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“Comrade Speaker!” *Zapiski* as Means of Political Communication and Source for Popular Moods in the 1920s*

Hardly any other type of source in the wake of the post-Soviet “archival revolution” has been received so enthusiastically and discussed so controversially as *svodki*, reports on the “moods” of the population compiled by the secret police and party organizations at different hierarchical levels. Multi-volume publication projects dedicated to these reports give the researcher a glimpse into the arcana of power and its perception of the populace.¹ For some historians, *svodki* provide the means to unearth the “authentic” voice of Soviet, particularly Stalin-era, dissent.² Others, while acknowledging the immense value of these sources, at the same time point out their shortcomings. They include their genre-specific focus on compiling “negative” opinions (since rooting out dissent was the secret police’s main goal), thus neglecting voices of conformity and approval; furthermore there exist the uncertainties about the diffusion rate and social relevance of the recorded opinions, as well as the possible adjustment of *svodki* by their authors to the expectations of the ruling elite.³

Another type of source for voices “from below” that has received much attention since the opening of the archives are letters from ordinary citizens addressed to power institutions, such as Soviet leaders or newspapers.⁴ As for

* This is the extended version of a paper presented at the 45th Annual Convention of the ASEES in Boston, 23 November 2013. The author thanks the panelists and members of the audience for feedback and critique.

1. The two main publications being “*Sovershenno sekretno*”. *Lubianka – Stalinu o polozhenii v strane. 1922-1934 gg.*, 9 vols. (Moscow: IRI RAN, 2001-13), and *Sovetskaia derevnia glazami VChK-OGPU-NKVD. Dokumenty i materialy*, 4 vols. (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1998-2012).

2. Most prominently: Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia. Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997). Recently: Liudmila P. Kolodnikova, *Sovetskoe obshchestvo 20-ch godov XX veka. Po dokumentam VChK-OGPU* (Moscow: Nauka, 2009).

3. For a summary of the discussion, see Jan Plamper, “Beyond Binaries. Popular Opinion in Stalinism,” in *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes. Facism, Nazism, Communism*, ed. Paul Corner (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), pp. 64–80.

4. As mere examples of the extensive historiography built upon such letters, see: Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Supplicants and Citizens. Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s,” *Slavic Review* no. 1 (1996): 78–105; Matthew Lenoe, “Letter-Writing and the State. Reader Correspondence with Newspapers as a Source for Early Soviet History,” *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* no. 1–2 (1999): 139–69; Aleksandr Ia. Livshin, *Nastroeniia i politicheskie emotsii v Sovetskoi Rossii. 1917-1932 gg.* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010); Ale-

the latter, the archives of the early Soviet peasant newspaper *Krest'ianskaia gazeta* have provided researchers with hundreds of thousands of unpublished letters from peasant correspondents, shedding light on attitudes and conditions of life in the countryside.⁵ Needless to say, this type of source is not without its pitfalls: the letters mostly represent the perspective of a (semi-)literate minority and are, moreover, shaped by the discourses that Soviet media provided for their audience.

While a substantial body of research and interpretation accrues on *svodki* and letters, a related type of early Soviet source has received almost no attention in the literature: *zapiski*, notes on paper posing questions or making remarks written by the audience and passed on to speakers during or after public lectures and rallies. Even though they did not go completely unnoticed in the last twenty years of post-Soviet research, scholars have referred to them only in passing and without reflecting on their nature as a particular type of source.⁶ This brief contribution attempts to investigate *zapiski* as a source for popular opinion and a means of political communication, highlighting their limitations and advantages, and inquiring about the ways they were produced and reproduced.

It is hard to tell whether the practice of letting the audience communicate with the speaker via short notes on paper stems from the pre-war revolutionary movement, from democratic practices in the aftermath of the February Revolution, or from public lectures in the Tsarist period. Western observers, such as the Italian communist Edmondo Peluso in 1924, described the practice

ksandr Ia. Livshin and Igor' B. Orlov, *Vlast' i obshchestvo. Dialog v pis'makh* (Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 2002); Heike Winkel, "Schreibversuche. Kollektive Vorlagen und individuelle Strategien in den 'Briefen der Werktätigen'," in *Die Musen der Macht. Medien in der sowjetischen Kultur der 20er und 30er Jahre*, ed. Jurij Murašov and Georg Witte (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2003), pp. 59–79. For source publications, see Aleksandr Ia. Livshin, Igor' B. Orlov, and Oleg V. Khlevniuk, eds., *Pis'ma vo vlast'. 1928-1939. Zaiavleniia, zhaloby, donosy, pis'ma v gosudarstvennye struktury i sovetskim vozhdiam* (Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 2003); A. V. Kvashonkin, ed., *Pis'ma vo vlast' 1917-1927. Zaiavleniia, zhaloby, donosy, pis'ma v gosudarstvennye struktury i bol'shevistskim vozhdiam* (Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 1998); Andrei K. Sokolov, ed., *Golos naroda. Pis'ma i otkliki riadovykh sovetskikh grazhdan o sobytiiach 1918-1932 gg.* (Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 1997).

5. For the archival holdings, see I. A. Kuznetsov, "Fond pisem 'Krest'ianskoi gazety'. Istochnikovedcheskii aspekt," *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Serija 8. Istorii* no. 2 (1999): 70–84. For source publications, see a.o. Svetlana S. Kriukova, ed., *Krest'ianskie istorii. Rossiiskaia derevnia 1920-kh godov v pis'makh i dokumentakh* (Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 2001); V. V. Kabanova and E. V. Khandurina, eds., "Rodnik platonovskogo iazyka. Pis'ma iz derevni v 'Krest'ianskuiu gazetiu' 1926-1928 gg.," *Istoricheskii arkhiv* no. 4 (1994): 82–89; V. V. Kabanova, T. Mironova, and E. V. Khandurina, eds., "'Sotsializm – èto rai na zemle'. Krest'ianskie predstavleniia o sotsializme v pis'makh 20-ch gg.," *Neizvestnaia Rossiia. XX vek* 3 (1993): 199–225.

6. Sergei V. Iarov, *Gorozhanin kak politik. Revoliutsiia, voennyi kommunizm i NĖP glazami petrogradtsev* (Sankt-Peterburg: Bulanin, 1999), p. 311; Alexander Friedman, *Deutschlandbilder in der weißrussischen sowjetischen Gesellschaft 1919-1941. Propaganda und Erfahrungen* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2011), p. 220; Olga Velikanova, *Popular Perceptions of Soviet Politics in the 1920s: Disenchantment of the Dreamers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 18.

of receiving *zapiski* from the audience as something inherently Soviet, as a thing that a speaker is inevitably confronted with when speaking in front of “Russian workers”.⁷ For the Bolsheviks *zapiski* presented a valuable tool to validate the effectiveness of their agitation and ascertain the opinions of its target audiences. Already in 1918, *Pravda* called on agitators speaking at rallies to submit all questions collected to the newspaper’s office.⁸ The insights gained from these documents were used by Bolsheviks at the highest level. When Bukharin stated there was a positive turn in the general mood in late 1920, he based his observation on the diminishing amount of anti-Bolshevik *zapiski* at workers’ rallies.⁹

When instructing their agitators, the Bolsheviks turned their attention to *zapiski* as a crucial point in the orchestration of public events. Written questions were to be answered by the speaker immediately after concluding his or her speech, and after the event *zapiski* were to be systematised and evaluated.¹⁰ It is through this systematisation and evaluation that historians have access to these documents. The original paper notes are, in most cases, absent from the archives.¹¹ Instead, typewritten transcripts are found in the archives, compiled after the events by the speakers themselves or their assistants. In many cases speakers who were commanded to give lectures sent these summaries to the organs that commissioned them to speak – the Central Committee (CC) or regional party bodies – in order to account for their activities. Thus, for example, many *zapiski* transcripts are preserved in the holdings of the CC’s Agitprop department, submitted by the speakers commissioned by the CC to deliver public lectures during the “German October” campaign in 1923, when revolution in Germany was to be explained and extolled among the Russian populace.¹² Other campaigns conducted by the Bolshevik state similarly resulted in substantial amounts of *zapiski* transcripts to be found in Russian archives. In some cases Bolshevik leaders such as Trotsky received

7. Edmondo Peluso, “Die Solidarität der russischen Arbeiter”, *Internationale Presse-Korrespondenz* 4, no. 15 (1924): 318-19.

8. *Pravda*, 13 July 1918.

9. Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24. Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 42.

10. Ia. Rudoi, “Kak provodit’ bespartiiinye volostnye krest’ianskie konferentsii?,” in *Bespartiiinye krest’ianskie konferentsii. Materialy dlia dokladchikov*, ed. Agitprop TsK RKP(b) (Leningrad: Priboi, 1925), p. 96; S. I. Syrtsov, ed., *V pomoshch agitproporganizatoru. Posobie dlia agitproporganizatorov iacheek RKP(b). Sbornik statei i materialov* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1925), p. 124.; K. Malin, “Ob agitkampaniiakh”, *Kommunisticheskaia revoliutsiia* no. 1-2 (1926): 76-84.

11. For an exception, see the reproduced notes in Iarov, *Gorozhanin kak politik*, pp. 234–38. Original handwritten *zapiski* submitted to Vladimir Maiakovskii during his public poetry readings used to be on display at the Maiakovskii Museum in Moscow before its temporary closure in 2013.

12. See Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, Moscow (henceforth: RGASPI), 17/60/460. For the campaign, see Gleb J. Albert, ““German October Is Approaching’. Internationalism, Activists, and the Soviet State in 1923,” *Revolutionary Russia* 24, no. 2 (2011): 111–42.

zapiski transcripts from lower-ranking agitators in order to use the material in their essays.¹³

The presence of large numbers of *zapiski* transcripts poses the question of the authenticity of their content. Did agitators leave out negative questions while compiling *zapiski* transcripts in order to show their superiors an embellished picture? Obviously, this cannot be excluded given the lack of the original question notes. However, at least during the 1920s and in reports from the central and regional level, this possibility seems not to have occurred, since critical and negative questions are constantly present in the transcripts, just like affirmative ones. Moreover, the wording of the transcripts appears to more or less replicate the original *zapiski* since the syntax of the individual transcribed questions varies greatly, thus most likely reproducing notes of different authors.

How widespread was the phenomenon of listeners addressing the speaker in written form, and who were those who did so? Nikolai Meshcheriakov, an old Bolshevik who was sent by the CC into the provinces to deliver speeches about the German revolution in 1923, stated in his report that at each event between 40 and 50 *zapiski* reached the podium.¹⁴ Moisei Rafes, another Bolshevik entrusted with the same task, reported that after his speeches people would not leave until he had answered all the written questions.¹⁵ Thus the practice appears to be a popular and accepted part of public lectures and speeches.

Of course this popularity had natural limits. While Peluso ideologically simplified his description of the participants as “Russian workers,” the medium itself imposed limits on those who could partake in it. Obviously in order to write down a question, one had to be at least semi-literate. For illiterate listeners, there was the possibility of heckling in order to interact with the speaker, but this form of interaction had no institutionalised form – speakers could react to hecklers, but could also ignore them. The authors of *zapiski*, in contrast, could more or less count on their voices being heard when their questions were dealt with at the end of the speech. The willingness to interact with a representative of the regime in a more or less orderly and “civilized” manner is another factor diminishing the number of participants in this practice. If members of the audience had no interest in writing a note, they could communicate by heckling (despite the danger of negative sanctions). They could demonstratively remain silent and unmoved, or simply leave the auditorium. By sending a *zapiska* to the podium, one accepted the terms of communication presented by the regime and, to a certain degree, the regime itself. Thus par-

13. See e.g., Russian State Military Archive, Moscow (henceforth: RGVA), 33987/2/273, p. 106: *Zapiski* received by Comrade Ostrovskaiia during her speech in Kursk, 8 October 1923. Trotsky received these and other materials in order to work on his essays on culture and everyday life. See Leon Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture & Science* (New York: Monad Press, 1973). See also Aleksandr Reznik, “Byt ili ne byt? Lev Trotskii, politika i kul'tura v 1920-e gody,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* no. 4 (2013): 88–106.

14. RGASPI, 17/60/460, pp. 31-33: Nikolai Meshcheriakov to CC RCP(b), 16 November 1923.

15. RGASPI, 17/60/460, pp. 23-29: Moisei Rafes to CC RCP(b), 17 November 1923.

taking in such question sessions was at once a domain, as we shall see, of adherents of the Bolsheviks and the regime, of Party and Komsomol members and of other “functionary enthusiasts”.¹⁶

However, this was not the only group that partook in writing *zapiski*. Mikhail Voronkov, a provincial Bolshevik whose task during the Civil War was at one point to speak before captured Red Army deserters, testifies in his diary to the fact that his audience, most likely composed of young peasants hostile to the Bolsheviks, resorted to *zapiski* en masse: “The speeches are met with hostility; they write ‘Now stop your unruly disturbances [*buza*], ‘give us boots’, ‘give provisions to our families’, ‘give soil to the children and work it’, ‘chase away the debauching village communists’ – that’s what the majority of deserters’ *zapiski* constitutes.”¹⁷ Thus, not only educated supporters of the regime put their comments and sentiments into notes of paper, but also semi-literate peasants hostile to the regime.

Was a genuine dialogue between individuals and regime possible through *zapiski*? As mentioned above, speakers were expected to answer written questions on the spot. Was it, however, a dialogue between individuals and power that also enabled public critique of the regime? To some extent, this seems to be the case. *Zapiski* were expected to be signed, but they could also be anonymous. The Polish communist Mieczysław Broński, commissioned by the CC for a lecture tour in late 1923, states in his report that after his speech in Riazan’ there were several anonymous notes, which were not responded to “due to the customs of the Riazan’ comrades”.¹⁸ If this fact was noteworthy for the Bolshevik, it is likely that this “custom” was not upheld elsewhere. Thus via *zapiski*, critique could not only be uttered without the fear of negative sanctions, but had a chance to be answered by representatives of state power.¹⁹ We do not know whether all speakers reacted to harshly critical *zapiski* like those quoted by Mikhail Voronkov in his diary. Bolsheviks at least acknowledged the existence of critical and even “counterrevolutionary” questions raised publically. The author of a *Pravda* article decried “an anti-Semitic mood [. . .] that shows itself in the *zapiski* given to the speakers” at rallies in Moscow.²⁰ Thus the authors of such *zapiski*, even if their questions probably did not receive attention on the spot, could know that their utterances have been noticed and read by the authorities.

For a typology of possible content of early Soviet *zapiski*, I shall resort to three Bolshevik campaigns from the early 1920s: The “German October”

16. For the definition of “functionary enthusiasts” as “a distinct social group, the members of which were formally linked with the regime, and who felt a personal tie with it”, see Boris I. Kolonitskii, “‘Revolutionary Names’. Russian Personal Names and Political Consciousness in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Revolutionary Russia* 6, no. 2 (1993): 219.

17. Mikhail I. Voronkov, *Intelligent i epokha. Dnevnik, vospominaniia, stat'i. 1911-1941 gg.*, ed. A. O. Nikitin (Riazan’: NRIID, 2013), p. 158.

18. RGASPI, 17/60/460, pp. 30-30ob: Mieczysław Broński to CC RCP(b), 21 November 1923.

19. Albert, “German October Is Approaching,” p. 126. This also corresponds to the assessment of Friedman, *Deutschlandbilder*, p. 220.

20. “Mitingi”, *Pravda*, 11 August 1918.

campaign in late 1923,²¹ the campaign connected to the confiscation of church valuables for hunger relief in 1921/22,²² and the solidarity campaign with striking British miners in 1926.²³ On a content level, four types of interventions through *zapiski* can be distinguished.

First, there are simple comprehension questions. It is known that Bolshevik agitation was often overly arcane for the majority of the target audience.²⁴ So it is not surprising that many *zapiski* center around understanding Marxist and other technical vocabulary. At a public meeting on the British strike in 1926, two of the 29 question notes inquired about the meaning of the term “strikebreaker,” which in Russian is a loanword from the German (“*shtreikbrekher*”).²⁵ Obviously the majority of those for whom Bolshevik vocabulary was completely alien did not bother to clarify such terms through a *zapiska* (especially if they were illiterate), but for those who were actively striving to master the regime’s argot it was an effective way to do so.

More advanced listeners could use *zapiski* to clarify certain aspects that the speaker did not make clear enough, such as the one who inquired at a meeting on the German revolution in Vladimir whether the occupation of the Ruhr area (which raised revolutionary expectations related to Germany in early 1923) was already over.²⁶ Others chose this way of intervention to develop further the problems posed by the speaker. At the same meeting, the following *zapiska* reached the podium: “Comrade Rafes, if the German workers take power into their hands, and if France [. . .] will set its army in motion to suppress the German revolution – what will the USSR do and what position will it take?”²⁷ – an obvious question given the war-scare atmosphere that accompanied the “German October” campaign.

Listeners could also point speakers to further problems that seemed to develop from the ones they posed. At another meeting on Germany, one *zapiska* inquired whether the German communists, should they take power, have enough leading figures to assume all positions in a revolutionary government,

21. Albert, “German October Is Approaching.”

22. Jonathan W. Daly, “Storming the Last Citadel. The Bolshevik Assault on the Church 1922,” in *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society. The Revolutions and the Civil Wars*, ed. Vladimir N. Brovkin (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 235–68.

23. Gabriel Gorodetsky, “The Soviet Union and Britain’s General Strike of May 1926,” *Cahiers Du Monde Russe Et Soviétique* 17, no. 2–3 (1976): 287–310; Alexander Vatlin, “‘Class Brothers Unite!’ The British General Strike and the Formation of the ‘United Opposition,’” in *The Lost Politburo Transcripts. From Collective Rule to Stalin’s Dictatorship*, ed. Paul R. Gregory and Norman Naimark (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 57–77; Iurii A. L’vunin, “Kampaniia solidarnosti trudiashchikhsia SSSR s bor’boi angliiskogo proletariata v 1926 g.,” *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta* no. 5 (1976): 23–34.

24. A fact that was already clear to the contemporary adherents of the regime: Jakov M. Shafir, *Gazeta i derevnia*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Krasnaia nov’, 1924). Also see e.g., Michael S. Gorham, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues. Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 2003).

25. RGASPI, 17/60/827, p. 121: *Zapiski* transcripts from a female worker delegates’ assembly, 17 May 1926.

26. RGASPI, 17/60/460, pp. 23–29: Moisei Rafes to CC RCP(b), 17 November 1923.

27. *Ibid.*

and whether Germany will have to go through a phase of war communism or will be able to launch their own NEP right away.²⁸ These thoughts were obviously drawn from the comparison between the supposedly revolutionary situation in Germany depicted by the speaker, and recent Russian revolutionary history.

If *zapiski* authors could deduce problems from the speakers' presentations, they could also – and this is the **second** type of intervention – come up with solutions. When agitators spoke about the problem of Soviet grain shipments to revolutionary Germany not being able to pass through Poland, listeners suggested in written notes to ship grain to Germany through the Baltic sea,²⁹ or even to trigger a revolution in Poland.³⁰

After an agitator's speech on the highly contested issue of the confiscation of church valuables in 1922, one of the (probably rather few) well-meaning listeners submitted a note, suggesting the authorities should make lists connecting every confiscated object of value with a particular village in the famine region, so people would see that help really reaches its destination.³¹

There were also less well-meaning ways of suggesting solutions through *zapiski* – ways which the authors probably realized were not acceptable to the authorities. Yet if the authorities rejected the suggestions, it was implied, things would not go well with the Bolsheviks. In the context of the church valuables campaign, a member of the audience submitted a *zapiska* pointing towards a 4000-*pud* heap of grain just sitting outside Moscow's Savel'evskii train station – why would it not be sent to the famine region instead of the church valuables?³² What were they going to do about it? In a similar vein were suggestions to use the Tsar's gold to help the starving,³³ or just “pre-revolutionary” valuables in general: “Where did the gold from the safes go?” inquired one note.³⁴ Others suggested taking the gold from “the Jews”, thus combining three antisemitic notions of Jews being particularly rich, having profited from the revolution, and being identical with the Bolshevik regime.³⁵

The **third** way of intervention that can be distinguished in the archived *zapiski* transcripts occurs when authors used the arguments of the agitators to turn them against the authority's logic by pointing to contradictions in their presentation. In the context of the “German October”, a member of the audience inquired as to why in backward Russia a revolution already took place,

28. RGASPI, 17/33/244, pp. 186-87: *Zapiski* transcripts from a worker-peasant-conference in Krasnopresnenskii district, Moscow [October 1923].

29. RGASPI, 17/60/460, pp. 23-29: Moisei Rafes to CC RCP(b), 17 November 1923.

30. RGASPI, 17/33/244, pp. 186-87: *Zapiski* transcripts from a worker-peasant-conference in Krasnopresnenskii district, Moscow [October 1923].

31. Nikolai N. Pokrovskii and S. G. Petrov, eds., *Politbiuro i tserkov'. 1922-1925 gg.*, vol. 2 (Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 1998), p. 111.

32. *Ibid.*, 2: 112.

33. *Ibid.*, 2: 110.

34. *Ibid.*, 2: 111.

35. *Ibid.*, 2: 112. On anti-Bolshevik antisemitism, see most recently Ulrich Herbeck, *Das Feindbild vom “jüdischen Bolschewiken”. Zur Geschichte des russischen Antisemitismus vor und während der Russischen Revolution* (Berlin: Metropol, 2009).

but not in industrialized Germany.³⁶ Taking the details of the speech as a point of departure, another one inquired: “Comrade Speaker, tell us, where will the proletariat take grain from in order to survive when there will be a revolution in Germany? We know that Germany is not an agrarian country.”³⁷

In the same spirit, a *zapiska* written during the British strike campaign in 1926 questioned the purpose of the miners’ strike by asking how the mines would survive after the workers’ victory since it was a known fact that they no longer made any profit anyway.³⁸ Some *zapiski* pointed even more directly at the contradictions that resulted from the agitators’ arguments. A member of the audience inquired during the 1922 confiscation campaign what sense would it actually make to confiscate the church valuables: one could not buy grain abroad since the capitalist countries would not sell the Soviet Union anything “because according to your words, they desire our death.”³⁹

Zapiski could be used to delegitimize the speaker not only by using contradictions in his speech against him, but also by denouncing him as incompetent. At an assembly of party activists in Moscow in 1926, the speaker apparently had tried to show that certain Soviet-friendly statements by the prominent Austrian social democrat Otto Bauer were only the result of pressure from the Austrian workers. One activist, however, did not agree with this characterization of Bauer as a mere opportunist, and voiced his dissent through a written question: “Do you really think that Otto Bauer, one of Europe’s best economists and without doubt an honest person, would speak about Soviet Russia in this way and not in another just because he’s afraid to be booed by workers?”⁴⁰ On other occasions the whole speech could be questioned, such as in a note submitted to the podium during the 1926 campaign: “Your report is weak, [. . .] we eagerly await news about what our comrades [the British] have done, since we have done everything for them; but in your presentation nothing is clear, you just repeat what the *Pravda* newspaper is writing.”⁴¹

In a similar fashion, even rank and file party dissidents during inner-party struggles could make themselves heard by questioning the competence of the speaker and demonstrating their own superior knowledge. In a Moscow party cell meeting in 1926, at the high tide of inner-party strife, a member of the audience was not content with the speaker’s negligence of foreign affairs, and uttered his critique in written form:

“How come the British [general] strike and the events in Poland are not deemed important? These events should have taken a prominent place in the

36. RGASPI, 17/33/244, pp. 186-87: *Zapiski* transcripts from a worker-peasant-conference in Krasnopresnenskii district, Moscow [October 1923].

37. RGASPI, 17/60/460, pp. 23-29: Moisei Rafes to CC RCP(b), 17 November 1923.

38. RGASPI, 17/60/827, pp. 134-36: *Zapiski* transcripts from conferences at Sokol’nicheskii district, Moscow [June 1926].

39. Pokrovskii and Petrov, *Politbiuro i tserkov’*, 2: 111.

40. RGASPI, 17/60/827, p. 21: *Zapiski* transcript from a party assembly in Sokol’nicheskii district, Moscow, 15 March 1926.

41. RGASPI, 17/60/827, pp. 134-36: *Zapiski* transcripts from conferences in Sokol’nicheskii district, Moscow [June 1926].

district committee’s work. But nothing of that sort happened! And you have concealed in your speech why this is the case! Communists of the Lenin guard [*kommunisty-lenintsy*] have never neglected such events and have dealt with them alongside the everyday work you were telling us about.”⁴²

Not only could the questioner by this means openly express his discontent about the speaker; but also, by using the reference to the “Lenin guard”, he employed code language to show sympathy to the anti-Stalinist opposition.

Zapiski could also denounce the speaker as being personally inadequate to present the message he was supposed to convey. Max Hoelz, a German communist touring the provinces in 1930, noted in his diary that at a workers’ assembly where he was speaking, “a worker sent a note [to the podium] asking why Comrade Semard (France), who had given the first speech, still wears a gold ring despite being a communist.”⁴³ Similar notes about communists wearing gold and jewelry were also recorded during the 1922 confiscation campaign – where such remarks were even more explosive, given the campaign was about confiscation of valuables.⁴⁴

Finally, a **fourth** way of intervention via *zapiski* consisted of not just criticizing or delegitimizing the speaker, but of hijacking the opportunity altogether for the author’s own cause which may have been completely unrelated to the speech of the agitator or the occasion of the event. In such an instance, an agitator from the CC received a note asking him for an answer to the question “in which year were the prices for agricultural and industrial goods equal”.⁴⁵ Judging from the other *zapiski* collected at that event, the speech was dealing with international affairs – the author, however, used the opportunity to raise the vexed question of the “scissors crisis”.

Similarly, during the 1922 campaign, alongside other notes of protest against the confiscations, a *zapiska* was received decrying the fate of demobilized soldiers: “Comrade communists, don’t you see how your men are pillaging, they are clad and shod, their families have wheat flour and butter; but a Red Army soldier comes back from the frontline and finds no place. Fake comrades are a disgrace [*tov. poddel’nye ved’ styd*], but one has to help the hungry people too.”⁴⁶ Here the author took the opportunity to voice his own (or a relative’s) grief over holding an outsider position in society as a demobilized soldier. The original topic of the event is only clumsily added in the last sentence.

Interestingly, this kind of hijacking the occasion via *zapiski* could also take place in a non-oppositional way. During the “German October” campaign, speakers received many notes like the following: “Comrade Speaker, even though this is not related to the speech, I beg you to tell us about the health of

42. RGASPI, 17/60/827, p. 121: *Zapiski* transcript from the assembly of the party cell in the Central Industrial Region Museum at the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment, 16 June 1926. The “events in Poland” refer to Piłsudski’s coup d’état in May 1926.

43. Max Hoelz, “*Ich grüße und küsse Dich - Rot Front!*” *Tagebücher und Briefe. Moskau 1929 bis 1933*, ed. Ulla Plener (Berlin: Dietz, 2005), p. 122.

44. Pokrovskii and Petrov, *Politbiuro i tserkov’*, 2: 112.

45. RGASPI, 17/60/460, pp. 145-49: F. Syromolotov to CC RCP(b), 6 July 1923.

46. Pokrovskii and Petrov, *Politbiuro i tserkov’*, 2: 110.

Vladimir Il'ich."⁴⁷ Lenin's death agony in the final months of 1923 and the first weeks of 1924 was genuinely worrying many Soviet citizens, arguably more than a prospective German revolution.

As the last example hints, *zapiski* could not only be used to convey opinion or criticism. They could also help their authors to make themselves visible as particularly knowledgeable and active. Max Hoelz noticed that nearly all Young Pioneers in the audience "keep paper and pencils ready in order to write down questions for the speaker".⁴⁸ Of course, these activists could have been genuinely interested in the speech, but at the same time they wanted to present themselves as particularly "conscious" in the eyes of a Western communist.

Topics connected to international events were especially rewarding occasions for members of the audience to distinguish themselves from the masses and make themselves visible in front of the authorities. We can assume that the questions about the numerical strength of the German Communist Party or about the perceptions of the upcoming German revolution in Poland, reported from peasants' assemblies during the "German October"-campaign, were posed not by "ordinary" peasants, but by the village intelligentsia and industrious party members and sympathizers – especially considering that at the same time the majority of the reported questions centered on matters of everyday life, the assembly's topic notwithstanding.⁴⁹ The function of posing such "advanced" questions in order to distinguish oneself becomes even more evident considering that such *zapiski* often bore the names of their authors. One posed in mid-1923, for example: "Comrade Syromolotov! Will we conduct some policy among the peoples of the East in order to stimulate their fight for emancipation? (Ukhanov)".⁵⁰ While Syromolotov's speech is not present in the archival file, we can nevertheless conclude from the other question notes collected by the speaker that the "peoples of the East" was not a crucial topic of his talk. Ukhanov, who posed such a peculiar question, probably wanted to demonstrate his interest in a particularly "advanced" topic and additionally make sure that the speaker got to know his name.

The foregoing outline allows us to draw some preliminary conclusions about the nature of *zapiski* as a source "from below" in early Soviet society. If we compare them to the most well-researched source for "popular moods", the *svodki*, it becomes clear that *zapiski* shed light on a much more limited group of the population. While police reports claim to capture the opinion of "workers and peasants" as a whole, *zapiski* only represent those who were a) at least semi-literate and b) willing to communicate with the regime. Thus one has to be careful not to extract any conclusions from this source on the opinions of the population at large. For this smaller segment of society, however, *zapiski* appear to present a much less pre-filtered medium of popular opinion than

47. RGASPI, 17/60/460, pp. 23-29: Moisei Rafes to CC RCP(b), 17 November 1923.

48. Hoelz, *Tagebücher und Briefe*, p. 101.

49. See e.g., RGASPI, 17/60/574, pp. 25-32ob: Report about the conduction of peasant assemblies in the Voronezh province [early 1924].

50. RGASPI, 17/60/460, pp. 145-49: F. Syromolotov to CC RCP(b), 6 July 1923.

svodki. While police reports usually omit the context of a particular utterance, re-formulate it, and frame it with judgmental epithets (presenting dissent as “counterrevolutionary”, “black-hundred”, “kulak” etc.), *zapiski* transcripts in most cases give us the exact wording of utterances “from below,” and provide us with a context (a particular event with a particular audience) in which these utterances were made.

When working with *zapiski*, one has to consider (probably more than with any other source of popular opinion) *by whom* and *for what purpose* they were written. Different members of the audience used *zapiski* to present themselves in a particular light and to pursue individual goals besides simply addressing the discussion at hand. In this sense *zapiski* have much in common with “letters from below” addressed to Soviet leaders and Bolshevik print media. Such letters not only convey information, but they also show how individuals try to present themselves to the authorities, how they inscribe themselves into the discourse of the regime, and how they strive to pursue their own agendas through this form of communication. There is, however, one major distinction between such letters and *zapiski* which constitutes an important advantage of the latter. While people have written letters to leaders and newspapers not knowing whether and when they would receive an answer, *zapiski* were part of a process of instant communication. Members of the audience wrote down their opinions and questions onto small pieces of paper and passed them on to the podium knowing that once the speech is over, chances would be very high that the speaker as a representative of the regime would make their voices, opinions and causes heard. While letters “from above” were part of a very uneven and unequal communication process, *zapiski* constituted one side of a dialogue between individuals and power.

They represent, however, only one half of this dialogue. In order to shed light on these acts of public political communication, historians need to look for sources to reconstruct the regime’s immediate responses to *zapiski* – such as shorthand reports of public assemblies that include not only the agitators’ speeches, but also the discussions that ensued about them. Furthermore, it would be important to trace the development of such public communication beyond the 1920s. Published archival documents show that the practice of passing *zapiski* to the podium remained a common practice throughout the entire Soviet period.⁵¹ A published *zapiski* transcript from 1935 shows that in terms of the four types of content outlined here, question notes did not change significantly. We can find the same naïve questions about meanings of words, but also questions that bear a peculiar mix of naivety and subversion – such as an inquiry on the whereabouts of Trotsky and his current occupation (in

51. Even when Eduard Shevarnadze visited the United States in the spring of 1991, he asked the audience to pass *zapiski* to the podium – a custom most members of the American audience were not familiar with. I am indebted to Alexis Pogorelskin for this information.

1935!).⁵² Here it would be even more important to embed *zapiski* into the context of public assemblies as a whole, and into the social climate at large. Establishing how interventions through *zapiski* functioned in the even more repressive climate of Stalinism would make them a valuable source not only for the NEP era, but also for the epoch that followed thereafter.

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52. *Zapiski* transcript from a workers' assembly in Perm' [1935]. Published in A. B. Suslov, ed., *Obshchestvo i vlast'. Rossiiskaia provintsia 1917-1985. Permskii krai*, vol. 1 (Perm': Bank kul'turnoi informatsii, 2008), pp. 781–86.