

Viktor Savchenko. *Neofitsial'naia Odessa epokhi NEPa: mart 1921-sentiabr' 1929*. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2012. 285 pp. (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-5-824-31685-8.

Viktor Savchenko has authored several books and articles dealing with early twentieth-century Odessa. His latest book deals with two separate topics – daily life in Odessa during the 1920s and creation of a mythical Odessa during the same time period. The book constitutes a useful contribution to the growing literature on post-1917 Odessa and its myth (Oleg Kapchinskii, Jarrod Tanny, Charles King).¹ The author provides his readers with an enormous amount of information about daily life during this period as well as about rumors, perceptions and cultural changes which gave rise to the myth of Odessa. The result is excellent. A reader can almost experience life in the city at that time.

Savchenko's main argument is that the party bureaucracy was extremely unpopular in Odessa, including among the workers, during the 1920s. Local party functionaries survived by exploiting and often exacerbating tensions among various groups within the population. They could do so, because the city was impoverished and the population was struggling for survival over scarce resources.

The city's self-perception, according to Savchenko, changed after the revolution. The main reason was that the traditional elites largely emigrated, perished, or lost their influence, and a new Bolshevik elite emerged – one that included many newcomers to the city as well as residents of impoverished neighborhoods. Instead of a proudly European middle-class culture, as exemplified by the prosperous city centre, Odessa began identifying itself in terms of the Moldavanka neighborhood culture, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city in which poor Jews lived and a criminal culture flourished. Isaac Babel in his book *Odessa Tales* and a film based on this book as well as numerous stories in the local press glorified Moldavanka. Thus a new city myth, with which the new elite could identify, was born.

As for the reality of daily life in Odessa, the author describes it as miserable. The poor suffered from impoverishment and from periodic occurrences of famine. Local workers were furious at the new government. Still, Savchenko claims that the authorities managed to convince many

1. O. I. Kapchinskii, *Mishka Iaponchik i drugie: kriminal i vlast' v gody grazhdanskoi voiny v Odesse* (Moscow, Kraft+, 2013); Jarrod Tanny, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia's Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2011); Charles King, *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011).

workers that those who had profited under the New Economic Policy (NEP) as well as Jews were to blame for the economic situation. Therefore, while many workers were angry at the authorities, the opposition was divided. Workers were angered by the NEP and wanted it canceled. By fall 1929, according to the author, the NEP was practically over in Odessa, even though officially it was retained until 1931.

As for the workers themselves, the author points out, they hated both the party elite and the NEP wealthy and despised the Bolshevik-dominated trade unions, but they had to be careful about strikes due to the enormous and constantly increasing number of unemployed. Still, strikes and protest actions of the unemployed, often encouraged by political oppositionists, were frequent and strike activists could lose their jobs or even be arrested. Until 1929, workers' strikes created a volatile situation in Odessa. However, after 1929, industry grew, jobs were created, and the problem practically disappeared.

The author discusses how impoverishment affected struggles over power within the city among several groups – the party bureaucracy, intelligentsia, workers, those who profited during NEP, and oppositionists. The author also mentions specifically religious institutions and Jews as a large local community. The party defined several groups as legitimate targets for workers and oppositionists who were frustrated by the economic situation.

A prominent target group was the NEP wealthy; the population perceived their wealth as illegitimate and saw them as a corrupting influence on the local bureaucracy. During the 1920s, Odessa's bureaucracy was highly corrupt and many profitable arrangements existed between bureaucrats, the local criminal world, and those made wealthy under NEP. The central government's attempts to reduce corruption were effective only to a limited extent. Thus both workers and party members, who were not part of the bureaucracy and thus did not live a privileged life, hated the NEP and were happy when it was over. The NEP wealthy were as hated as the party bureaucracy, but they were considerably more vulnerable. Their mass arrests and confiscation of their property during 1927-1929 were highly popular among the local workers. In fact, groups of workers often carried out the confiscations.

Since many of the NEP wealthy in Odessa were Jewish, local non-Jewish workers often blamed Jews for the unpopular policies. Even before the NEP, anti-Semitism was prevalent because the population associated Jews with communist military policies. Jews, who had been excluded from the bureaucracy before the revolution, joined it in large numbers after 1917. Thus, the non-Jewish population, which was unaccustomed to a Jewish presence in the bureaucracy, often perceived the new govern-

ment as “Jewish.” Both intelligentsia and workers felt threatened, since many positions from which Jews previously had been excluded were now open to them. Anti-Semitism, according to the author, increased during the 1920s and divided the opposition. In that sense it was useful to the bureaucracy.

In addition to the NEP wealthy, the intelligentsia was also a target group for workers’ anger. The authorities presented the intelligentsia as part of the bourgeoisie and, like the bourgeoisie, as enjoying a privileged life at workers’ expense. While this was untrue during the 1920s, workers still perceived the intelligentsia as privileged based on their memories of pre-1917 Russia. The intelligentsia during the 1920s was indeed offered material inducements for loyalty, though any sign of dissidence was savagely repressed. Students from non-worker families were periodically removed from higher education institutions and those professors perceived as disloyal often lost their jobs.

Two other issues dividing the population, the author claims, were the state’s policies on religion and Ukrainization. The government actively supported division within the Russian Orthodox Church through confiscations and arrests. By 1929-1930, when the Church was too weak to constitute a threat, this policy became unnecessary and priests of all denominations were arrested. From 1927 different evangelist sects were destroyed through arrests as well. The same was true for Jewish religious institutions. Inter-generational conflict between the old for whom religion mattered and the young who desired a career under the new government and adopted its anti-religious principles ensured that the repression of institutionalized religions created division within the population.

The government’s Ukrainization policies created particular tensions within the city. These policies were popular in Ukraine as a whole and among some of the local Ukrainian intelligentsia, but were vehemently rejected by the Russian-speaking Odessa population, including the local Soviet bureaucracy. The bureaucracy had to adhere to governmental policies on this issue, but could always blame and penalize the local intelligentsia for Ukrainian nationalism. Overall, according to the author, Ukrainization failed in Odessa and efforts to implement it contributed to inter-ethnic tensions within the city.

The political opposition to the regime was largely socialist or anarchist, with Mensheviks as the largest oppositional party. Eventually some oppositionists within the Bolshevik party, especially Trotsky’s supporters, became popular as part of the opposition as well. According to the author, the oppositionists initially had significant influence among local workers, but the party did whatever it could to destroy them. This strategy included making sure the general population understood that any contact

with the opposition could result in their arrest. The author concludes that once economic hardship and unemployment, which were the main sources of popular unrest, were eliminated, the government easily suppressed the oppositionist movements.

The argument of the book is convincing and Savchenko's choice of employing local history to understand how Bolsheviks, who in many localities constituted a small minority with little popular support, managed to survive as the party in power is highly effective. An important part of the book is stories about individuals – workers, criminals, activists, bureaucrats and others. These stories add much color to the book and sustain readers' interest all through the narrative. The Odessa myth portrayed the city as a fun and colorful place, and the author makes sure that this myth is sustained in his writing.

Inna Shtakser

Tel-Aviv University