

Serhy YEKELCHYK

**A COMMUNAL MODEL OF CITIZENSHIP
IN STALINIST POLITICS:
AGITATORS AND VOTERS IN POSTWAR
ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS (KYIV, 1946–53)***

What most strikes the researcher poring over archival documents from postwar Kyiv is just how much time the party and state organs spent preparing for elections. The tasks of rebuilding the ruined city center, reconstructing industry, and providing residents with food and shelter clearly took a second seat to the massive propaganda campaigns that preceded every election: to the All-Union Supreme Soviet in 1946 and 1950, to the Ukrainian legislature in 1947 and 1951, and to oblast and municipal soviets in 1947, 1950, and 1953. One may wonder why the authorities took these electoral campaigns so seriously. If the state presented voters with a single slate of candidates running unopposed, with everybody knowing they would be endorsed by

* Earlier versions of this article were presented at the University of Michigan and Princeton University. I would like to thank the audiences there – in particular Ron Suny, Val Kivelson, Doug Northrop, Deborah Jones, Sergei Oushakine, and Peter Holquist – for providing many helpful criticisms and constructive suggestions. Comments by two anonymous reviewers for *Ab Imperio* helped greatly in clarifying my theoretical framework. Marta D. Olynyk kindly edited the text and the changes, both times on very short notice. My research has been supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

over 99 percent of voters, at least according to the official results, then why did the Kremlin spend colossal amounts of time and energy, not to mention money and materiel, on staging elaborate electoral campaigns?

In order to unlock this puzzle, I propose to employ the concept of “citizenship,” understood as a relationship between an individual and a state in the political sphere. In contrast to traditional scholarship, which saw citizenship as a status of a certain category of people, I understand it as a set of institutionally embedded political, social, and cultural practices that define a person as a member of a polity. Informed by the work of modern sociologists such as Margaret Somers and Bryan Turner, this definition allows for analysis of citizenship as an active form of participation.¹ By studying practices rather than policies, such an approach restores agency to individuals within the field of power established by the state. Inasmuch as elections are a formality, electoral campaigns emerge as the principal venue of citizen interaction with the state in the political domain.

Moreover, the material presented below resists the familiar dichotomy present in my own working definition of citizenship as a relationship between an individual and the state, for the state was most often represented during electoral campaigns by volunteer *agitatory* (“agitators”), who played a complex and ambiguous role, speaking on behalf of the state before the people and on behalf of the people before the state. Through their mediation, the political space spread to communal apartments and factory shops, and power relations acquired a “communal” character. Often ordinary individuals, for example, coworkers or neighbors, with whom voters could establish a personal relationship, agitators merged the personal and the political in a way that made political participation a communal duty. The everydayness of Stalinist political life – that fabric of public participation that made the Soviet state more than just a well-guarded camp – can thus be conceptualized as a “communal model” of citizenship.

Accordingly, the answer I propose for the opening question of this article is that while Election Day was relatively unimportant, with the outcome never in doubt, the electoral campaign was an important moment of political realignment at ground level, in which state ideology was refracted through daily interaction – often communal in nature – between ordinary citizens and agitators. The effects of these interactions rippled through in

¹ See Margaret Somers. *Citizenship and the Place of the Public Sphere: Law, Community, and Political Culture in the Transition to Democracy // American Sociological Review*. 1993. Vol. 58. No. 5. Pp. 587-620 and Bryan Turner. *Citizenship and Social Theory*. Newbury Park, CA, 1993.

all directions – the authorities gauged societal response to their policies and identified potential sources of discontent based on what they heard from agitators, while ordinary people “updated” their Soviet identities through ideological interaction with them. A meeting of voters with their agitator was intended to be an occasion for political education of the masses, but was instead a locus of subtle negotiations on issues ranging from the supply of everyday necessities to citizens’ political rights. Last but not least, in this “communal” model of Stalinist political life, not showing up at the polling station or voting against the official candidate did not mean a person was rebelling against the abstract state, but making trouble for his/her agitator, with whom the voters had already established a personal relationship and who would not be able to go home until all voters were accounted for – or would receive a reprimand if there were too many negative votes. Thus, big politics at the local level worked subtly through communal attitudes rather than force and fear.

My interpretation thus contradicts the views of contemporary Western social scientists, who saw the agitator’s personal relations with his or her audience as *conflicting* with his or her political duties. For example, Alex Inkeles wrote in 1950:

[A] man’s role as agitator may conflict with other roles which he plays as a member of society. In particular, it may conflict with the agitator’s personal relations with his audience of fellow workers, [in] personal relations toward which he has a real emotional commitment. Because the men who are his ‘audience’ when he acts as agitator are often, during the rest of the day, simply his fellow workers, men with whom he eats in the factory lunchrooms, rides home on the trolley in the evening, and whom he perhaps sees socially and reckons as friends after working hours. And in some situations, in so far as the agitator consolidates his party position by fulfilling his agitation instructions, he may at the same time be disrupting his relations with his fellow workers.²

In contrast, I propose that it was precisely the amalgamation of the political and the personal in everyday situations that constituted the essence of Stalinist citizenship. It was this combination rather than the ever-present fear of political reprisals that made the Stalinist everyday politics work.

Generally, in the decades when Stalinist electoral campaigns still belonged to the domain of political science, Western scholars usually viewed

² Alex Inkeles. *Public Opinion in Soviet Russia: A Study in Mass Persuasion*. Cambridge, MA, 1950. P. 84.

them simply as public rituals demonstrating active adherence to Soviet power or, actually in line with official Soviet statements, as campaigns of political education.³ Jerome M. Gilison, however, has made the insightful suggestion that sending an army of agitators to work with voters before the elections represented an attempt “to remove elections entirely from the area of limited grievances and to make it a simple test of allegiance to the system.”⁴ While this may have been the state’s unspoken intent, there was more to the interaction between the agitators and the voters. In this article Stalinist electoral campaigns will be analyzed as major political events on their own, phenomena much more complex than a distraction maneuver aimed at minimizing a negative vote come Election Day. The argument proposed in this article will also clarify the obscure point found in more recent works by Russian and Ukrainian historians who acknowledge that electoral agitation somehow “worked,” either because of or in spite of the agitators’ efforts, yet cannot explain how exactly. For example, the Russian historian Elena Zubkova writes that agitators needed to be able to “prove the unprovable,” yet were often “not just uninformed, but simply uneducated.” At the same time, however, “the very atmosphere of the [1946] elections, which resembled a popular holiday, proved that the authorities enjoyed real rather than illusory trust of the people.”⁵ Her Ukrainian colleague Vasyl Kononenko also acknowledges: “A feverish propaganda campaign, the work of agitators secured for the state the necessary results.”⁶

Comrade Agitator

A good starting point in the examination of electoral campaigns as moments of political interaction is to look at the expectations of Stalinist ideologists. In December 1946, the CP(B)U Central Committee’s secretary for propaganda, Ivan Nazarenko, spoke frankly to an audience of senior

³ See, for example, George Barr Carson, Jr. *Electoral Practices in the USSR*. New York, 1955. Pp. 66-67 and Merle Fainsod. *How Russia Is Ruled*. Cambridge, MA, 1954. Pp. 323-324.

⁴ Jerome M. Gilison. *Soviet Elections as a Measure of Dissent: The Missing One Percent* // *American Political Science Review*. 1968. Vol. 62. No. 3. P. 815.

⁵ Elena Zubkova. *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obshchestvo: politika i povsednevnost, 1945-1953*. Moscow, 1999. Pp. 114-115 and 111.

⁶ V. V. Kononenko. *Nastroi naseleennia Ukrainy v umovakh povoiennoi deklarativnoi radianskoi demokratii* // *Naukovi zapysky Vinnytskoho derzhavnogo pedahohichnoho universytetu im. Mykhaila Kotsiubynskoho. Serii Istorii*. 2003. Vol. 6. Pp. 75-80, here 78.

ideological workers: “We have no doubt that our people will vote for our candidates, but this is not enough. We need to make use of this most important political event by advancing our political work among the working population (*trudiaschikhsia*), by raising the communist consciousness of our people.”⁷ At another such meeting held several weeks later, in January 1947, the Kyiv city party committee’s secretary for propaganda, Yakiv Pashko, elaborated on the propagandistic and mobilizational function of electoral campaigns:

In our country it has become a tradition to turn an electoral campaign into a mass school for the political education of the people, which helps the workers to understand better and in more depth the policy of our Bolshevik party and the Soviet government. Our electoral campaign turns into a school in which the working masses are educated in the spirit of devotion to their country; it unites the workers around the party.⁸

If the authorities were “educating” the masses during electoral campaigns, the masses were expected to demonstrate their loyalty in the process. In a long preelection article published in January 1947, the republic’s leader, Nikita Khrushchev (or his speechwriters) claimed that the electoral campaign then under way “has turned into a striking demonstration of our people’s unshakable devotion to the socialist system, to the great and victorious ideas of Lenin and Stalin.”⁹ Perhaps because the actual outcome of this highly ritualized voting was never in doubt, Soviet functionaries expected additional proof of voter sincerity, in the form of assurances provided before the election.

The key figure in making the population meet these expectations was the “agitator.” In theory, agitators volunteered their time during lunch breaks and after work to prepare the population for voting by explaining the procedure and promoting Soviet achievements. In practice, however, local organizations appointed them from among reliable people with some degree of education, with professionals and party members clearly overrepresented. District party committees formally approved the lists of agitators usually well before the elections.¹⁰ Many of those selected doubled as “agitators”

⁷ Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromadskykh obiednan Ukrainy (hereafter TsDAHO). F. 1. Op. 70. Spr. 480. Ark. 3. CP(B)U: Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine, the official name of the Communist Party’s branch in the Ukrainian republic.

⁸ Derzhavnyi arkhiv Kyivskoi oblasti (hereafter DAKO). F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 404. Ark. 23.

⁹ *Kyivska Pravda*. 1947. 24 January. P. 4.

¹⁰ See, for example, DAKO. F. 282. Op. 1. Spr. 6. Ark. 13: a list of agitators from the “Bilshovyk” factory approved on February 28, 1945, although the elections were scheduled for February 1946.

or “propagandists” in the system of mass political education, thus becoming, for all intents and purposes, permanent, part-time, unpaid ideological workers. But there were also those who worked as agitators only during election campaigns, when local party organizations needed to report to their higher-ups on the ever-increasing number of talks given and people propagandized. In late 1945 and early 1946, the total number of agitators in Kyiv started at approximately 10,000, and grew to 15,000 by the time the elections were held in February 1946. The authorities tallied 26,000 agitators in February 1947, but only 20,000 in December 1947, and 19,500 in mid-1948, when the election cycle ended and no major ideological campaigns were under way. In 1950, the total number of agitators ballooned to 47,843, only to shrink somewhat to 42,000 by 1953. Given that during this period the number of voters in Kyiv grew from 454,000 to slightly over 700,000, the agitator-to-voter ratio increased significantly, roughly from 1:45 to 1:15.¹¹

What did this army of agitators do? Officially, they educated voters, but their real role was more complex – that of intermediaries between the government and the populace. In addition to providing political education to the citizenry and bearing personal responsibility for voter turnout, agitators also acted as collectors of popular opinion, and even petitioners on behalf of their constituency. Yet the official instructions emphasized propagandistic and disciplinarian aims: “to ensure the participation in the elections of all voters, to further raise the political activism and socialist consciousness of the masses.”¹² That Soviet ideologues took the educational function of agitators seriously can be seen from more specific instructions about social groups requiring special attention.

These included, first and foremost, the so-called unorganized population, that is, those not in the workforce and thus not covered by the propaganda blanket at work, and generally more difficult to organize. Reports about agita-

¹¹ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter RGASPI). F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. Ll. 258-259; DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 144; F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 226. Ark. 122; TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 30. Spr. 351. Ark. 76 (data for 1945-1946); DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 412. Ark. 52; F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 484. Ark. 61; L. Kliuchnyk. Zakriptyty dosvid peredvyborchoi ahitatsii // Partiine zhyttia. 1947. No. 2. Pp. 59-62, here P. 59 (data for 1947-1948); DAKO. F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 3216. Ark. 198; F. 1. Op. 12. Spr. 323. Ark. 1 (data for 1950 and 1953).

¹² Pered vyboramy do Verkhovnoi Rady SRSR // Partrobitnyk Ukrainy. 1945. No. 7. Pp. 26-30, here P. 26. Similar statements in: Kyivska Pravda. 1945. November 24. P. 1; 1947. January 19. P. 1 and in: Naivazhlyvishe zavdannia partiinykh orhanizatsii // Partrobitnyk Ukrainy. 1946. No. 2. Pp. 1-10.

tors' work during the 1946 elections often include the numbers of people in this or that neighborhood, who are "not employed," apparently as an indication of a challenge for agitators.¹³ This population category comprised the elderly, disabled people, and housewives, as well as returning war veterans taking their time to find better jobs. There were also some vague statements in the press about the possible lasting effects of Nazi propaganda on those who had remained in occupied territory, especially with regard to the issue of private property, and rather blunt assertions about other categories of voters at closed ideological conferences: "False ideas of bourgeois democracy have been introduced into our milieu by some people who have been abroad, both in the Red Army and in German slavery – those who are now being repatriated [from Germany back to the USSR]. Such views were also disseminated in print, in particular by the magazine *Britanskii soiuznik*."¹⁴ Finally, young people are often mentioned as another group needing extra propagandizing, perhaps because the war and the two-year Nazi occupation had disrupted their political education and socialization. Before the first postwar elections in February 1946, the authorities often arranged "meetings of young voters," featuring lectures and concerts.¹⁵

Armed with this mental list of tasks and groups requiring special attention, agitators went on with their work. Their job literally involved much walking around and knocking on doors, so much so that the only recorded case I have found of someone refusing to serve as an agitator concerns a person claiming the lack of presentable footwear and clothing.¹⁶ Where did the agitators go? Most likely, they first went to the polling station for instructions about "their" group of voters and to the *agitpunkt* (agitation center) for lecture topics and propaganda materials. Often, this required only one trip because every polling station doubled as an *agitpunkt*, although numerous additional agitation centers were established in larger organizations and most cultural institutions.

The press and most general reports create the impression that agitators focused heavily on propaganda work, but a careful reading of archival

¹³ RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 261; DAKO. F. 791. Op. 1. Spr. 1434. Ark. 11; Pro politychnu i ahitmasovu robotu // Partrobitnyk Ukrainy. 1945. No. 9. Pp. 11-18, here P. 12 ("not employed").

¹⁴ Pered vyboramy do Verkhovnoi Rady SRSR. P. 29 (private property); TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 70. D. 480. P. 2 (bourgeois democracy). *Britanskii soiuznik* (British Ally) was a magazine published in Russian by the British government and sold in some Soviet cities during and immediately after the war.

¹⁵ RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 261; TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 70. Spr. 480. Ark. 2.

¹⁶ TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 23. Spr. 4289. Ark. 5.

documents on the shortcomings of electoral agitation shows that they had a more important task – checking voters’ lists. Local party organizations often mildly chastised their agitators for doing nothing but checking the lists – clearly a minor offense.¹⁷ If, however, agitators missed names, buildings, and sometimes entire streets, on their lists (even though they were based on police residence-registration records), their party supervisors raised the alarm. The most blatant mistakes, such as the 1946 case of an agitator missing all of Zahorodna Street with 892 voters, made it into the pages of a local newspaper.¹⁸ The authorities were paranoid about such problems because they could allow unconscientious residents to dodge voting altogether – thus leaving their Soviet identity “unconfirmed” – or, if they showed up anyway, skew upward the sacred number of the 99.9 percent turnout, which would require last-minute recalculations at district and city levels.

Such omissions usually came to light well in advance of Election Day because the authorities wisely required all voters to show up to check their names on the lists, which were posted at polling stations one month before the elections.¹⁹ Big-city voters, who were easier to organize and served by a larger army of agitators, always led the way. Three weeks before the All-Union elections in March 1950, 87 percent of Kyivites had verified their names, but only 66 percent of the republican population did so. Two weeks before the February 1951 elections to the Ukrainian legislature, the numbers stood at 98 percent and 82 percent, respectively.²⁰ One explanation for this difference is the sheer number of Kyiv-based agitators, who could take the lists to voters in case the latter did not show up at the polling station. Especially before the first postwar elections in 1946, checks of voters’ lists led to a significant increase in the number of registered voters: an amazing 733,088 people throughout the republic. In Kyiv, the available data for Molotovskiy District indicates 3,841 “missed” names and for Kaganovichskiy District, 11,642.²¹

If their *agitpunkt* did not happen to be in the same building as the polling station, agitators had to make another stop on their evening trips. Political

¹⁷ DAKO. F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 3216. Ark. 126; F. 5156. Op. 2. Spr. 1. Ark. 1; F. 282. Op. 4. Spr. 3. Ark. 51.

¹⁸ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 7. Spr. 208. Ark. 26; F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 3076. Ark. 102; F. 5156. Op. 1. Spr. 3. Ark. 1; Kyivska Pravda. 1946. January 29. P. 1.

¹⁹ Polozhennia pro vybory do Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy koi RSR // Bilshovyk Ukrainy. 1946. No. 1. Pp. 15-24, here P. 16; Kyivska Pravda. 1945. December 20. P. 5.

²⁰ TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 24. Spr. 82. Ark. 2; F. 1. Op. 24. Spr. 859. Ark. 137.

²¹ TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 6. Spr. 906. Ark. 14; Kyivska Pravda. 1946. January 29. P. 1.

education rooms in large organizations, school classrooms, and district libraries most often doubled as *agitpunkty*. The authorities spread responsibility for any necessary renovations and slogans among nearby factories, ministries, and military institutions; district libraries and schools provided portraits of leaders and loaned propaganda literature.²² Most agitation work took place elsewhere, but the *agitpunkt* served as a coordinating center, library, and lecture hall. A special magazine for agitators described an ideal *agitpunkt* as having a library, reading room, baby room, buffet, and games room (with suggested games being checkers, chess, and dominoes) – that is, “a permanent place for voters to get together.”²³ There are archival reports about such well-organized agitation centers that were usually attached to major factories or colleges. In 1946 *agitpunkt* no. 3 of the ninth electoral district, which the Dytodiah (children’s clothing) factory took under its wing, was described as “bright and comfortable,” crammed with portraits of Soviet leaders, and coordinating the work of 100 agitators. There was an experienced agitator on duty from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., and people gladly showed up in the evening to read books and newspapers, as well as to play checkers, chess, and dominoes – conspicuously listed in the exact same order as in the magazine. In 1947, agitators at voting station no. 176 and the attached *agitpunkt*, under the aegis of the Ukrkabel (electric cable) factory, organized in one month five concerts, including one featuring opera singers, and fifteen well-attended film screenings – top of doing exemplary propaganda work. In the same year, inspectors from Moscow found the *agitpunkt* at the Kyiv Military Intercommunications College to be exemplary, especially because of the homemade posters illustrating the voting procedure. In 1951, the *agitpunkt* at the Artem factory (military industry) was likewise in excellent condition, well stocked with books, newspapers, and portraits, and with an agitator on duty between 12 noon and 8 p.m. The 132 affiliated agitators, 64 of them party members, were responsible for a total of 1,739 voters in the 34 nearby apartment buildings – a ratio of 1:13.²⁴ Not all of the hundreds of *agitpunkty* in Kyiv – 280 in 1946 and over 400 in 1951 – were that well organized, however. Especially during the 1946 and

²² See, for example, DAKO. F. 282. Op. 1. Spr. 6. Ark. 67; F. 178. Op. 1. Spr. 7. Ark. 51.

²³ *Iak orhanizuvaty politychnu robotu z vybortsiamy na ahitpunkti vyborchoi dilnytsi // Bloknot ahitatora*. 1946. No. 24. Pp. 68-78, here P. 73.

²⁴ *Kyivska Pravda*. 1946. 29 December. P. 1 (Dytodiah); DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 404. Ark. 2 (Ukrkabel); RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 122. D. 249. Ll. 160-161 (Military College); DAKO. F. 5. Op. 5. Spr. 289. Ark. 3 (Artem).

1947 elections, both of which were held in the winter, agitators complained about unheated polling stations and *agitpunkty*, where “one could not last even twenty-five minutes.”²⁵

Most of the agitators’ activities, however, were held at their workplace and after work in nearby apartment buildings. At work, agitators typically used their lunch breaks to read and explain the Statute of Elections and recent party pronouncements. The authorities preferred the notion of *kruzhok* (study circle), implying listener participation, to that of a passive public listening to an agitator’s reading, which resulted in the creation of numerous study groups focusing on the Constitution, the Statute of Elections, and ideological documents of the day. Yet this project slowly folded, probably because all this “study” was limited to an agitator’s reading. In late 1945, official reports claimed that 5,845 study circles existed in the city, and in 1946, the suspiciously round number of 7,000. But the following year the reporting method switched to the number of talks given and the number of voters who attended them; for example 85,000 talks and 500,000 voters before the 1947 elections – most likely just another way to recalculate all the occasions where agitators read various documents out loud. Soon the grand total of “talks” and formal lectures reached astronomical numbers (349,000 talks and 5,060 lectures in preparation for the 1952 elections) prompting ideologues to stop reporting the total number of attendees, because it would be many times higher than the number of voters in Kyiv.²⁶

When they visited prospective voters at home, agitators typically tried to gather the residents of several communal apartments, up to thirty people, in a single room. Even during the first postwar elections, there was no pretence of a “study circle”; according to newspaper reports from late 1945, a good agitator simply read from a fresh newspaper, residents reminded each other about the voting procedure, and all of them recalled the war and the horrors of the Nazi occupation. Young voters could also occupy themselves during such meetings by reading aloud (Soviet) novels or listening to their elders’ (suitably gloomy) reminiscences about their life before the revolution.²⁷ Regardless of the epidemic of robberies that were taking place in postwar Kyiv, failure to let an agitator into your apartment was considered a political transgression. Such cases were extremely rare even in 1945-1947, and

²⁵ TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 70. Spr. 478. Ark. 7.

²⁶ RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 259 (1945); TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 30. Spr. 351. Ark. 76 (1946); DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 412. Ark. 52 (1947); F. 1. Op. 11. Spr. 651. Ark. 7 (1952).

²⁷ Kyivska Pravda. 1945. December 18. P. 1; November 25. P. 2.

they were usually reported to the city authorities.²⁸ Agitation work at places of residence gradually intensified and became more structured, at least on paper. In 1950, the city authorities considered the ratio of agitators to voters in the range of 1:15 to 1:12 to be a satisfactory one, and demanded that agitators make weekly visits to their residential groups.²⁹

Comrade Lecturer

Agitators' work usually began with the publication of the Statute on Elections, typically two or three months before Election Day. There were separate statutes for each level of elections – to the All-Union Supreme Soviet, the Ukrainian legislature, and local soviets – the main difference among them being the number of voters electing a single deputy and thus, the number of electoral districts in the city of Kyiv: three during the 1946 elections, nine in February 1947, and hundreds during the municipal elections in December 1947. All the technicalities remained the same, including the nomination and voting procedures. But since Stalinist ideologists saw the voting procedure as an important political matter, the statutes developed in the republic were sent to Moscow for approval.³⁰ Such a technical document could not be “discussed,” so over the years official reports about agitators' work emphasize the “collective reading and elucidation” of the statutes.³¹

The other topics that were covered by agitators may be divided into perennial and annual. The study of the Constitution of the USSR or, in more simplified form, of the “rights and duties of Soviet citizens,” with an emphasis on the right to elect and be elected, was a perennial favorite. Agitators tended to discuss citizens' rights as reasons for thanking Stalin with their votes: “We, the Soviet people, have the right to work, to receive an education, and to go on vacation – all granted to us by the Stalin constitution.”³² As we will see later, however, the population paid attention to the language

²⁸ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 12; F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 404. Ark. 15; RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 243.

²⁹ DAKO. F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 3216. Ark. 198.

³⁰ See RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 122. D. 244 (the statute prepared for the 1947 elections to local soviets). The texts of various statutes are in: Polozhennia pro vybory // Bloknot ahitatora. 1946. No. 23. Pp. 3-30; Kyivska Pravda. 1946. November 28. Pp. 1-2; 1950. January 11. Pp. 1-2.

³¹ Kyivska Pravda. 1945. October 16. P. 1; 1946. December 1. P. 5; 1947. December 4. P. 1; 1951. January 6. P. 1.

³² Kyivska Pravda. 1947. December 21. P. 1 (quotation); 1945. December 26. P. 1; 1950. January 14. P. 1; DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 2.

of people's constitutional rights in the Soviet state and sometimes used it, if in an awkward form, when pressing for their everyday needs. Meaningful discussions of citizens' rights and legislation that ordinary people would find relevant rarely took place during electoral campaigns. One such example was a 1947 lecture for female voters, titled "On the Rights of a Mother." Voting, already discussed as a right, was also first in the list of duties, followed closely by the duty to engage in productive work (also doubling as the right to employment). In the context of the postwar economy, the latter duty was presented as an obligation to rebuild the city and its industry.³³

Another important perennial topic was the superiority of Soviet democracy over its Western equivalent. Numerous, if rather abstract, articles on this topic appeared before every election, claiming that Soviet parliamentarians were workers and peasants, whereas those in the West were capitalists and their flunkies.³⁴ When ideologues addressed each other, they sometimes used a more revealing language, as when Nazarenko stressed the need to explain to the population "why our elections are different from elections in capitalist countries."³⁵ The favorite strategy of Soviet journalists and speechwriters, however, was to sidestep the issue of competitive elections by reaching back to pre-Soviet elections, which older citizens could remember. Rather than informing their readers about electoral procedures in the West, writers discredited the notion of multicandidate elections by counting how many of the city councilors in prerevolutionary Kyiv and deputies from Ukraine to the State Duma were large landowners and rich merchants.³⁶

Topics that changed annually probably had more importance for Soviet citizens' orientation in the contemporary political world. For winter elections, study topics often included the main political speech of the Revolution Day celebrations on November 7: by Viacheslav Molotov in 1945 and by Andrei Zhdanov in 1946. In late 1945, agitators in Kyiv also read and explained Khrushchev's speech on the occasion of the first anniversary since Ukraine's liberation by the Red Army. Stalin's election speech on February 9, 1946, which was broadcast on the radio and marked by celebratory meetings ev-

³³ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 404. Ark. 6 (mothers); Kyivska Pravda. 1946. January 12. P. 1 (duties).

³⁴ H. Aleksandrov. Pro radiansku demokratiiu // Bilshovyk Ukrainy. 1946. No. 2. Pp. 8-36; Vybory do Verkhovnoi Rady SRSR – torzhestvo radians'koi demokratii // Bilshovyk Ukrainy. 1950. No. 2. Pp. 11-20; Kyivska Pravda. 1950. January 20. P. 3.

³⁵ TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 70. Spr. 480. Ark. 2.

³⁶ TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 23. Spr. 4307. Ark. 40-41; Kyivska Pravda. 1947. January 19. P. 3.

erywhere, outshone them all, becoming the principal ideological document of the late 1940s. In addition to an ideological analysis of the war and the postwar international situation, the text also offered guidelines for economic reconstruction and promised improvements in the living standard, such as the abolition of ration cards and the lowering of prices.³⁷ Generally, reconstruction figured prominently as a lecture topic during the early postwar years, displaced by the struggle for peace and new construction projects by 1950-1951, and the decisions of the nineteenth party congress in 1953. Sometimes a topic that was considered political-educational could elicit genuine interest among the public, as was the case in December 1945, when 200 voters (apparently an unusually large number) showed up at *agitpunkt* no. 20 near the Ukrkabel factory for a physicist's lecture on nuclear energy.³⁸

Ironically, familiarizing voters with candidates' biographies came last in the work of Kyivan agitators. This aspect was usually mentioned late in the electoral campaign and got short shrift in reports. Since there were no diverse platforms to discuss and no choice of candidates, in the overwhelming majority of cases their names mattered little – unless, of course, one's candidate happened to be Stalin himself or the republican leader, to whom agitators could give personal credit for changing the lives of their constituents, for the reconstruction of the city and the republic.³⁹

Approximately one week before every All-Union election, the party's Central Committee issued an Appeal to Voters, while the CP(b)U Central Committee issued similar appeals before elections, specific to the republic. These general statements about the party's current policies and recent achievements always contained a hypocritical sentence to the effect that the party leadership "hopes for and counts on the voters' trust" or, "The party of communists expects that during the forthcoming elections to the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR voters will again show their confidence in the

³⁷ Kyivska Pravda. 1945. November 16. P. 3 (Molotov); 1946. February 10. Pp. 1-4, and February 20. P. 3 (Stalin); 1946. December 8. P. 4 (Zhdanov); DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 12; RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 247 (Khrushchev).

³⁸ For examples, see Radnianska Ukraina na shliakhu novoho narodno-hospodarskoho i kulturnoho pidnesennia // Bloknot ahitatora. 1946. No. 24. Pp. 1-19; O. Koroid. Bilshe uvahy orhanizatsiino-tekhniichnii pidhotovtsi do vyboriv // Partrobitnyk Ukrainy. 1946. No. 1. Pp. 53-57, here P. 53; Kyivska Pravda. 1950. October 10. P. 1; Vybory do mist-sevykh Rad deputativ trudiashchykh // Bilshovyk Ukrainy. 1950. No. 10. Pp. 11-17, here P. 15; Kyivska Pravda. 1945. December 30. P. 2 (nuclear power).

³⁹ Kyivska Pravda. 1946. January 23. P. 2; 1950. February 28. P. 2 (studying biographies); TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 70. Spr. 478. Ark. 4 (agitators and voters discuss Khrushchev's candidacy in 1946).

Communist Party and approve its policies.”⁴⁰ The Appeal to Voters, also published as a separate booklet with a large print run – in 1946, when newspapers were still difficult to obtain, Kyiv received 100,000 booklets – was the final ideological document that agitators studied with voters in their charge.⁴¹

Comrade Pollster

In addition to the political-educational function of electoral agitation, the authorities also used it to gauge voters’ political allegiances and hear their major concerns – tasks that the election itself could not fulfill because ideologists envisaged it as a ritualized demonstration of gratitude and unity. Accordingly, agitators acted as intermediaries between the authorities and the population at large, reporting to their higher-ups typical or troublesome questions from the audiences, which were summarized at every level and forwarded higher still, all the way up to Stalin’s desk in the Kremlin. As is clear from the agitators’ reports, postwar Kyivites could express, in the form of innocent questions, all kinds of political and social concerns, all the while remaining within the confines of the official discourse.

To the authorities’ great relief, even after two years of Nazi occupation, postwar electoral campaigns in Kyiv featured only a miniscule number of openly anti-Soviet political statements. Police reports to the Ukrainian leadership about the population’s “political mood” before the first elections (February 1946) frequently use the word “comedy,” for this was apparently the most popular among “isolated negative reactions” to the forthcoming elections by otherwise content voters in the republic.⁴² But in an official setting, people rarely expressed the sentiment that police informers could detect in their daily conversations. During the entire campaign in late 1945 and early 1946 the People’s Commissariat of State Security reportedly uncovered in Kyiv only one related case of anti-Soviet agitation (this formulation implied arrest and prosecution). An unnamed person whom they caught had said that “our elections are not free. Free elections are in England; they did not want Churchill and did not elect him.”⁴³

The authorities could deceive themselves, however. If a veiled hint not to vote for Stalin clearly warranted arrest, they let go a number of other

⁴⁰ These examples come from *Kyivska Pravda*. 1950. February 17. P. 1 and 1947. February 2. P. 1.

⁴¹ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 319. Ark. 100; *Kyivska Pravda*. 1946. February 2. Pp. 1-3.

⁴² TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 23. Spr. 1424. Ark. 4-5.

⁴³ TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 70. Spr. 478. Ark. 8.

statements undermining the basic tenets of Soviet political mythology. For example, when an agitator named Konkova talked about the significance of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany to a group of voters in Zhovtnevy District in November 1945, a voter by the name of Lysenko said: "It was not the Red Army that won but American [canned] ham and airplanes." Also in late 1945, the housewife Mishennikova refused to attend a voters' meeting, calling it pointless because "the Soviet power does not allow freedom of parties."⁴⁴ At Kyiv's second Power Station, the worker Hryhoriiv took the floor during a discussion of the Statute to the Elections to denounce the whole system as fraud: "In essence, the Supreme Soviet has been 'elected' already. Studying the Statute is a formality, just as the elections are." He went on to dismiss the (prewar) Ukrainian parliamentarian Maria Demchenko, elected "because she harvested 50,000 kilograms of sugar beets from one hectare, even though she does not know how to run a state." The worker claimed that during the elections to the State Duma, representatives of various parties on Election Day treated voters to vodka and snacks, "but they do not do this now."⁴⁵ In Molotovskiy District, during a meeting between the agitator Tabakmakher and a group of voters, a certain Medvedev announced, "I have not voted for the Soviet power and will not [vote this time]" and left the gathering.⁴⁶

Yet there is no indication that these people suffered any serious consequences. Rather, the authorities interpreted their statements as indicating the need to intensify agitation work among the population. Other such indications included agitators complaining in more general terms about housewives treating propaganda work "with estrangement" and residents in Ievbaz neighborhood (many of whom were bazaar traders) meeting agitators "coldly." Even asking one's agitator, "What is the state going to lose if I do not vote?" was considered an expression of confusion rather than of unwillingness to play along.⁴⁷

Reports about erroneous interpretations during the next electoral campaign (late 1946 and early 1947) are considerably less detailed, perhaps

⁴⁴ RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. Ll. 260-262; DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 22 (Lysenko); Ark. 214 overleaf (Mishennikova).

⁴⁵ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 219.

⁴⁶ TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 30. Spr. 351. Ark. 78; DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 122.

⁴⁷ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 306. Ark. 22 and 25; F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 88 (question). See also Blackwell. *Regime City*. P. 318 (with a reference to TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 30. Spr. 351. Ark. 83 rather than the oblast archive as here). For a similar example from the city of Rostov, see Jeffrey W. Jones. "In My Opinion This Is All a Fraud!": Concrete, Culture, and Class in the "Reconstruction" of Rostov-on-Don, 1943-1948 / Ph.D. dissertation; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000. P. 267.

because the authorities were not focusing so much on evaluating the possible remnants of Nazi propaganda. Yet there are still indications of what is termed “unhealthy attitudes”: “overestimation of the U.S. and British [military] might, underestimation of the role of elections.” In Kaganovichsky District, a “slightly drunk” unnamed citizen told the agitator Kozakova that “we do not elect, they give us a ready candidacy and all we need is to vote.” There were also cases of Kyivans stating that they would not vote (for example, a certain Slushna from Mezhyhirska Street), but the ideologues’ recommendation to agitators was just “to work individually” with such people.⁴⁸

The authorities also did not prosecute citizens who framed their objections to Soviet policies as questions – thus feigning confusion or a desire to dispel rumors – or even pointed out the undemocratic or unconstitutional character of certain government policies. Before the 1947 elections to the Ukrainian SSR Supreme Soviet, popular questions to agitators in Kyiv included, “Why would Ukraine not become an independent state?” “Can a Soviet republic withdraw from the Soviet Union?” and “Is it true that after the elections Ukraine will become an independent state?”⁴⁹ Ideologues preferred the explanation that these confused voters had only honestly asked for a clarification of the republic’s constitutional right to secede, but such questions might just as easily be asked in teasing fashion. In any case, it appears that a rumor about Ukraine’s forthcoming separation did indeed circulate throughout the city. In contrast, the authorities saw one of the most popular questions during the elections of 1946 and 1947, about whether priests could be elected, as organized by the clergy to test the state’s position, although it could also have been the result of genuine confusion following the state’s wartime reconciliation with the Russian Orthodox Church.⁵⁰

Ideological functionaries did not regard as anti-Soviet the questioning of state policies as undemocratic or illegal: “Is it not a violation of democracy that a worker cannot move from one factory to another according to his own will?” and its variants, “Is it not a violation of socialist legality that it is impossible for a worker to transfer at will to another enterprise?” “Will the government decree prohibiting unauthorized job changes be repealed?”⁵¹

⁴⁸ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 410. Ark. 114 (unhealthy attitudes); F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 494. Ark. 8 (ready candidacy); F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 409. Ark. 138 (Slushna).

⁴⁹ DAKO. F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 1310. Ark. 87-88.

⁵⁰ For the ideologues’ explanation, see TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 70. Spr. 315. Ark. 20. For numerous examples, see RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 239; DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 6 and 107; TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 30. Spr. 351. Ark. 82.

⁵¹ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 11 and 107; TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 30. Spr. 351. Ark. 77 and 83.

Another loaded question was also considered legitimate: “Why does the Constitution say that education is free, whereas one has to pay for it after grade eight?”⁵² Even a question depicting the entire electoral campaign as pointless warranted an explanation rather than repression, as long as it was asked with the pretense of honest confusion, as in the case of the workers at the Artem military factory in late 1945: “Is it even necessary to conduct agitation work in preparation for the elections, if there is a single party in our country, and therefore there cannot be such struggle during the electoral campaign as in capitalist countries?”⁵³ No less tongue-in-cheek was the question, “In what ways is our electoral system different from those in Europe’s democratic countries?” implying as it did that the Soviet system was not democratic.⁵⁴

In some cases, voters subtly questioned the past selection of candidates by using the system’s own language, as in the question, “During the last elections we voted for enemies of the people – will we elect such people again?” Indeed, a very large proportion of prewar deputies had been shot in 1937 and 1938. At the second Power Station, the worker Mikhnitsky said, “Last time we voted for Marchak, but he turned out to be an enemy of the people.” In Podil District, somebody formulated a more elaborate version of this question, offering the example of the republic’s former party leader, who was executed in 1938: “Why were there no by-elections to elect new deputies in place of those who left (Kosior) and why were the voters not even notified about this?”⁵⁵

Significantly, a large group of questions concerned the right to vote, which the population – mindful of the disenfranchisement of the “exploiting classes” before 1936 – apparently understood as a marker of their good standing with the state. The majority of these questions concerned “repatriated” or former *Ostarbeiter*, who had returned from their slave labor in Germany with the stigma of ideological unreliability, but did not lose their right to vote. These repatriated individuals were eager to take part in the elections with the precise aim of confirming their full rights as citizens. In 1946, an agitator reported on the case of six repatriated Kyivites, who returned just

⁵² TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 30. Spr. 351. Ark. 83; variant in DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 47.

⁵³ RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 240; DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 11.

⁵⁴ DAKO. F. 3. Op. 212. Spr. 22.

⁵⁵ RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. Ll. 244 and 274 (first two questions); DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 218 (Kosior). For a similar example from Yaroslav oblast in Russia, see Zubkova. *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obshchestvo*. P. 112.

before the elections and insisted on voting even before obtaining residential registration: “They filled out the applications, we added them to the [voters’] list and these people calmed down. They are citizens with full and equal rights (*polnopravnye*) and they will vote.”⁵⁶ Other categories of people about which the population often asked included those who had remained in Kyiv during the Nazi occupation, those without residential permits, members of the clergy, churchgoers, individuals who had been away on a business trip, and those who were currently serving abroad in the Red Army—in all these cases, the answer was affirmative.⁵⁷ Anti-Semitic rumors, ever present in postwar Kyiv, prompted the single occurrence of a question about the creation of a separate electoral district for the city’s Jews, but it was never asked again, perhaps because audiences sensed from the agitators’ reactions that it was not (yet) in line with official ideology.⁵⁸

In contrast, another spontaneous question from the floor sounded right to both voters and agitators, who often reported it to their higher-ups as a signal of sorts to the authorities about what the population at large would consider just: “Why are those who served in administrative institutions under the Germans not being deprived of the right to vote?” Versions of this question included those who had served in the auxiliary police, their wives, and village captains. The question could also be formulated more forcefully in the form of a demand, as when the worker Vrublevsky at the Bozhenko furniture factory said: “I understand the democratic nature of our Constitution, but as an old worker who helped establish Soviet power in 1917, I think that policemen and all other traitors should be deprived of voting rights without trial and not allowed to vote.”⁵⁹

Because the authorities viewed the elections, with their predictable results, as essentially a political education campaign, they encouraged questions on all kinds of issues not necessarily related to the elections as such. The population mostly played along by asking, for the record, friendly questions about domestic and foreign policies, but also availed itself of the opportunity to probe agitators on those “big issues” that truly worried

⁵⁶ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 306. Ark. 26. For other examples, see RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 266. Ll. 239, 240 and 241; TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 30. Spr. 351. Ark. 82; DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 6, 16 and 20.

⁵⁷ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 6, 16, 19-20, 107; TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 30. Spr. 351. Ark. 82; RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 244.

⁵⁸ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 174. On anti-Semitism in postwar Kyiv, see Blackwell. *Regime City of the First Category*. Ch. 6.

⁵⁹ TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 30. Spr. 351. Ark. 91 (first quotation); RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. Ll. 239; 245 (Vrublevsky).

ordinary Kyivites. In the aftermath of the total war, with the city center still lying in ruins and most families still mourning their dead, rumors often had an apocalyptic quality. The partial solar eclipse on July 9, 1945, during the hours between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m., when Kyivites saw up to 82 percent of the sun obscured by the moon, made a strong impact on the popular imagination. Despite explanatory articles in a local newspaper and several radio broadcasts, a few months later agitators were still getting questions such as “Is it true that one-third of the Sun broke off and is falling to the Earth?” or even “When will the end of the world arrive?” (with an agitator’s note stating that the last question was related to the same rumor).⁶⁰

But whereas that rumor circulated mostly among people with little education, and in one particular year, a different apocalyptic expectation was rife among all social strata, producing a mass of questions during every electoral campaign under Stalin. This was the fear of a new world war. A general question as to whether there would be a war predominates in reports over the years. Occasionally, rumors circulated that war had just been declared or had begun without public notification. In late 1945, agitators in Kyiv were asked if Turkey had really declared war on the Soviet Union on November 15. In 1947, a rumor circulating in the city prompted questions, like “Is it true that a war is under way and the wounded have been brought to Kyiv?”⁶¹

The population apparently monitored international news and Soviet ideological statements for indications of the growing or decreasing likelihood of a military conflict directly influencing them. In late 1945, Kyivan voters were asking their agitators whether Molotov’s words about “capitalist encirclement” in his Revolution Day speech meant imminent war. Ordinary people were also worried mightily about the fact that the Council of Foreign Ministers of the allied states could not reach any decisions during its conference in London. Others asked, “Will [the invention of] a nuclear bomb lead to war?”⁶² Although the United States was clearly the main potential enemy, over the years voters also worried about possible or real Soviet involvement in local conflicts, particularly in Greece and Korea, as well as

⁶⁰ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 114 (the quoted question) and 25 (variant); RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 250 (the end of the world). See also *Kyivska Pravda*. 1945. November 4. P. 2. Note that this popular article by the astronomer D. Piaskovsky appeared four months after the eclipse, clearly as a response to subsequent rumors.

⁶¹ RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 261; DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 22 (1945); TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 23. Spr. 4318. Ark. 8; DAKO. F. 791. Op. 1. Spr. 1434. Ark. 24 (1947). For examples of general questions about the likelihood of a war, see also DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 410. Ark. 124; F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 412. Ark. 25; F. 5. Op. 5. Spr. 289. Ark. 39

⁶² RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 250; DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 27.

the danger of a clash with the Western Allies in Germany.⁶³ Of course, the line in official reports that “the agitators gave exhaustive answers to all the above-mentioned questions”⁶⁴ is a figment of bureaucratic imagination. Agitators differed from the general public only insofar as all of them had at least secondary education and they read the press regularly. They could identify a politically unsound rumor or anti-Soviet interpretation of events, but few could discuss the intricacies of foreign policy. Yet the authorities did not really expect this from them; rather the agitators’ role was to conduct ritualistic meetings to reinforce Soviet identities among the population.

Comrade Petitioner

Another function of electoral campaigns – the transmission to the authorities of popular concerns and requests concerning daily life in Kyiv – placed agitators in a more difficult situation because they served as an interface between the state and often disaffected voters. In these interactions, ordinary Kyivites sometimes adopted the language of citizens’ rights and duties to press for their needs. Like local bureaucrats, they also demonstrated an understanding of elections as a moment of negotiation, when voters can ask for things and the authorities feel obliged to do at least something. Instructional articles in the press as late as 1947 suggest that agitators should explain all the difficulties in the city as “temporary, of transitional character,” but this did not always sit well with the voters they were facing. During the same electoral campaign, the agitator Makarov from the Machine-Tool Factory complained at a factory party meeting about the difficulties of conducting agitation at workers’ dormitories: “They always swear at the agitators, often ask why the dormitories are not heated. We explain that this is connected to the difficulties [of postwar reconstruction], but this does little to calm down the voters.”⁶⁵ However, the reaction from below likely also depended on who was asking. If disgruntled workers felt free to air their feelings to agitators from the same factory – who could be fellow workers or young engineers with little disciplinary power – this is not how the population of residential neighborhoods interacted with unfamiliar and powerful agitators from the republic’s central institutions. During the 1947 electoral campaign,

⁶³ See examples from the 1947 and 1951 electoral campaigns in DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 410. Ark. 113 and 124; F. 5. Op. 5. Spr. 289. Ark. 39.

⁶⁴ RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 667. L. 273.

⁶⁵ Kyivska Pravda. 1947. January 12. P. 4 and TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 23. Spr. 4289. Ark. 7.

the agitators from Soviet Ukraine's Ministry of Justice reported thus on their work:

One should note that, although the contingent that the agitators from the Ministry of Justice serve consists to a large degree of the poor (*maloimushchee*) population of the city outskirts (unskilled workers, cleaners, low-paid office workers, etc.), who are often burdened with large families and many of whom had remained on the occupied territory, the voters' mood is completely satisfactory. They willingly attend the talks about the prospects of fulfilling the Fourth Stalinist Five-Year Plan and, while complaining to agitators about material difficulties in everyday life, readily agree that the completion of the Five-Year Plan and the future harvest will improve considerably the well-being of the Soviet people.⁶⁶

In cases where voters did not tremble as much in the presence of agitators, their general questions about the economy and everyday life could border on open criticism of Soviet policies. This is true of the following questions, which were reported as typical during various electoral campaigns in Kyiv: "When will the good life return?" "When will the material situation of the working people improve considerably?" "Why is bread being taken away from the collective farmers?" "Why is the struggle against speculation conducted so poorly?" "Why are the local authorities not taking decisive measures to combat burglaries and robberies in the outskirts?" (1946); "When will rationing be cancelled?" "For what period of time has rationing been extended?" "When will permission be given to build private housing?" "What are the causes of the typhus epidemic, and why are sufficient measures not being taken?" "Why do peasants from Bessarabia, who have been conscripted for construction work in Kyiv, walk barefoot, and beg for food?" (1947); "When will prices be lowered?" "When will the quality of consumer goods improve?" (1951).⁶⁷

As compiled reports from all corners of the Soviet Union confirm, people everywhere asked similar questions.⁶⁸ The authorities claimed

⁶⁶ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 416. Ark. 17.

⁶⁷ TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 30. Spr. 351. Ark. 91; DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 88, 174, and 212 (1946); DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 412. Ark. 11; F. 791. Op. 1. Spr. 1434. Ark. 22 (1947); DAKO. F. 5. Op. 5. Spr. 289. Ark. 39 (1951). The typhus epidemic in postwar Kyiv was never mentioned in the official press. On it, see T. V. Vronska. *V umovakh viiny: zhyttia ta pobut naseleння mist Ukrainy (1943–1953 rr.)*. Kyiv, 1994.

⁶⁸ RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 88. D. 692. L. 171–173. Published in E. Iu. Zubkova, L. P. Kosheleva, G. A. Kuznetsova, A. I. Miniuk, and L. A. Rogovaia (Eds.). *Sovetskaia zhizn: 1945–1953*. Moscow, 2003. Pp. 403–405.

to have listened. Originally promised by Stalin in his election speech in February 1946, the abolition of rationing – one of the most popular questions posed to agitators in 1946 and 1947 – finally took place on December 14, 1947, one week before the elections to the local soviets. The population greeted the simultaneous lowering of bread prices and the opening of numerous additional grocery stores both at official meetings and spontaneously. Upon exiting new stores with their purchases, some Kyivites reportedly exclaimed, “Here it is, the good life, it has come back. May God grant good health and strength to our dear and beloved Comrade Stalin!” or “Long live Comrade Stalin, hurrah to Comrade Stalin!”⁶⁹ The abolition of rationing, however, came complete with a currency reform that was designed to eliminate large cash savings and shrink any significant bank accounts. The majority of workers, who had no savings to speak of, apparently welcomed this as targeting hated speculators. Those who were slightly better off emptied the stores, bought theater tickets for upcoming performances, and ordered expensive haircuts. There were expressions of discontent at the Arsenal factory, where the mid-month advance was delayed, leaving the employees penniless on the day of the government announcement. Even the official communiqué tried to preempt grumblings by pointing out that the reform would be the people’s “last sacrifice” to the cause of postwar reconstruction.⁷⁰

With these reforms announced during the electoral campaign and presented at meetings as “Stalin’s protection of the interests of working people,” the authorities claimed that the election results represented the voters’ response to the reforms, which in turn were the state’s answer to popular concerns. The gratitude of Kyivites allegedly “found its expression during the elections to the local soviets” on December 21, as confirmed by the 99.99 percent turnout and 99.94 percent of votes in favor of the official slate of candidates. The Soviet authorities also reported as evidence patriotic inscriptions on bulletins thanking Stalin for the abolition of rationing and the currency reform.⁷¹ Similarly, when state prices on major food items were lowered on March 1, 1950, just before the All-Union elections on March 12, the Kyivan authorities summarized the popular response as follows:

⁶⁹ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 426. Ark. 93-97 (quotes cited on 96 and 97); Kyivska Pravda. 1947. December 15. Pp. 1-2; December 16. P. 1; December 17. P. 2.

⁷⁰ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 426. Ark. 1-14 (the population’s reaction); Kyivska Pravda. 1947. December 15. P. 1.

⁷¹ Kyivska Pravda. 1947. December 15. P. 2 (Stalin’s protection); DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 426. Ark. 98 (election results as an expression of gratitude).

the voters “will unanimously vote for the candidates, because this means a happy life.”⁷²

If ideologists expected Soviet citizens to thank the state for a better life with their votes, people desperate for improvements in their living conditions could turn the tables and threaten to abstain from voting unless their demands were met. This admittedly risky negotiating strategy could be successful if local bureaucrats considered the request itself reasonable. Thus, before the February 1947 elections to the Ukrainian legislature, a female voter named Shevchuk (10 Annensky Lane) announced to the local agitator: “According to Stalin’s Constitution, I should be receiving a bread ration card, but I am not getting it and I do not want to vote anymore. I voted on February 10 [1946], and what did it bring me?” Although Shevchuk’s request was not based on any clauses of the Constitution, it was totally legitimate. The bureaucratic glitch was immediately fixed and she received her ration card.⁷³

That same year, the agitator Kizei, an employee at the Kyiv Polytechnic, ran into a more difficult situation during a talk with female construction workers living in an unheated dormitory. The three women living in room 12 said, “What are the elections to us, when we are hungry? Before the war we voted for Comrade Hnatenko. Back then we were receiving four kilograms of grain for one workday [on a collective farm], but now we are sitting here in the cold and have not been paid for three months now.” According to the agitator, many other workers in this dormitory had similar feelings. Satisfying the demands of 157 construction workers was not as easy as helping one elderly woman obtain her ration card. Just as in another similar case involving the dormitory of the Bridge Construction Depot, the situation allegedly “improved” after the administration got involved, but it is highly unlikely that all the workers’ demands were met.⁷⁴

Finally, the city authorities ignored the demand of A. V. Veksler (77 Dmytrivska Street), who announced to his agitator that he would not vote for Khrushchev, who was standing for election in this district. The voter “expressed his displeasure with C[omrade] Khrushchev because C[omrade] Khrushchev had not given him an apartment, and he told the agitator that his family will vote for Com[rade] Stalin [instead].” The only result of this demarche was that the entire building was placed under the close observa-

⁷² DAKO. F. 1. Op. 7. Spr. 208. Ark. 52.

⁷³ DAKO. F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 494. Ark. 49.

⁷⁴ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 41. Ark. 123 (quotation); F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 409. Ark. 72; F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 494. Ark. 48-49.

tion of agitators, which move further increased the number of talks about the temporary difficulties.⁷⁵

Generally, only in desperate cases did voters try to negotiate the resolution of their private concerns during the elections to the All-Union and Ukrainian Supreme Soviets. They understood these events as appropriate occasions for posing questions about the likelihood of war, major state policies, and the improvement of living standards in general – issues that one could bring up in a symbolic interaction with Stalin. In contrast, the elections to local soviets in December 1947 and December 1950 saw a flurry of questions and demands concerning concrete everyday problems specific to Kyivan neighborhoods. These electoral campaigns contained a strong component of real, as opposed to symbolic, interaction with authorities. One month before the elections, hundreds of lower-level deputies – in 1950, Kyivites were represented by 1,666 deputies to district soviets, 844 to the city soviet, and 44 to the oblast soviet⁷⁶ – held meetings to “report on their work” to the voters, who had apparently been waiting for this moment of direct negotiation with the local authorities. (Tens of thousands of agitators worked on this campaign as well, but their function as intermediaries was muted – only the mayor, Oleksii Davydov, who was elected to this position indirectly, by the city council, collected questions and proposals during a meeting with agitators, who summarized voters’ concerns for him.)

What is interesting about the municipal elections is not just the sheer number of demands but the language in which they were expressed. Citizens and agitators alike, and even official reports at the city level, speak of “voters’ demands,” as in this example from 1947: “At a number of meetings, voters demanded that the city executive committee and district soviets concentrate above all on improving the operation of trams and buses, increasing the number of shops, eliminating interruptions in the power supply, the renovation of housing, and construction of new apartment buildings and customer service sites.”⁷⁷ During the election campaign, petitions from residents asking that their buildings be wired for radios or that the power supply be restored routinely opened with the sentence, “We, the voters of...” followed by the name of the street or neighborhood. During a meeting with the chairman of the Zaliznychny District soviet, Comrade Izhelia, in one outlying neighborhood “voters put forward demands to build stairs to Batyeva Hill, light the streets in Batyeva Hill with electricity, build

⁷⁵ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 409. Ark. 72.

⁷⁶ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 412. Ark. 80.

⁷⁷ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 412. Ark. 56.

additional water fountains on the streets, and organize cultural life for the residents of Batyeva Hill.”⁷⁸

Requests and questions registered during these two campaigns could be very specific, for example, shoe stores’ lack of footwear for girls ages 12 to 16, the stinking rainwater collector near Zhytny Market, or the lack of repairs in a particular flooded apartment. They could also be more general, applicable to most neighborhoods, such as the unsatisfactory operation of public transport, insufficient number of public baths, and unreliable supply of electricity. There is every indication that local authorities listened at least to those concerns that were heard in more than one neighborhood – city bureaucrats summarized these demands district by district, and the city soviet’s executive committee planned remedial measures.⁷⁹

During the elections to Soviet and Ukrainian legislatures, however, voters almost never made such concrete demands. Instead of speaking in the voice of the collective (“We, the voters”) each of them stood on his/her own in a symbolic interaction with the state power as personified by Stalin or the candidates represented as his proxies. The general principle of *quid pro quo* applied – people could obtain help more easily before the elections, when the authorities needed satisfied voters, but assistance was always individual. Also, instead of a candidate standing for election, they dealt with an intermediary representing the state in general, the agitator.

Especially during the electoral campaigns of 1946 and 1947, when state social services remained undeveloped, Kyivan agitators played a major role in helping the population resolve all kinds of everyday problems. Judging by the language of their reports, agitators “discovered” problems just as often as they responded to complaints or requests. Many agitators likely saw helping the poor and the disadvantaged as a state-approved form of social activism; others could be guided by compassion; while some merely fulfilled their duties – but the end result remained the same: in preparation for the elections, representatives of the state helped improve ordinary people’s lives.

Agitators most often assisted with paperwork. As relatively educated people with better-than-average orientation in the world of Soviet bureaucracy, they often helped obtain a certificate of a husband’s death at the front, register for disability status, apply for a job, receive a registration

⁷⁸ DAKO. F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 3089. Ark. 9 and 20 (“We, the voters”); F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 412. Ark. 17 (Batyeva Hill).

⁷⁹ These examples come from TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 24. Spr. 295; DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 412; F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 3089. See, in particular, DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 412. Ark. 74-79 about the reaction of the city authorities.

stamp, apply for a pension, acquire a bread ration card, and so on. In one case, an agitator helped a worker's family prepare the paperwork for a lawsuit that resulted in the return of their apartment. Sometimes an agitator realized that his or her charges were entitled to a state benefit they did not know about, as in the case of the agitator Kaufman, who in late 1945 helped the voter Khodakivska to prepare documents about the number of children she had, seven, which entitled her to a medal and considerable benefit payments from the state.⁸⁰ When an agitator found out that a certain Marchenko, an unemployed women recovering from typhus, was lying hungry in her unheated apartment on Zhertv Revoliutsii Street, things began changing: the stove was repaired, firewood delivered, clothing donated, and financial help received. Another agitator helped the bedridden disabled voter Kostiantyn Riznychenko by obtaining a bread ration card, wiring his room for radio, and providing a complimentary newspaper subscription. The press reported on such cases as examples of the great work being done by agitators.⁸¹

When agitators represented a large factory or powerful administrative institution, they could do more for voters than just helping with paperwork. In 1946, the Ukrkabel factory helped open an additional bread store in the neighborhood, thus eliminating long lines. The same enterprise also provided elderly voters in the vicinity with firewood.⁸² During the 1947 elections, agitators from the Ministry of Justice applied their influence and bureaucratic skills to helping voters in their charge. They mobilized the police to help a 75-year-old single woman Skrypchuk, who had been illegally evicted from her apartment. They double-checked the amount of pension due to the voter Chyhir, whose income then went up (and retroactively for the past seven months). They obtained a free sanatorium pass for the retired engineer Sverhun, who suffered from rheumatism, and donated ten square meters of cloth from the ministry's supplies to the voter Shapovalova, who had adopted an abandoned baby. When an agitator from the ministry realized that the voter Rvacheva was being mistakenly charged communal payments

⁸⁰ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212. Ark. 31 (court) and 105 (7 children). My summary of other typical uses of an agitator's assistance is based on DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 212; F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 306; F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 409; F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 416; F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 494; and F. 791. Op. 1. Spr. 1434.

⁸¹ DAKO. F. 5. Op. 3. Spr. 494. Ark. 48 (Marchenko); F. 791. Op. 1. Spr. 1434. Ark. 14 (Riznychenko); *Kyivska Pravda*. 1945. December 4. P. 1; December 30. P. 2. For similar examples from the city of Rostov, see Jones. "In My Opinion, This Is All a Fraud". P. 261.

⁸² TsDAHO. F. 1. Op. 70. Spr. 478. Ark. 4-5.

for a shared kitchen, he “sent for the apartment manager and demanded that this be stopped immediately.”⁸³

Whether assistance was rendered by heavy-handed ministry employees or by gentler individuals from other walks of life, the population was grateful for the agitators’ help. Voters understood that this was part of a bargain not with individual agitators or even the institutions they represented, but with the state for which they stood. What people would have appreciated even more would have been constant attention to their needs. As one inscription on a ballot during the 1946 elections read, “Thank you, comrades, for all the work you did in our building. We ask you not to forget us in the future too.” Reportedly, there were many such notes.⁸⁴

* * *

Unlike the elections themselves, Stalinist electoral campaigns thus emerge as an important social practice of political participation, a moment of high politics translated into the everydayness of “communal citizenship.” Definitely a political ritual, the electoral campaign cannot be dismissed as an “empty” ceremony because it provided social space for symbolic interaction with the authority, reiterated ideal notions of citizenship, and allowed for a moment of subtle negotiation. As was the case with other mass forms of political participation under Stalin, citizens could embrace, tolerate, or subvert them – and the majority accepted them as the only form of mainstream politics known to them – but the state’s idea of citizenship required all to take part. Over time, the population, too, accepted the notion of citizenship as based on participation in a set of political and social practices, and moreover because so many of them reached ordinary citizens in a “communal” form. Participants could imbue these political rituals with different meaning or use them to express criticisms of the state, framing their questions and comments as part of a reciprocal relationship, in which citizens fulfilling their duty expected the authorities to provide them with services.

A particularly interesting role in the mechanism of Stalinist “communal politics” was played by the army of “agitators,” who acted at once as political educators, voting-turnout enforcers, opinion pollsters, social workers, advocates of the poor, and defenders of the state’s policies. Ordinary citizens organizing elections for the state, the agitators unwittingly or knowingly provided Stalinist politics with a human face. Despite the political tension

⁸³ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 416. Ark. 14-15 overleaf.

⁸⁴ DAKO. F. 1. Op. 3. Spr. 306. Ark. 31.

ever-present in routine agitation work, relations between agitators and voters present a rather unexpected perspective on Stalinist politics as a “communal affair.” In the case of Stalinist electoral campaigns, grand strategies of the state – here, the political education of citizens and mass demonstration of allegiance – were translated into home visits by agitators, communal get-togethers, and newspaper-reading circles, in which the agitators forged personal relationships with their “agitees.” The success of Stalinist elections was ensured not just by means of fear or internalization of Bolshevik ideology, but at that very moment, so often described in newspapers and reports, when voters offered tea to their agitator.

SUMMARY

Статья Сергея Екельчика посвящена выборам в Верховный Совет и местные органы власти в послевоенном Киеве, точнее, роли агитаторов во время предвыборной кампании. В статье реконструируется деятельность агитаторов: их назначение, встречи с рядовыми гражданами, пропаганда и сбор жалоб и пожеланий для передачи официальным инстанциям. Как выясняет автор, политическое руководство очень серьезно относилось к предвыборной кампании и вовсе не воспринимало ее как пустой спектакль (как полагали сторонники теории тоталитаризма). С другой стороны, участвовавшие в предвыборной агитации люди (каждый пятнадцатый избиратель становился агитатором) вовсе не обязаны были демонстрировать особую идеологическую сознательность – их работа заключалась в транслировании официозной пропаганды. Екельчик предлагает рассматривать деятельность агитаторов как важнейшую социальную практику реализации “коммунальной модели гражданства.” Эта модель отличается от традиционных представлений о гражданстве как формальном статусе определенной категории населения и предполагает, что в сталинском СССР граждане должны были регулярно подтверждать свой статус через ритуалы политического участия (в том числе, в ходе предвыборных кампаний). Выступавшие от лица государства обычные люди, временно назначаемые агитаторами, служили важным передаточным звеном между государственной машиной и пространством частной жизни. Они придавали сталинскому режиму “человеческое лицо” в глазах населения, собирали информацию о настроениях граждан, а также по мере сил пытались решать бытовые проблемы избирателей.