival collection serve as a means for reconstructing historical reality? If so, to what extent? It is also necessary to emphasize the localized nature of the conclusions drawn, which should not be extrapolated beyond the studied socio-territorial context. Given this, the objective of this study is to reconstruct the "voice of the people" in the so-called "offensive cases" of the early 20th century, based on the fragmentarily preserved set of documents from the State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region. These cases were initiated by the police against those who defamed the tsar's name, blasphemed, and used obscene language.

Literature Review

Historians have traditionally regarded offensive documents as minor, monotonous, and uninformative. Even during the Soviet era, they were used only as secondary decorative material to support the thesis of emerging symptoms of revolution and class struggle. Peasants allegedly expressed their revolutionary stance toward the monarchy, the Church, and God through verbal insults[1]. These were viewed as "openly atheistic, freethinking ideas... characteristic of the most revolutionary segment of the peasantry," influenced by the Bolsheviks[2]. From the 1950s to the late 1980s, evaluative judgments remained largely unchanged, though the style became less aggressive. Cases of "offending His Majesty with obscene words" were interpreted as reflections of popular class struggle and the idea of "overthrowing autocracy."[3]

The most serious attempt to analyze this issue was made by the prominent scholar of peasant history, Boris Litvak. He contributed numerous source-based observations on the nature of offensive cases and the bureaucratic processes governing their administrative handling. He preferred to examine not initiative documents (denunciations and reports) but judicial materials, particularly verdicts, which, in his view, more reliably "reflect the evolution of peasant mass consciousness."[4] He was interested in cases where the court proved the "deliberate" protest stance of the peasant rather than mere swearing and obscenity.[5] While his general conclusions aligned with the party line (that the peasantry was "developing revolutionary views" and "maturing for the great step toward revolutionary struggle alongside the proletariat"),[6] his emphasis on the bureaucratic origins and proliferation of such cases encourages exploration beyond class theory.

Elena Smilyanskaya, in her study of 18th-century popular culture, demonstrated that verbal, indirect insults against the tsar, combined with sacrilege and blasphemy, were commonplace in peasant society and had no direct connection to revolution or modernization.[7] Nevertheless, a "revolutionary" perspective – albeit in a softer version – remains influential among some serious scholars. Some argue that the mass cases of insults against the tsar indicate "the onset of the erosion of fundamental peasant values and the transformation of peasant consciousness toward revolutionary-renewalist ideas and perceptions."[8]

[1] Emelyakh, L. I. (1976). *Peasants and the Church on the Eve of October*. Leningrad, 55, 176.
[2] Emelyakh, L. I. (1956). The Anti-Church Movement of Peasants During the First Russian Revolution. *Questions of the History of Religion and Atheism. Collection of Articles, 3*, 477.
[3] Senchakova, L.T. (ed.) (2000). Sentences and Instructions of Peasants in Central Russia (1905-1907). *Collection of Documents*, 222-223.
[4] Litvak, B. G. (1989). *The Peasant Movement in Russia (1775-1904): History and Methodology of Studying Sources.* Moscow, 212-214.
[5] Ibid, 234.
[6] Ibid, 220.
[7] Smilyanskaya, E. B. (2003). *Magicians. Blasphemers. Heretics. Folk Religiosity and "Spiritual Crimes" in Russia in the XVIII Century*. Moscow.
[8] Konovalov, V. S. (2005). Workers, and Soldiers of Russia on the Eve and During the First World War. *Social and Humanitarian Sciences. Domestic and Foreign Literature. History*, *5*, 59.

Recently, cultural-anthropological interpretations have emerged, though not specifically based on Ukrainian material. Some of these interpretations have been analyzed by Konovalova. Historians have moved away from directly linking insults to revolution, which is a positive development; however, attempts to find new explanatory models are not always convincing. For instance, the "carnivalesque" theory cannot be stretched indefinitely, as its applicability is quite limited.[1] The "archetypal" explanation – that insults arose because "peasants felt a lack of unity with the tsar, an idea that had long existed in peasant culture" – is also unsatisfactory, as it relies on metaphysical and unverifiable concepts.[2] Moreover, when exactly did peasants feel unity with the tsar? Which peasants, with which tsar, in which century? The ecclesiastical-monarchical mythologeme is somehow taken at face value. The theory of rumors about Nicholas II being an impostor, proposed by Konovalova herself, is intriguing but weakly substantiated. However, it is beyond doubt that the last emperor did not correspond to the popular ideal of a just ruler. It is also clear that, contrary to Bolshevik mythology, peasants did not call the tsar "Bloody" – he was simply a "bloodsucker"[3] to them, for reasons unrelated to the tragedy of January 9, 1905.[4]

Psychological interpretations based on materials from central Russia have been proposed by Olga Sukhova. She identifies in offensive texts "deviant elements in the structure of collective consciousness," "manifestations of mass social aggression during the revolutionary period," "erosion of archetypal perceptions," consequences of the breakdown of the "social contract" between peasants and the tsar, and the sublimation of an "extremely critical attitude toward the world."[5] These were expressions of "anti-monarchical sentiment," socially upheld by both the poorest and the wealthiest peasants – kulaks – whose growing numbers paralleled the increase in insults against the tsar. Ultimately, "collective consciousness began to outgrow the need for the very institution of tsarist authority." In peasant eyes, the tsar was relegated to a "lower rung of the social hierarchy."[6] While Sukhova's observations are largely accurate, they are complicated by an excessive immersion in topics that extend beyond strict academic discourse, such as "archetypes," "the unconscious," and "collective consciousness."

In Ukrainian historiography, research has traditionally focused on the economic conditions of the peasantry and the awakening of national consciousness. The study of peasant worldviews is typically limited to ethnographic detailing of "cordocentrism," "sentimentality," "diligence," and other self-congratulatory traits postulated by populists in the 1860s – 1880s.[7] Perhaps this is why the series of sources on verbal insults against the emperor has received little attention. The connection between their emergence and Bolshevik propaganda is no longer emphasized, yet these documents are either ignored as informational debris or selectively used to illustrate the decline of the Church's authority, the conflict between the peasant world and modernization, and the rise of revolutionary sentiment.[8] Only in a few studies are peasant behavioral and verbal deviations linked to socio-cultural and mental factors.[9]

Results

Insulting the Tsar and God as a Means of Strengthening Expressive Language

We observe numerous documented instances of insults directed at both the tsar and God within the popular milieu. The frequency of such occurrences significantly increased in the early twentieth century compared to any period of the previous century (the probable reasons for this will be discussed later).

[1] Konovalova, N.A. (2014). On the study of the problem of insulting the Emperor's Majesty by peasants in the early twentieth century. *Bulletin of Omsk University, 1*, 45-46.
[2] Ibid.
[3] As Olga Sukhova demonstrated in her study of Russian peasant psychology, the tsar's bloodthirstiness and justice were not contradictory but rather coincided in the personalities of the most "just" tsars – Ivan the Terrible and Peter I. These tsars were "peasantized" in the popular consciousness more than others: "The tsar's righteousness was considered derivative of his peasant nature." See: Sukhova, O.A. (2008). Ten Myths of Peasant Consciousness. *Essays on the History of Social Psychology and Mentality*. Moscow.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid, 324-325, 326.
[6] Ibid, 336.
[7] Portnova, T. (2016). *To Love and Teach: The Peasantry in the Perceptions of the Ukrainian Intelligentsia in the Second Half of the XIX Century*. Dnipropetrovsk.
[8] Prisyazhnyuk, Yu. P. (2007). *Ukrainian Peasantry of Dnieper Ukraine: A Socio-Mental History of the Second Half of the XIX – Early XX Century*. Cherkasy.
[9] Mikhailiuk, A. (2011). Hooliganism in Ukrainian Villages of the Early 20th Century as a Manifestation of Laughter Culture. *Doksa, 16,* 132-143.

In many cases, reviling the tsar was inextricably linked with demonstrative blasphemy. However, this act should not be interpreted in a simplistic manner as an inevitable symptom of a loss of faith in God, atheization, or "Bolshevization" of the collective consciousness. To grasp this aspect of the issue, one can turn to anthropological studies on the phenomenon of tabooing a ruler's name.[1] In this light, the practice can be seen as a peculiar reminiscence of archaic magical rituals, manifesting in an inverted or counter-behavioral form.

Proponents of semiotic interpretations may recall Boris Uspensky's observation that "the attitude toward the tsar resembles the attitude toward an icon: the tsar may be perceived as a visible image of God."[2] If we accept this conceptual framework, then for those who profaned the tsar's name, this act served as a means of amplifying the emotional and semantic weight of their curses by verbally desecrating what official societal norms deemed sacred. The tsar's name was safeguarded by the laws of the Russian Empire and considered sacrosanct: "To obey His Supreme Authority <...> is a commandment of God Himself."[3] The 1903 Criminal Code contained Article 103, which prescribed up to eight years of penal servitude for "insulting the reigning Emperor, Empress, or Heir to the Throne," as well as for "threatening Their Person or desecrating Their image." Such an offense could be committed directly or indirectly, with the intent to "incite disrespect toward Their Person." If it was established that no such intent existed, the offender was confined to a fortress.[4]

The increased risk of severe punishment for sacrilegious profanity heightened its emotional impact on listeners – bearers of a traditional worldview. One case heard in a district court concerned a peasant named Sergei Perepelitsyn, who was held in a prison under the jurisdiction of the Bakhmut County Police. One day, he wished to take a walk, but the prison authorities denied his request. "Then Perepelitsyn began <...> to swear obscenely and proceeded to utter curses, daring to direct them at the reigning Emperor, the Empress, their August children, and the Dowager Empress."[5] The force of his profanity appeared to escalate with the increasing number of sacred imperial names invoked. The prisoner admitted his guilt, explaining his outburst as "irritation due to illness."[6]

In such instances, the factor of public exposure was crucial: the blasphemer required an audience – spectators and listeners whose emotional reactions reinforced the act. This spectacle could take on a theatrical dimension: "On May 18, in the marketplace of the Alexandrovsk mine, the Auerbach worker Mikhail Kovalev uttered profane words against God, His saints, and the reigning Emperor."[7]

Typically, the tsar's name was invoked in the heat of everyday quarrels and disputes among peasants rather than at political gatherings. Violating this taboo conferred a certain authority upon the blasphemer, providing additional weight to his argument, as not all opponents had the courage to respond in kind (instead, they resorted to "loyalist" denunciations). In this regard, curses that included references to both the tsar and God, along with the Church, carried even greater rhetorical force. Within the framework of popular street and carnival culture, such expressions were acceptable,[8] yet they remained entirely impermissible from the perspective of the Orthodox Empire's criminal law. The 1903 Criminal Code dedicated Article 73 to "casting blasphemy" upon the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary, angels, and saints. A blasphemer faced real risks of penal servitude or exile to a remote settlement.[9]

Of course, the article had been secularized; its content made no reference to the idea that the blasphemer acted in service of unclean forces or engaged in sorcery, as was the case in earlier legal codes (under the 1649 Sobornoye Ulozhenie, blasphemers were burned at the stake).[10] Officially, the charge was

[1] Frazer, J.G. (2016). *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 257-259.
[2] Uspensky, B. A. (2002). *Essays on Russian History*. St. Petersburg, 293.
[3] Russian Empire (1857). *Code of Laws, 1(1)*. St. Petersburg, 2.
[4] Russian Empire (1903). *Criminal Code*. St. Petersburg, 22.
[5] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1916). Case on the Accusation of Peasant Sergey Kalinovich Perepelitsyn in an Uprising Against the Tsar's Autocracy. *Fund 177. Inventory 1. Case 10*. Sheet 2.
[6] Ibid.
[7] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1907-1909). Telegrams, Reports, and Correspondence with the Police Department, ESGA, and Ekaterinoslav Security Department. *Fund 11. Inventory 1. File 546 b*. Sheet 591.
[8] Bakhtin, M. M. (1990). *The Work of François Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.* Moscow; Uspensky, B. A. (1994). The Mythological Aspect of Russian Expressive Phraseology. *Selected Works.* Moscow, *2*, 53-128.
[9] Russian Empire (1903). *Criminal Code*. St. Petersburg, 16.
[10] Smilyanskaya, E. B. (2003). *Magicians. Blasphemers. Heretics. Folk Religiosity and "Spiritual Crimes" in Russia in the XVIII Century*. Moscow.

merely one of "causing scandal among those present," yet the cultural and symbolic background of blasphemous swearing remained largely archaic and deeply multifaceted.

There were numerous cases in which offenses against Their Majesties also included elements of blasphemy. A report from the Slavyanoserbsk district reached Yekaterinoslav, stating that "on January 23, a worker at the Donetsk-Yuriev plant, the peasant […] Mikhail Yakovlev, while intoxicated, uttered profane words against God and the Most Holy Person of His Imperial Majesty."[1] A peasant from the Bakhmut district, Platon Medvedev, after cursing the tsar, declared that "for him, neither tsar nor God exists."[2] A laborer at a mine in the Verkhnedneprovsk district, Pyotr Chekin, during a theological dispute, blasphemed against God "using obscene language."[3] Another peasant from the Bakhmut district, Ivan Kiyenko, informed the police that his son-in-law "spoke in offensive terms about the Sovereign Emperor and the Holy Church."[4] The authorities learned of this incident only because the two men had a strained relationship, and the father-in-law may have hoped for a reward for his vigilance. Many such denunciations were indeed motivated by a desire to earn favor with the authorities.

Ignat Avramenko reported an acquaintance who, in the midst of a tirade against his wife, turned his invective against the Sovereign, Christ, and icons. When reprimanded and urged to restrain himself, he retorted: "I am God and Tsar myself, and no one has the right to command my wife."[5] A peasant from the Alexandrovsk district, Vasily Buryak, cursed both the Tsar and God in the presence of two fellow villagers, who later reported him to the police.[6] Meanwhile, an illiterate and "drunken" peasant, Alexander Dubrovsky, a resident of Yekaterinoslav district, simultaneously hurled profanities at the "Tsar-Father" and the State Duma, adding that he "spoke unfavorably about the Holy Gospel, claiming that there is no truth in it."[7]

Notably, officials in their reports often transcribed profane utterances verbatim, thereby violating the legal taboo against reproducing obscene language, which "in principle cannot be transferred into metatext or become a mere quotation." Such words defy citation because they "retain an immediate connection to their content in any context," and those who utter them, regardless of circumstances, intentions, or motives, bear full responsibility.[8] This was the traditional worldview: whoever recorded blasphemy, by documenting the crime, effectively joined the chorus of blasphemers and profaners. The Europeanized bureaucrat no longer grasped the fundamental ontological reality of the sign. This, indirectly, testifies to the secularization of consciousness even among those charged with safeguarding the immutable and sacred foundations of autocracy.

The hypothesis that profanity was "intensified" by the inclusion of sacred names – those of the tsar, theonyms, and hagiographic anthroponyms – is supported by the fact that, within the examined archival materials, we rarely encounter curses that combine sacred and profane nominological elements in a single semantic construction.[9] From the perspective of strict revolutionary theory, this would be logical: local authorities were more immediate and oppressive than the distant tsar, and the people harbored no naïve illusions about officials. As Olga Sukhova notes, peasants felt a particular "antipathy" toward district chiefs due to their "absolute power" over them, calling them "murderers," "bloodsuckers," "dogs," "scoundrels," and other epithets of enmity.[10] However, these names or titles never appeared in ritualistic everyday profanities. Unlike the image and name of the tsar,[11] officials did not represent an "unattainable ethical value" for the peasantry, rendering their profanation through ritual desecration meaningless.

---

[1] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1901). Reports of Police Departments and District Officials. *Fund 11. Inventory 1. File 316.* Sheet 20.

[2] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1906). Cases of Persons Accused of Agitation Against the Tsar. *Fund 11. File 541.* Sheet 23.

[3] Ibid, 27.

[4] Ibid, 32.

[5] Ibid, 38.

[6] Ibid, 61.

[7] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1908). Telegrams, Reports, and Correspondence with the Police Department, Ekaterinoslav State Gendarmerie Administration (ESGA), and Security Department. *Fund 11. Inventory 1. File 546.* Sheet 356.

[8] Uspensky, B. (1994). The Mythological Aspect of Russian Expressive Phraseology. *Selected Works*. Moscow, *2*, 58.

[9] However, this is just a hypothesis; we do not exclude a simpler explanation: the loss of corresponding sources, as noted at the beginning of the article.

[10] Sukhova, O.A. (2008). Ten Myths of Peasant Consciousness. *Essays on the History of Social Psychology and Mentality*. Moscow, 371.

[11] Ibid, 305.

The Criminalization of Insulting Officials

Meanwhile, insulting government officials was also criminalized, though not too harshly. According to the 1845 Code of Punishments, "acts of violence committed to insult an official," even if not in an official setting, were punishable by confinement in a correctional institution for one to three years "with the loss of certain rights and privileges." Verbal insults were punishable by confinement for three to six months. If an official was insulted by someone who was drunk, ignorant, or did not intend to show disrespect – using words that were "improper but not abusive or slanderous" – the penalty was merely symbolic: a formal apology or a small fine.[1] The 1903 Criminal Code was more succinct: Article 530 stipulated that anyone guilty of insulting a public official would face "imprisonment."[2]

The Paradox of Blasphemous Swearing

Swearing that invoked sacred names created a paradoxical situation. For the peasantry, the tsar and God were perceived as "allies" included in the imagined collective "We," which stood in opposition to "Them" – the landlords and bureaucrats.[3] Within peasant culture, irreverence toward the tsar was considered sinful; he was seen as the source of prosperity and justice.[4] This worldview remained remarkably resilient, despite increasing secularization, up until 1917. At the same time, historian Elena Smilyanskaya observed that in traditional society, blasphemy and sacrilege were not expressions of disbelief or, as Soviet authors would later claim, instances of "spontaneous atheism."[5] Rather, they were "a peculiar, inverted manifestation of deeply ingrained elements of 'folk faith.'" The dualism of popular religiosity presupposed the coexistence of sacralization and profanation, behavioral norms and their opposites.[6]

A Weak, Unlucky, and Sleeping Tsar[7]

An analysis of criminal and administrative cases handled by the Yekaterinoslav police suggests a hypothesis: the root of these incidents lay in collective archaic beliefs about a ruler's "luck" or "misfortune."[8] Profane language that mentioned the tsar's name may have functioned as an assessment of that specific monarch rather than as a mere act of malicious insult.[9] The label of "unlucky ruler," who doomed his people to misfortune, became firmly attached to Nicholas II after the Khodynka Tragedy. From that moment, nothing could sever the association between the emperor and the suffering of the people. By 1896, Nicholas II had no "achievements" to his name except for the disastrous stampede at Khodynka, but that alone was enough for the peasantry to brand him a "son of a bitch."[10]

The "unlucky autocrat" was blamed for everything. A peasant conscript from Kryvyi Rih volost, Leontiy Moshlaty, cursed Nicholas II for taking away his land and conscripting him into military service.[11] Matvei Chaika, a peasant from Yekaterinoslav Uyezd, accused the emperor of being incapable

[1] Russian Empire (1845). *Legal Code of Punishments.* St. Petersburg, 126.
[2] Russian Empire (1903). *Criminal Code*. St. Petersburg, 105.
[3] Litvak, B. G. (1989). *The Peasant Movement in Russia (1775-1904): History and Methodology of Studying Sources.* Moscow, 186.
[4] Mironov, B. N. (2000). *Social History of Russia (XVIII – Early XX Century) in Two Volumes*. St. Petersburg, *1*, 329.
[5] Smilyanskaya, E. B. (2003). *Magicians. Blasphemers. Heretics. Folk Religiosity and "Spiritual Crimes" in Russia in the XVIII Century*. Moscow, 214.
[6] Uspensky, B. A. (1996). *Selected Works. Semiotics of History. Semiotics of Culture.* Moscow, *1*, 460-476.
[7] Notably, after the social experiments of Soviet power, Nicholas II became a subject of nostalgia among the peasantry of southern Ukraine. "When little Mykola was a fool, A bun was worth a nickel's rule!" "If only we had a tsar so grand, Or a Hetman ruling Russian land!" "When Tsar Mykola played the fool, A bun still cost a nickel's rule. But then the Reds came marching in – No crumbs were left, not even thin!" "When Tsar Mykola was a clown, A loaf was cheap, just five cents down. But when commissars took their fill, They counted all – and left us nil."
[8] About a ruler who has lost his vital and magical powers and has become a threat to his people see: Tolochko, A. (1992). *The Prince in Kievan Rus': Prince, Property, Ideology*. Kyiv, 16-17.
[9] As B.A.Uspensky argued, foul language "as a rule is not perceived as an insult". Its semantic load depends not on the verbal content, but on the situation and form of reproduction. See: Uspensky, B.A. (1994). *Selected Works.* Moscow, *2*, 53-55.
[10] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1896). Reports of the Ekaterinoslav Police Chief and District Officials. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 265.* Sheet 10.
[11] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1906). Cases of Persons Accused of Agitation Against the Tsar. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 541,* Sheet 1.

of governing the state and concluded that "if he didn't exist, things would be better."[1] The police classified this remark as an ideological stance of a "supporter of the revolutionary movement."[2] Mark Pletenzov hurled obscenities at the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, though the case file does not clarify the reason – presumably, for giving birth to an inept ruler. His offense was classified as "anti-government agitation."[3]

Retired Second Lieutenant Pokorsky from Tomakovka, in a private conversation with the peasant Korney Rozhkovsky, accused Nicholas II of "whoring around, that motherf-er, all he does is chase after girls and does nothing good for the peasants… Soon we'll set things right and establish our own order in Russia."[4] His well-intentioned conversation partner reported him to the police.

A peasant from the village of Zhelannaya, while drunk, cursed His Majesty the Emperor in the coarsest terms, declaring that "we don't need a tsar."[5] The police officer in Aleksandrovsk reported on a peasant from the village of Voznesenka, Nikolai Rogov, who, "in a drunken state," cursed loudly inside the local rural administration building, directing his insults at the portrait of Nicholas II. When reprimanded, he turned his profanity directly toward the tsar himself.[6]

Zachar Shapovalov, a peasant from Verkhnedneprovsk Uyezd, in the presence of a policeman and two fellow villagers, called the emperor a "Black Hundreds supporter" and his government "a gang of swindlers."[7] Foma Ostapenko, apparently upset over liquor prices, called the tsar a "tavern keeper."[8] A police officer in Novomoskovsk reported an incident where a peasant proclaimed: "There is no justice in Russia, the tsar doesn't care about the peasants, he's a drunkard."[9]

Pavel Skosarenko, a resident of the village of Nikolaevka in Krynychansko-Nikolaevskaya volost, "while intoxicated," during an argument with fellow peasants, "uttered profanities against the Sacred Person of His Majesty the Emperor."[10] Grigory Mikhaylenko from Verkhnedneprovsk Uyezd, while examining a hundred-ruble banknote, "referred to Empress Catherine the Great using the most obscene word imaginable.[11]

Such stories accumulated by the hundreds, and their protagonists were not only peasants or factory and mine workers (often former peasants themselves) but also members of the nobility. In the latter cases, profane insults directed at the tsar were generally not motivated by economic grievances but rather had a hooligan-like character. Nobles cursed the tsar simply because they could afford to do so. The district police chief of Pavlograd reported to the governor about a nobleman from the settlement of Synelnykove, Alexander Yegorov, who, "in a drunken state," hurled obscene insults at Nicholas II in connection with the passage of the imperial train through the local station.[12]

A resident of a village in the Alexandrovsk district, Yakov Marunich, denounced another nobleman, Nikolai Sinitsyn. The peasant was outraged that in May 1899, Sinitsyn had "dared to utter profane words against His Imperial Highness, Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich."[13] It is worth noting that peasants took particular pleasure in informing on nobles who insulted the imperial family, often doing so with a sense of schadenfreude and the conviction that they were thereby serving the sovereign.[14]

---

[1] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1906). Cases of Persons Accused of Agitation Against the Tsar. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 541,* Sheet 4.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid, 5.
[4] Ibid, 7.
[5] Ibid, 18.
[6] Ibid, 20.
[7] Ibid, 37.
[8] Ibid, 26.
[9] Ibid, 36.
[10] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1896). Reports of the Ekaterinoslav Police Chief and District Officials. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 265,* Sheet 5.
[11] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1901). Reports of the Ekaterinoslav Police Chief and District Officials. Reports of Police Departments and District Officials. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 316*, Sheet 54.
[12] Ibid, 2.
[13] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1899). Reports of the Ekaterinoslav Police Chief and District Officials. Case on the Prohibition of Residence in Ekaterinoslav Province. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 319,* Sheet 46.
[14] Litvak, B. G. (1989). *The Peasant Movement in Russia (1775-1904): History and Methodology of Studying Sources.* Moscow, 220.

Pro-monarchical propaganda eagerly recorded such incidents in its catalog of the people's love for their adored ruler.[1] However, deciphering the motives behind these denunciations is no simple task. While they should not be over-ideologized, it remains essential to consider the perspectives of those who documented such cases.

Denunciations were filed against "class-alien" nobles, fellow villagers, neighbors, acquaintances, friends, relatives, and even family members. Workers sometimes reported their employers, citing patriotic motives. A case in point is that of Lavrentiy Bezsirkin, a peasant and member of the Union of Russian Workers, who was employed at the Alexandrovsk mine. After a quarrel with the mine's foremen over workplace drinking, he accused them of "cursing the tsar," hoping that his affiliation with a monarchist organization would influence the outcome. However, he miscalculated. The mine workers refused to corroborate his allegations, Bezsirkin was dismissed, and his political patrons received a reprimand from the governor: "Inform the Union of Russian Workers that it should not advocate for its members who have been dismissed for drunken behavior and insolence, nor should it attempt to convince me that they suffered for their patriotic convictions."[2]

The public's lack of trust in informers could sometimes lead to impunity, particularly when the accused were nobles. Cases initiated against them often collapsed amid bureaucratic wrangling and correspondence, and local authorities showed little enthusiasm for pursuing them. One such incident occurred in the autumn of 1906. On October 21, Prokopiy Shmelev, vice-chairman of the Union of the Russian People, was in a cathedral during a liturgy when he overheard hereditary nobles Nikolai Peresidenko and Nikolai Ivanov "reviling the sacred person of the Sovereign Emperor." A denunciation was promptly submitted to the police chief. One of the alleged offenders turned out to be an employee of the Ekaterinoslav branch of the State Bank. The bank's management refused to participate in the persecution of the supposed blasphemer. To stall the investigation, he was placed on extended leave, and in response to the governor's demand for clarification, a glowing character reference was issued: Peresidenko was described as "a very modest and diligent civil servant" who had never been implicated in any wrongdoing. Ultimately, the bankers turned the tables on the informers themselves – members of the far-right Union of the Russian People – accusing them of harboring "a passion for denunciation" and of having "fabricated a scandal out of nothing."[3] The case dragged on for several months, gradually losing its substance amid official correspondence and futile attempts to clarify the details of the "crime." Whether the accusations were true or mere slander was irrelevant. What mattered was that, in the eyes of autocracy's supporters, the Emperor appeared to tolerate such insults without punishment, thereby revealing his weakness.

The sheer number of such cases suggests not only an increase in those using profanity as a form of protest against autocracy but also a rise in the number of people submitting denunciations – vigilant and patriotically inclined subjects. According to Boris Litvak's calculations, informers and prosecution witnesses consistently formed a much larger group of "conformists" compared to the lone "protester" or their sympathizers, with a ratio of approximately six to one.[4] The key question is whether this form of "revolutionary protest" intensified of its own accord or whether it was a consequence of the increased documentation of such incidents, the encouragement of denunciations as a means of communication with the state, and the expansion of local police and informant networks. It should not be forgotten that failing to report blasphemy was itself punishable under the 1845 *Criminal* Code by imprisonment for six months to a year or detention for a period of three weeks to three months.[5] This certainly incentivized denunciations, particularly in such cases.

A particularly striking instance of politically motivated blasphemy was recorded by the district police chief of Alexandrovsk. A peasant named Nestor Ustimenko, in a "state of unconscious drunkenness," declared: "There is no autocracy, no Mother of God, no Saint Nicholas. The tsar himself is nothing, fuck his

[1] Varyagin, P. V. (1906). *The Voice of the Russian People about the Tsar*. Tsarskoye Selo.
[2] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1908). Telegrams, Reports, and Correspondence with the Police Department, Ekaterinoslav State Gendarmerie Administration (ESGA), and Security Department. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 546,* Sheets 100-101.
[3] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1906). Cases of Persons Accused of Agitation Against the Tsar. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 541,* Sheets 41-51.
[4] Litvak, B. G. (1989). *The Peasant Movement in Russia (1775-1904): History and Methodology of Studying Sources.* Moscow, 264.
[5] Russian Empire (1903). *Criminal* Code, 63-64.

fucking mother."[1] Notably, his blasphemy stemmed from an assessment of the current political situation: if autocracy no longer existed, then the tsar had no real power. Could this reflect a kind of nostalgia for an unlimited monarchy? Many cases suggest that certain peasants were less dissatisfied with autocracy itself than with the particular autocrat in power, who failed to match their ideal of a strong and mighty sovereign. For instance, the district police chief of Verkhnedneprovsk recorded an incident in which a village scribe fervently sang "God Save the tsar" – only to immediately curse the reigning Emperor.[2]

In this light, the open admiration for Japan, which was soon expected to "take over all of Russia," becomes more comprehensible. According to such sentiment, "we will no longer have a tsar; let him go to the bloody mother, and Russia will be ruled by jids."[3] The logical incoherence of this notion did not diminish its popularity.

The existence of a weak and spineless tsar made no sense in the eyes of the peasants. His physical extermination, along with his entire family, seemed entirely justified. The "drunken" peasants of Alexandrovsk were dissatisfied with the operating hours of the state liquor store and voiced their outrage: "What kind of tsarist order is this? They killed Sergei Alexandrovich, and the same fate awaits the tsar – he brings only chaos to Russia..."[4]

A peasant from Mariupol County, Yakov Olkhovsky, rejoiced: "They tore Prince Sergei apart; the same will happen to the Sovereign."[5] Some even drank out of joy: "I am drunk because the Grand Duke has been killed."[6] Certain peasants from Slavyanoserbsk County were caught dreaming of establishing a government "like in Germany."[7] The attitude toward the reigning tsar extended to state symbols as well. The miners of Bakhmut reported a colleague for lacking patriotic feelings. When the proposal to hoist the national flag over the mine was discussed, he allegedly remarked, "To hell with that flag."[8]

A particularly telling incident occurred in Mariupol County. Vigilant neighbors overheard the musings of the peasant Taras Rogulya: "They killed the Grand Duke, and they should slaughter the entire royal family too – they're all swindlers. Who will be tsar then? Or you, or me, or whoever the fuck, then we can all do it!"[9] In peasant political philosophy, the weakness of tsarist power did not lead to liberalism and democracy but rather to lawlessness and complete anarchy.

A policeman from Slavyanoserbsk County, Yakov Boldyrev, visited his father-in-law, Grigory Rakovshchenko, a peasant from the village of Bely, who also sympathized with the assassins of the Grand Duke. He shared his views with his son-in-law: "The landlords have too much land, and the peasants have none. The heir is still a nobody, yet he already receives a million rubles a year in salary. If Russia had a president, it would be better – there would be no uprisings. Look at England, they have a president, and everything is fine there."[10] Thus, a true tsar should be just and prevent rebellions, like the "English president." The son-in-law reported this conversation to the authorities.

Some were prepared to move from words to action. Convinced of a Jewish conspiracy against the emperor, Martyn Demidenko, a peasant from Verkhnedneprovsk County, attempted to "persuade Jews to kill the Sovereign" and wished to participate in the plot himself.[11]

The belief that tsar Nicholas lacked true power was only reinforced by Russia's subsequent defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. Peasants openly expressed their sympathies for the Japanese emperor, who appeared stronger and more powerful than "our little fool." The police frequently recorded profane insults

[1] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1906). Cases of Persons Accused of Agitation Against the Tsar. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 541,* Sheet 37.
[2] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1899). Case on the Prohibition of Residence in Ekaterinoslav Province. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 319,* Sheet 33.
[3] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1905). Case of Various Persons Accused of Agitation Against the Tsar. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 517,* Sheet 4.
[4] Ibid, 5.
[5] Ibid, 517.
[6] Ibid, 16.
[7] Ibid, 21.
[8] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1899). Case on the Prohibition of Residence in Ekaterinoslav Province. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 319,* Sheet 59.
[9] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1905). Case of Various Persons Accused of Agitation Against the Tsar. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 517,* Sheet 25.
[10] Ibid, 22.
[11] Ibid, 61.

against the Russian emperor, often in connection with the Japanese threat.[1] Upon hearing of the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich's death, Artem Tarasenko, a peasant from Mariupol County, responded: "So they killed him – serves him right! He deserved it. Are these the kind of Sovereigns we should have? If the Japanese conquer us, it won't make any difference whether we serve Japan or Russia."[2]

The Japanese theme was frequently discussed among literate peasants who read newspapers. Alexei Moroz from Pavlograd County, after reading an issue of *Pridneprovsky Krai*, commented on the current geopolitics: "Why sacrifice so many people to the Japanese? It would be better to kill one Sovereign instead."[3]

The present tsar was not only an idle ruler devoid of real power but also a "fool" – a term frequently used to describe him. "A simpleton doesn't know how to govern Russia; all he does is travel abroad and consort with foreign women," opined the village elder of Verkhnedneprovsk County.[4] Semen Dorensky, a peasant from Mariupol County, made the mistake of suggesting in front of his friends that all the Romanovs should be killed after the Grand Duke, particularly since "our Sovereign lacks common sense..."[5]

Konstantin Gorlov, a retired non-commissioned officer from the village of Ternovka, for reasons unknown, had not received his pension: "Let the dogs serve him! That's why he faces uprisings. If our tsar were killed, he would have given us land for free."[6] Peasants were unashamed in their scorn for Nicholas II but spoke with reverence of past emperors, contrasting them with their inept and hapless descendant.[7]

And it wasn't just the peasants. Sometimes, Nicholas II, derided as a "swindler" and a weak-willed "fool," was directly contrasted with a true tsar – his grandfather, Alexander II. During a fair in Novomoskovsk, Mendel Itsko Khaimovsky remarked: "Alexander II was a benefactor, but the current one is scum."[8]

The growing number of cases in which both the tsar and God's name were reviled, as recorded in gubernatorial reports, does not support the Soviet historiographical claim of a weakening of "naïve" peasant monarchism. Rather, it suggests its persistence as a principle – a peculiar norm of autocracy, grounded in the idea of the monarch as a demiurge, a creator and doer. This principle remained a stable regulator of social relations in the peasant milieu even during the inter-revolutionary period when peasant monarchism was supposedly "shot down" on January 9, 1905. (Incidentally, this event stirred the peasants far less than revolutionaries had hoped.)

It seems that many peasants in the province did not merely dislike the last tsar and his family – they despised them and wished them dead. But this had little to do with a critique of autocracy itself. While denouncing Nicholas II, they still expected another tsar to solve their problems – one who was unlike the powerless "idler," be it the Japanese emperor or the "English president."

The paradox of peasant anti-monarchist rhetoric lay in the fact that its very existence stemmed from the tsar's inaction. They were not provoked by his tyranny but by its absence. They failed to witness the acts traditionally perceived as expressions of autocratic power – even in the form of capricious despotism. The lack of a clear response from the sovereign to his own symbolic and political diminishment gave rise to metaphors of a "sleeping tsar" among stalwart monarchists popular with the people, such as Archpriest John of Kronstadt: "May the sleeping tsar, who has ceased to rule with his power, awaken. Grant him courage, wisdom, and foresight," ran one of his prayers.[9]

Toward a powerless, "sleeping," passive ruler, any derogatory remarks, curses, or gestures became psychologically permissible. The widespread perception of Nicholas II as weak-willed, indecisive,

[1] Soviet historiography considered such cases as evidence in favor of the theory of progressive "Bolshevization" of peasants as 1917 approached. See: *Materials on the History of the Ekaterinoslav Bolshevik Social-Democratic Organization and the Revolutionary Events of 1904-1906 (On the 20th Anniversary of the 1905 Revolution). Ekaterinoslav*, 1924. p. 99.

[2] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1905). Case of Various Persons Accused of Agitation Against the Tsar. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 517,* Sheet 11.

[3] Ibid, 36.

[4] Ibid, 27.

[5] Ibid, 44.

[6] Ibid, 34.

[7] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1896). Reports of the Ekaterinoslav Police Chief and District Officials. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 265,* Sheet 34.

[8] Ibid, 53.

[9] *Memories of Contemporaries* (2003). *Saint John of Kronstadt*, 22.

unemotional, and indifferent to everything, compounded by his obvious misfortune (the war with Japan underscored this more than anything), did not fit the archetypal image of a "good," "just," and, most importantly, "peasant-friendly" tsar. And this was despite all of Nicholas's efforts and aspirations to appear as a "people's tsar," for instance, by embracing the cult of St. Seraphim alongside the common folk.[1]

Insults as Social Protest

Undoubtedly, within the stream of verbal abuse recorded in Yekaterinoslav Province between 1896 and 1905, certain cases stood out for their conscious protest character. These instances were particularly well-suited to revolutionary interpretation. For example, on February 21, 1908, during a search of the peasant Vladimir Makukha's home, the third-district police chief of Slavyanoserbsk County discovered offensive verses about the emperor, written in pencil on white paper. Alongside the verses, several socialist books and a pamphlet titled "Talmud" were found, indicating that the appearance of these writings was no mere coincidence.[2]

In a report to the governor, the county police chief described another incident: in the village of Sursko-Mikhailovka, during a local assembly, the village elder proposed commemorating "the upcoming coronation of Their Imperial Majesties with a worthy act." In response, a young peasant, Ignat Kozhushko, declared: "It is not we who are under the protection of His Majesty the Emperor, but rather the Emperor who is under our protection. He lives by us, not we by him..."[3] The oppositional meaning of this statement is not entirely obvious; it is possible that this was merely a rhetorical misstep in expressing loyalist sentiments.

A more unequivocal case, however, involved Trofim Ivanitsa, a peasant from Novomoskovsk County, who, while debating with fellow villagers, uttered a reckless statement: "The tsar – what has he ever given me? He sucks the blood from me and strips the very last skin off my back..."[4] This was undoubtedly an expression of social protest: the peasant was sober, motivated by material hardships, and did not consider it necessary to "protest" through crude profanity.

It is likely that there were many such instances of genuine peasant opposition, yet the fragmentary nature of surviving pre-revolutionary archival materials – preserved only by sheer chance – makes it impossible to assess their representativeness. For instance, in the archives of the Yekaterinoslav Chamber of Criminal Court, not a single case has survived from after 1866.[5] The archives of the Yekaterinoslav District Court, officially classified as "partially lost," are in reality in far worse condition – almost entirely destroyed.[6] Of the entire collection, only twenty-four cases remain, and just one of them concerns a slanderer of the tsar. This case involves the already familiar inmate of Bakhmut Prison, Sergey Perepelitsyn, who, in a fit of rage, cursed the august family and, thanks to the annotations of archivists, was posthumously elevated to the status of a "fighter against autocracy." Even state prosecutors were less categorical in their assessment of his crime.

The Politicization of Everyday Life as a Factor in the Proliferation of "Offensive Cases"

Revolutionary populists were the first to take note of cases involving insults. They saw in them the early stirrings of the people's awakening from monarchical illusions, failing to consider that analogous "cases of indecent speech" had been prosecuted with varying intensity since the late

[1] Nicholas II insisted on the canonization of Seraphim of Sarov despite the opposition of the Holy Synod. See: Firsov, S. L. (2007). *The Church in the Empire. Essays on Church History During the Reign of Emperor Nicholas II.* Saint Petersburg, 101-117. "He strove to appear as a popular Russian tsar, responding to popular tastes and committed to the egalitarian anti-intellectual spirit that was thought to be peculiar to the peasants." However, unlike his gruff father, who was not known for his elegant manners, Nicholas did not resemble a "peasant tsar". See: Wortman, R. (1992). Nicholas II and the Image of Autocracy. In: *Reform or Revolution? Russia, 1861-1917. Materials of the International Colloquium of Historians.* St. Petersburg, 20.

[2] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1908). Telegrams, Reports, and Correspondence with the Police Department, Ekaterinoslav State Gendarmerie Administration (ESGA), and Security Department. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 546,* Sheet 374.

[3] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1896). Reports of the Ekaterinoslav Police Chief and District Officials. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 265,* Sheet 8.

[4] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1901). Reports of Police Departments and District Officials. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 316,* Sheet 12.

[5] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1866). *New Russia Criminal Court Chamber. Ekaterinoslav Criminal Court Chamber* <https://dp.archives.gov.ua/images/stories/opysy/F-368-1.pdf> (2025, March, 14).

[6] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (2017). *Guide.* Dnipro, 185.

seventeenth century.[1] In Yekaterinoslav Province, such cases were far from rare even before the beginning of the twentieth century[2].

Following the assassination of Alexander II, both the opposition and the government began to interpret such cases through an ideological and political lens. The authorities, with paranoid zeal, politicized any form of deviant behavior among the peasantry, whom they regarded as the principal support of the "people's tsar." The "preservation of public order" was accompanied by an extensive hunt for sedition, the encouragement of informants, the recording of private conversations among peasants, and the thematic grouping of such cases into revolutionary "files." The results bordered on the absurd. Revolutionary sentiments were reportedly detected among a crowd of women from Verkhnedneprovsk County who had been discussing a portrait of the Empress. According to a police report, peasant women from the village of Sukhaya Balka had spread "outrageous rumors that Her Imperial Majesty, Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, was not nearly as beautiful as she appeared in her portrait."[3]

This policy intensified after an imperial decree issued in 1878 mandated that police chiefs and county supervisors "arrest individuals suspected of state crimes or 'connected' to such crimes."[4] The latter category was never clearly defined, which facilitated the indiscriminate expansion of the pool of "suspects." According to Boris Litvak, during the 1880s, such cases were recorded hundreds of times more frequently than in the 1860s.[5]

Provincial authorities were well aware of the potential consequences of this policy. In correspondence with the Police Department, the acting governor wrote: "In general, all possible measures are being taken against agrarian unrest in Yekaterinoslav Province. I consider it my official duty to add that, under the influence of various rumors – often completely fabricated – landowners, particularly women, have begun filing complaints against minor infractions by local peasants, which previously went unnoticed, as they were considered commonplace occurrences. Nonetheless, I issue appropriate orders even in response to such complaints."[6] This, in turn, led to a dramatic increase in the volume of "papers" circulating in official correspondence and, consequently, in the number of cases stored in the archives.

The chain of denunciations for seditious words and actions followed approximately this pattern: peasants reported to a local or volost authority (such as a village elder, volost head, scribe, or rural policeman), from where the denunciation was forwarded to a police sergeant, then to a district police officer, and subsequently to the county police chief, who would ultimately submit it to the provincial center in the form of an official report.

In most of the documents we analyzed, it is noted that peasants who blasphemed against the tsar and God were "in a state of drunkenness" at the time. Historians generally tend to accept this "fact" as a reflection of reality without delving into the details of the circumstances. Who recorded this state? The informant, the witnesses? Who measured the degree of intoxication, and by what means? If the so-called "drunken clause" was merely a product of bureaucratic narrative, at what level of the document's journey did it appear? Was it inserted by the author of the denunciation, the volost authorities, the police sergeant, the district officer, the county chief, or the centurion? It seems plausible that reporting the criminal as intoxicated was particularly advantageous for the volost administration, which provided the denunciation with its initial documentation and "passport to life." In doing so, the local authorities sought to absolve themselves of responsibility for the spread of revolutionary sedition within their jurisdiction, since the village elder and volost head were personally accountable for maintaining "public order."

Under Peter I, intoxication during the commission of a crime was considered an aggravating circumstance. More precisely, the legislator was indifferent to whether the blasphemer was drunk or sober – his tongue was burned with iron either way, and then his head was cut off.[7] The issue was not the perpetrator's

[1] Litvak, B. G. (1989). *The Peasant Movement in Russia (1775-1904): History and Methodology of Studying Sources.* Moscow, 214, 219.
[2] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1875). Case of Ivan Golovnya, Accused of Insulting the Tsar. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 47,* Sheet 14.
[3] State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1896). Reports of the Ekaterinoslav Police Chief and District Officials. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 265,* Sheet 14.
[4] Litvak, B. G. (1989). *The Peasant Movement in Russia (1775-1904): History and Methodology of Studying Sources.* Moscow, 215-216.
[5] B.G. Litvak gives data only for Moscow Province. See: Ibid, 218.
[6] Documents and Materials (1975). *Ekaterinoslav Region in the Revolution of 1905 – 1907.* Dnepropetrovsk.
[7] Smilyanskaya, E. B. (2003). *Magicians. Blasphemers.* Heretics, 206.

subjective state but the objective desecrating power of the spoken words. However, by the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, intoxication had come to be regarded as a mitigating factor. According to the 1845 Code, "a crime committed in a state of intoxication was equated to an unintentional act," provided that the suspect had not deliberately drunk himself into a stupor to evade responsibility.[1] The 1903 Code approached the matter as follows: liability was mitigated if intoxication "rendered a person unconscious and completely deprived him of control over his actions."[2] This still needed to be proven, yet a crime committed while intoxicated was no longer viewed as unequivocally criminal as one committed sober. This applied both to insults against the imperial family and to blasphemy. "If a slanderous remark, threat, or act of desecration was committed out of folly, ignorance, or in a state of intoxication, the offender was subject to arrest," rather than an eight-year sentence of hard labor. "If blasphemy or an insult to a sacred object was committed under the conditions specified in this article but out of folly, ignorance, or in a state of intoxication, the offender was subject to arrest."[3]

The reference in an initiatory document to a blasphemer's or royal offender's potentially impaired state allowed senior officials to decide for themselves: should the case be politicized, should it be used to replenish the ranks of convicts by exposing "conspirators" and demonstrating zealous service, or should it be dismissed as drunken ramblings of idlers, warranting no more than an arrest? It can be assumed that in this rather crude manner, the overwhelming flood of denunciations was to some extent regulated and filtered, preventing all cases from reaching the authorities. Furthermore, at the district court level, many cases of insult collapsed – courts frequently found no elements of state crime in them, and judicial prosecutors were exasperated at having to deal with false denunciations "based on tavern gossip gathered by lower-ranking officers."[4] As Boris Litvak, who studied the materials of the Moscow Judicial Chamber, noted, "there were far more gendarme reports than actual court cases."[5] This observation likely holds true for other provinces as well.

Thus, the cultivated atmosphere of patriotic vigilance created a "snowball effect" – a rapid accumulation of cases and official correspondence concerning revolutionary sentiments, actions, and statements from people who had previously gone unnoticed. Added to this was a striking demographic boom during the last reign, an expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus, and improvements in state record-keeping, including archival document storage, which significantly increased the volume of official paperwork. These were the real reasons behind the sudden rise in "cases of insult."

All this unfolded against the backdrop of police reform (from the 1860s to 1906), during which the police network was centralized and militarized, and local police staffing was significantly increased. Police sergeants, district officers, centurions, and decurions operated, along with county guards, not to mention the gendarme administrations and security departments with their informants and undercover agents (since 1902). Yet the authorities remained dissatisfied with their work: "Many, at best, zealously conduct formal investigations. Political surveillance is extremely weak."[6] Nonetheless, through surveillance and the promotion of a culture of denunciation, the state succeeded in penetrating even the most intimate and previously unnoticed aspects of peasant life. The intrusion of police officers into the daily lives of peasants with the aim of detecting and documenting "thought crimes" led to the politicization and criminalization of ordinary expressions of profanity and unguarded table conversations about life. "The fight against the revolutionary movement is a war waged by the state against criminal elements," declared an order issued by the gendarme corps. These elements were to be sought "with interest and dedication to the cause," which was precisely what was observed.[7]

When did people not curse the authorities? Insults and profanities discovered by the police in streets, homes, and taverns, after passing through a series of bureaucratic procedures, transformed into something they originally were not – additional embellishments to the revolutionary narrative. The canonization of this particular interpretation of "cases of insult" is explained by its wide circle of beneficiaries. These included local authorities, eager to identify internal enemies in pursuit of rewards, ranks, and positions; revolutionaries

[1] Mironov, B. N. (2000). *Social History of Russia in the Imperial Period (XVIII – Early XX Century) in 2 Volumes, 2,* 23.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Russian Empire (1903). *Criminal Code*, 16, 22.
[4] Litvak, B. G. (1989). *The Peasant Movement in Russia (1775-1904): History and Methodology of Studying Sources.* Moscow, 215.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Chentsov, V. & Kozina, A. (ed.) (1996). *Gendarmerie and Secret Police of the Late XIX – Early XX Century. Collection of Documents from Ukrainian State Archives,* 45.
[7] Ibid.

seeking allies among the masses; Soviet historians, who adapted these materials to their party doctrines; and, finally, contemporary researchers, who still struggle to construct explanatory frameworks for late XIX – and early XX century Russian history without invoking the omnipresent revolutionary situation. The retrospective expansion of the revolutionary myth's scope and its claims to totality are products of the same mythology of "underground Russia," invented and propagated by the radical intelligentsia.[1] This mythology continues to guide the pens of many scholars.

"Cases of insult" are merely a localized episode in the history of the imperial provinces, serving as an argument for the necessity of liberating early 20th-century sources from the grip of revolutionary discourse, radical worldviews, and the academic practices associated with them.

Conclusion

The "voice of the people" in the early 20th century "offensive cases" reflected widespread frustration, traditional beliefs, and political tensions. These cases, recorded by police in Yekaterinoslav Province, captured spontaneous verbal attacks against the tsar, the Church, and state officials. Often made in moments of anger or intoxication, these insults were not always deliberate political statements but expressions of deep dissatisfaction with the monarchy's perceived failures. The tsar's name was often used in blasphemous speech to intensify complaints, suggesting disappointment rather than outright rejection of autocracy.

Insults to the tsar did not always indicate anti-monarchism in a revolutionary sense. Many peasants and workers did not oppose monarchy itself but saw Nicholas II as weak, unlucky, or indifferent to their struggles. Events like the Khodynka tragedy and the Russo-Japanese War reinforced this perception. While some verbal attacks aligned with growing revolutionary sentiment, most reflected traditional expectations of a strong and just ruler rather than a desire to overthrow the system.

Even though these insults were often spontaneous, they still contributed to the weakening of the tsar's authority. Repeated expressions of disdain eroded the sacred image of the monarchy, and the fact that authorities recorded and prosecuted such cases shows their concern about declining loyalty.

These verbal acts of defiance also influenced the mindset of future revolutionaries. While most offenders were not consciously part of a revolutionary movement, their open criticism of the monarchy helped normalize opposition. The increasing frequency of such cases suggests that dissatisfaction was becoming more political, even if initially unorganized.

Popular geopolitics also played a role. Many linked their frustration with admiration for foreign powers, particularly Japan, which had defeated Russia in war. Some even suggested that Russian rule should be replaced entirely. Insulting the tsar and wishing him dead became a way to express geopolitical anxieties and the belief that his removal could improve Russia's situation.

Overall, the offensive cases of the early 20th century illustrate the growing discontent with Nicholas II's rule. While not all insults were revolutionary in nature, they contributed to the erosion of his legitimacy and set the stage for more organized opposition.

Acknowledgements: none

Conflict of Interests: none

References

Bakhtin, M. M. (1990). *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaya kultura srednevekovya i Renessansa* [The Work of François Rabelais and the Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance]. Moscow. [in Russian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1906). *Dela o litsakh, obvinyayemykh v agitatsii protiv tsarya* [Cases of Persons Accused of Agitation Against the Tsar]. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 541*. [in Russian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1875). *Delo o Ivane Golovne, obvinyayemom v oskorblenii tsarya* [Case of Ivan Golovnya, Accused of Insulting the Tsar]. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 47*. [in Russian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1905). *Delo o raznykh litsakh, obvinyayemykh v agitatsii protiv tsarya* [Case of Various Persons Accused of Agitation Against the Tsar]. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 517*. [in Russian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1906). *Delo o revolyutsionnykh vystupleniyakh rabochikh i krestyan Ekaterinoslavskoy gubernii* [Case on the Revolutionary Demonstrations of Workers and Peasants in Ekaterinoslav Province]. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 523*. [in Russian].

[1] Mogilner, M. (1999). Mythology of the "Underground Man". *The Radical Microcosm in Early 20th Century Russia as a Subject of Semiotic Analysis, 11*, 206-207.

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1899). *Delo o zapreshchenii zhitel'stva v Ekaterinoslavskoy gubernii* [Case on the Prohibition of Residence in Ekaterinoslav Province]. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 319*. [in Russian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1916). *Delo po obvineniyu krestyanina Perepelitsyna Sergeya Kalinovicha v vystuplenii protiv tsarskogo samoderzhaviya* [Case on the Accusation of Peasant Sergey Kalinovich Perepelitsyn in an Uprising Against the Tsar's Autocracy]. *Fund 177, Inventory 1, File 10*. [in Russian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1911). *Donesenie direktora 2-go kommercheskogo uchilishcha V. Yakunina o pedagogakh uchilishcha*. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 1184*. [in Russian].

Ekaterinoslavshchina v revolyutsii 1905-1907 gg. [Ekaterinoslav Region in the Revolution of 1905-1907] (1975). *Dokumenty i materialy* [Documents and Materials]. Dnepropetrovsk. [in Russian].

Emelyakh, L. I. (1956). Antitserkovnoe dvizhenie krestyan v gody pervoy russkoy revolyutsii [The Anti-Church Movement of Peasants During the First Russian Revolution]. In: *Voprosy istorii religii i ateizma. Sbornik statey* [Questions of the History of Religion and Atheism. Collection of Articles], *3*. [in Russian].

Emelyakh, L. I. (1976). *Krestyane i tserkov nakanune Oktyabrya* [Peasants and the Church on the Eve of October]. Leningrad. [in Russian].

Firsov, S. L. (2007). *Tserkov v Imperii. Ocherki iz tserkovnoy istorii epokhi Imperatora Nikolaya II* [The Church in the Empire. Essays on Church History During the Reign of Emperor Nicholas II]. Saint Petersburg. [in Russian].

Frazer, J.G. (2016). *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion.* London: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-00400-3.

Konovalov, V. S. (2005). *Krestyane, rabochiye i soldaty Rossii nakanune i v gody pervoy mirovoy voyny [Peasants, Workers and Soldiers of Russia on the Eve and During the First World War]. Sotsialnyye i gumanitarnyye nauki. Otechestvennaya i zarubezhnaya literatura. Seriya 5. Istoriya. Referativnyy zhurnal [Social and Humanitarian Sciences. Domestic and Foreign Literature. Series 5. History. Abstract journal]*. [in Russian].

Konovalova, N. A. (2014). Ob izuchenii problemy oskorbleniya krestyanami osoby gosudarya imperatora v nachale XX veka [On the Study of the Problem of Insulting the Emperor's Majesty by Peasants in the Early Twentieth Century]. *Vestnik Omskogo universiteta [Bulletin of Omsk University], 1*, 45-46. [in Russian].

Litvak, B. G. (1989). *Krestyanskoe dvizhenie v Rossii v 1775-1904 gg. Istoriya i metodika izucheniya istochnikov* [Peasant Movements in Russia, 1775-1904: History and Methodology of Source Study]. Moscow. [in Russian].

Materialy po istorii Ekaterinoslavskoy sotsial-demokraticheskoy organizatsii bolshevikov i revolyutsionnykh sobytiy 1904-1906 (K 20-letiyu revolyutsii 1905 g.) (1924). *[Materials on the History of the Ekaterinoslav Bolshevik Social-Democratic Organization and the Revolutionary Events of 1904-1906 (On the 20th Anniversary of the 1905 Revolution)]*. Ekaterinoslav. [in Russian].

Mikhailiuk, A. (2011). Khuliganstvo v selakh Ukrainy nachala XX v. kak proyavlenie smekhovoy kultury [Hooliganism in Ukrainian Villages of the Early 20th Century as a Manifestation of Laughter Culture]. *Doksa, 16*, 132-143. [in Russian].

Mironov, B. N. (2000). *Sotsialnaya istoriya Rossii (XVIII – nachalo XX v.) v 2-kh t.* [Social History of Russia (18th – Early 20th Century) in 2 Volumes]. Saint Petersburg, *1*. [in Russian].

Mironov, B. N. (2000). *Sotsialnaya istoriya Rossii perioda imperii (XVIII – nachalo XX v.) v 2-kh t.* [Social History of Russia in the Imperial Period (18th – Early 20th Century) in 2 Volumes]. Saint Petersburg, *2*. [in Russian].

Mogilner, M. (1999). *Mifologiya "podpol'nogo cheloveka": Radikal'nyy mikrokosm v Rossii nachala XX veka kak predmet semioticheskogo analiza* [Mythology of the "Underground Man": The Radical Microcosm in Early 20th Century Russia as a Subject of Semiotic Analysis]. Moscow. [in Russian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1866). *Novorossiyskaya palata ugolovnogo suda. Ekaterinoslavskaya palata ugolovnogo suda* [New Russia Criminal Court Chamber. Ekaterinoslav Criminal Court Chamber]. <https://dp.archives.gov.ua/images/stories/opysy/F-368-1.pdf> [in Russian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1913). *Obyavleniya, ustavy, zayavleniya raznykh lits* [Announcements, Charters, and Statements of Various Individuals]. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 1238.* [in Russian].

Portnova, T. (2016). *Lyubyty i navchaty: selyanstvo v uyavlennyakh ukrayinskoyi intelektualnoyi druzhyny druhoi polovyny XIX stolittia* [To Love and to Teach: Peasantry in the Perception of the Ukrainian Intellectual Elite of the Second Half of the 19th Century]. Dnipro. [in Ukrainian].

Prysyazhnyuk, Yu.P. (2007). *Ukrayinske selyanstvo Naddnipryanskoyi Ukrayiny: sotsiomentalna istoriya druhoï polovyny XIX – pochatku XX st.* [The Ukrainian Peasantry of the Dnieper Ukraine: A Socio-Mental History of the Second Half of the 19th – Early 20th Century]. Cherkasy. [in Ukrainian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (2017). *Putivnyk* [Guide]. Dnipro, *2*. [in Ukrainian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1896). *Raporty Ekaterinoslavskogo politseymeystera i uezdnykh ispravnikov* [Reports of the Ekaterinoslav Police Chief and District Officials]. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 265*. [in Russian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1901). *Raporty politseyskikh upravleniy i uezdnykh ispravnikov* [Reports of Police Departments and District Officials]. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 316.* [in Russian].

Senchakova, L. T. (ed.). (2000). *Prigovory i nakazy krestyan Tsentralnoy Rossii. 1905-1907* [Sentences and Orders of Peasants in Central Russia, 1905-1907]. Moscow. [in Russian].

Senchakova, L. T. (ed.). (2000). *Prigovory i nakazy krestyan Tsentralnoy Rossii, 1905-1907. Sbornik dokumentov* [Sentences and Orders of Peasants in Central Russia, 1905-1907: Collection of Documents]. Moscow. [in Russian].

Smilyanska, E. B. (2003). *Volshebniki. Bogokhulniki. Eretiki. Narodnaya religioznost i "dukhovnye prestupleniya" v Rossii XVIII veka* [Wizards. Blasphemers. Heretics. Folk Religiosity and "Spiritual Crimes" in 18th Century Russia]. Moscow. [in Russian].

Sukhova, O. A. (2008). *Desyat mifov krestyanskogo soznaniya: Ocherki istorii sotsialnoy psikhologii i mentaliteta* [Ten Myths of Peasant Consciousness: Essays on the History of Social Psychology and Mentality]. Moscow. [in Russian].

Svatoi Ioann Kronshtadtskiy v vospominaniyakh sovremennikov (2003). *[Saint John of Kronstadt in the Memories of Contemporaries].* Moscow. [in Russian].

Svod zakonov Rossiyskoy imperii (1857). [Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire]. Saint Petersburg, *1(1)*. [in Russian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1908). *Telegrammy, doneseniya i perepiska s Departamentom politsii, Ekaterinoslavskim gosudarstvennym zhandarmskim upravleniyem (EGZhU), okhrannym otdeleniyem* [Telegrams, Reports, and Correspondence with the Police Department, Ekaterinoslav State Gendarmerie Administration (ESGA), and Security Department]. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 546.* [in Russian].

State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region (1909). *Telegrammy, doneseniya, perepiska s Departamentom politsii, EGZhU, Ekaterinoslavskim okhrannym otdeleniyem* [Telegrams, Reports, and Correspondence with the Police Department, ESGA, and Ekaterinoslav Security Department]. *Fund 11, Inventory 1, File 546b.* [in Russian].

Tolochko, A. (1992). *Knyaz v Kievskoy Rusi: Knyaz, sobstvennost, ideologiya* [The Prince in Kievan Rus: Prince, Property, Ideology]. Kyiv. [in Russian].

Russian Empire (1903). *Ugolovnoe ulozhenie* [Criminal Code]. St. Petersburg. [in Russian].

Russian Empire (1845). *Ulozhenie o nakazaniyakh [Code of Punishments]*. St. Petersburg. [in Russian].

Uspensky, B. A. (1994). Mifologicheskiy aspekt russkoy ekspressivnoy frazeologii [Mythological Aspect of Russian Expressive Phraseology]. In: *Uspensky, B. A. Izbrannye trudy.* [Selected Works]. Moscow, *2*, 53-128. [in Russian].

Uspensky, B. A. (1996). *Izbrannye trudy: Semiotika istorii. Semiotika kultury* [Selected Works: Semiotics of History. Semiotics of Culture]. Moscow, *1*. [in Russian].

Uspensky, B. A. (2002). *Etyudy o russkoy istorii* [Essays on Russian History]. St. Petersburg. [in Russian].

Varyagin, P. V. (1906). *Golos russkogo naroda o tsare* [The Voice of the Russian People about the Tsar]. Tsarskoe Selo. [in Russian].

Wortman, R. (1992). Nikolay II i obraz samoderzhaviya [Nicholas II and the Image of Autocracy]. In: *Reformy ili revolyutsiya? Rossiya, 1861-1917. Materialy mezhdunarodnogo kollokviuma istorikov* [Reforms or Revolution? Russia, 1861-1917. Materials of the International Colloquium of Historians]. St. Petersburg. [in Russian].

Zhandarmeriya i okhranka kontsa XIX – nachala XX v. [Gendarmerie and Secret Police of the Late 19th – Early 20th Century] (1996). *Sbornik dokumentov gosudarstvennykh arkhivov Ukrainy* [Collection of Documents from Ukrainian State Archives]. Dnepropetrovsk. [in Russian].