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**The attitude of extreme right-wing movements in France to Ukraine during
the Liberation Struggles of 1917-1921 (on the example of the newspaper
«L'Action française»)**

Yaroslav Shkabura,

Candidate of Historical Sciences, Senior Lecturer, Department of Ukrainian
Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University,
Kharkiv, Ukraine, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1541-9317>

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Abstract: *The study of the image of Ukraine in the French far-right press, in particular in the newspaper “L'Action française”, allows us to reveal a complex and heterogeneous system of perception of the Liberation Struggles in Ukraine (events of the period of the national liberation struggle of the Ukrainian people during 1917-1921) in the ideological environment of the monarchist and integral-nationalist movement. Based on the analysis of newspaper publications, it can be argued that the tone and rhetoric of materials on the Ukrainian issue changed under the influence of both the military-political situation in Eastern Europe and the internal priorities of the Action Française movement itself, which saw in world events primarily a reflection of its own concept of the fight against the republican system and “revolutionary chaos”. In the first months of revolutionary changes in Russia and the emergence of the Central Rada, the Ukrainian issue in the publication was mainly considered through the prism of the general crisis of the*

“imperial order” and the danger of “anarchy”, which threatened not only Eastern Europe, but also the entire Christian West. However, over time, as Ukrainian governments sought external allies, texts began to appear in the newspaper that recognized the independence aspirations of Ukrainians, especially when they coincided with France’s geopolitical interests in confronting Bolshevism.

It is important that the representation of Ukraine in the pages of “L’Action française” was not autonomous — it was always subordinated to a broader narrative in which anti-Marxist and anti-democratic motives played a key role. The Ukrainian movement was presented either as an example of “order and discipline” in alliance with traditional European forces, or as another manifestation of the “decomposable” power of the revolution, if its actions contradicted the political sympathies of the editorial staff. This gives reason to believe that for the French far-right of that time, the image of Ukraine was not so much a realistic picture of events as a tool for confirming their own political theses.

Thus, the analysis revealed the duality of the position of “L’Action française”: on the one hand, an ideological interest in opposing the Bolshevik threat, which could generate situational support for Ukrainian independence; on the other, a deep distrust of any forms of national self-determination outside the monarchical model, which limited the depth and stability of the positive image of Ukraine. The study also showed that the newspaper rhetoric of this period reflected political realities, but also formed a specific vision of the Ukrainian question in French public opinion, which in the following decades influenced the range of right-wing conservative interpretations of events in Eastern Europe.

Keywords: *Ukraine; Liberation struggles; France; press; L’Action française.*

**Відношення до України крайніх правих рухів у Франції у період
Визвольних змагань 1917-1921 рр. (на прикладі газети «L’Action
française»)**

Шкабура Ярослав Іванович,

кандидат історичних наук, старший викладач кафедри українознавства
філософського факультету Харківського національного університету імені
В.Н.Каразіна, м. Харків, Україна, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1541-9317>

***Анотація:** Дослідження образу України у французькій ультраправій пресі, зокрема в газеті «L’Action française», дає змогу виявити складну й неоднорідну систему сприйняття Визвольних змагань в Україні (подій періоду національно-визвольної боротьби українського народу протягом 1917—1921 років) в ідеологічному середовищі монархічного та інтегрально-націоналістичного руху. На підставі аналізу газетних публікацій можна стверджувати, що тональність і риторика матеріалів щодо українського питання змінювалися під впливом як військово-політичної ситуації на сході Європи, так і внутрішніх пріоритетів самого руху Action Française, що бачив у світових подіях насамперед відображення власної концепції боротьби з республіканським ладом і «революційним хаосом». У перші місяці революційних змін у Росії та появи Центральної Ради українське питання у виданні переважно розглядалося крізь призму загальної кризи «імперського порядку» та небезпеки «анархії», що загрожує не лише Східній Європі, а й усьому християнському Заходу. Проте з часом, у міру того як українські уряди шукали зовнішніх союзників, у газеті почали з’являтися тексти, які визнавали самостійницькі прагнення українців, особливо коли вони збігалися з геополітичними інтересами Франції у протистоянні більшовизму.*

Важливим є те, що представлення України на сторінках «L’Action française» не було автономним — воно завжди підпорядковувалося ширшому наративу, у якому ключову роль відігравали антимарксистські та антидемократичні мотиви. Український рух поставав або як приклад «порядку і дисципліни» в союзі з традиційними європейськими силами, або як ще один прояв «розкладної» сили революції, якщо його дії суперечили політичним симпатіям редакції. Це дає підстави вважати, що для французьких ультраправих того часу образ України був не стільки реалістичною картиною подій, скільки інструментом підтвердження власних політичних тез.

Таким чином, аналіз виявив подвійність позиції «L’Action française»: з одного боку, ідеологічну зацікавленість у протиставленні більшовицькій загрозі, що могло породжувати ситуативну підтримку української незалежності; з іншого — глибоку недовіру до будь-яких форм національного самовизначення поза монархічною моделлю, що обмежувало глибину й сталість позитивного образу України. Дослідження також показало, що газетна риторика цього періоду і відображала політичні реалії, але й сама формувала у французькій суспільній думці специфічне бачення українського питання, яке у наступні десятиліття впливало на коло правоконсервативних інтерпретацій подій на сході Європи.

Ключові слова: Україна; Визвольні змагання; Франція; преса; L’Action française.

Statement of the problem. Modern historiography continues to actively study how extreme right-wing movements influenced narratives about national liberation processes in neighboring countries. Of particular interest is the study of the influence of the French far-right — in particular, through the organ «L’Action



française» — on the reflection and formation of attitudes towards Ukrainian statehood during the period of the conditional Liberation Struggles of 1917–1921. This is important not only for historical studies, but also for understanding long-term transnational models of political thinking, the role of the media in the legitimization of states, and the influence of propaganda.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The research tradition associated with the history of the Action Française movement received thorough coverage in E. Weber's fundamental monograph «Action Française, Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth-Century France» [1], where the ideological development of monarchical and reactionary nationalism in France was traced on the basis of archival materials. Modern studies, in particular Stephen Wilson in his article «A View of the Past» [2], explores the socio-political function of the historiography of Action Française as a tool for constructing a conservative vision of the past in French society. In the same context, it is worth noting the collective work of M. Lemari and J. Prevost «L'Action française : culture, société, politique» [3], which deepens the understanding of the cultural and political strategies of the movement, demonstrating its multidimensional impact on the intellectual and social life of France in the first half of the twentieth century.

The topic of the influence of the press on the formation of public mentality in France was developed in large-scale survey studies, such as «Histoire générale de la presse française» [4], which covers the period from 1871 to 1940, tracing the evolution of the French press in social and political contexts, as well as in P. Eveno's synthetic work «Histoire de la presse française: de Théophraste Renaudot à la révolution numérique» [5], which offers a long-term perspective on the development of the press from early modern origins to the present day. In light of the issues of radical movements, it is important to mention M. Vinok's monograph

«Nationalisme, Antisémitisme et Fascisme en France» [6], which analyzes in detail the relationship between political extremism and mass communications in France.

As for the Ukrainian topic, there are studies in historiography that analyze the function of the press in shaping the image of Ukraine in the Western European information space. The work of V. Wolfram and co-authors «The Emergence of Ukraine: Self-Determination, Occupation, and War in Ukraine, 1917–1922» [7] is a comprehensive analysis of the formation of Ukrainian statehood and the international perception of the Ukrainian question during the years of revolutions and liberation struggles. Of particular importance is S. Blavatsky's article «The Ukrainian Francophone Press in France (1919–1921)» [8], which studies the activities of Ukrainian Francophone publications in France as an important instrument of cultural diplomacy and information representation of Ukraine. In the same direction are the studies of O. Drozdovskaya, dedicated to the Ukrainian-language magazines «Grey Ukraine» and «Yellow Ukraine» (1917–1918) [9], which reproduce little-known stories of Ukrainian press activity abroad. An important addition to these investigations is the analysis of publications of the magazine «France et Ukraine» [10], in which French intellectual circles tried to form a positive image of Ukraine, drawing attention to the problems of famine, emigration and military-political blockade. In the article by J. Shkabury «Promotion of national interests on the pages of the Ukrainian émigré press in France during the first liberation struggles of 1917–1921 (on the example of the weekly “France et Ukraine”)» [11], the author analyzes the specifics of the French-language magazine France et Ukraine as a platform for representing Ukrainian national interests in French society, traces the themes of materials aimed at forming a positive image of Ukraine, and also emphasizes the importance of this press in the context of the struggle for international recognition of Ukrainian statehood.

Highlighting unresolved parts of the general problem. Despite significant achievements in the study of right-wing French movements and the history of the press, there are several significant gaps:

- lack of focused analysis of the Ukrainian issue in the far-right French press, especially in «L’Action française». There is no real historical overview that would systematically describe how this newspaper changed its tone and rhetoric regarding Ukraine from 1917 to 1921;

- insufficient number of interpretative approaches that combine the ideological component of the movement, journalistic practices, and the perception of Ukraine as a social phenomenon;

- limited empirical source: official histories of Action Française often ignore the Ukrainian segment as peripheral or irrelevant; instead, general French or political narratives of history do not take into account the dynamics of the perception of the Ukrainian Revolution.

The purpose of the article: to show the change in the rhetoric of «L’Action française» in the representation of Ukraine from 1917 to 1921 as a mirror of ideological transformations in the ultra-right against the background of the events of the Liberation Struggle.

Tasks:

- Chronologically reconstruct the thematic stages of the newspaper’s coverage of Ukraine: from the February Revolution, which led to the beginning of the Liberation Struggle – and to their completion.

- Identify key discursive models recorded in the pages of «L’Action française».

- To analyze the parallels between media rhetoric and political events of that time, territorial changes, state formation.



- Based on this analysis, to show how «L’Action française» constructed the image of Ukraine depending on its ideological relations with Russia, Germany, and the Bolsheviks.

Presentation of the main material of the article. The first mentions of Ukraine in 1917 on the pages of «L’Action française» were fragmentary and were woven into the general discourse of support for «allied» Russia after the February Revolution. In the material from May 5, the editorial office noted: «There is nothing new in Berlin’s plans to use the so-called Ukrainian question to weaken Russia; even before the war, German diplomacy nurtured these ideas» [12].

Thus, the Ukrainian movement was perceived through the prism of external influence, primarily German, and not as a manifestation of internal national revival. The editorial board saw the main threat as the possible collapse of the empire, which would cast doubt on the Entente's ability to end the war with victory.

The publication of June 4 emphasized that the unity of Russia is a «necessary prerequisite for the preservation of the Eastern Front,» and any «centrifugal tendencies» constitute a «dangerous gift to the Kaiser» [13].

At the same time, in July, the tone began to take on a tone of recognition of the separateness of Ukrainian identity. It stated: «Mazepa’s country, which has been under the northern yoke for centuries, is rediscovering its own consciousness» [14]. However, this recognition was not supported by the idea of independence. On the contrary, the authors advised Ukrainians «not to follow the example of the Irish dreamers» [14].

It is particularly telling that the Central Rada was called a «public organization that has exceeded its powers» [15]. Such rhetoric effectively repeated the official formulations of the Provisional Government in Petrograd, which indicates the editorial office’s orientation towards a pro-Russian position.



The fall of Riga in September 1917 gave L'Action française a reason to link military setbacks with national movements in Russia. In its issue of September 5, the newspaper drew parallels between contemporary events and the defeat of Hetman Mazepa: «Riga fell just as Baturyn had fallen; since then, Russia's geographical regression has begun» [16]. Ukrainian separatism in this logic essentially appeared as a key factor bringing about the «reduction of Russia» and the strengthening of Germany in eastern Europe. It is significant that the proclamation of the Third Universal of the Central Rada of November 7, 1917, which legally formalized the UNR as an autonomy within federal Russia, was virtually ignored by the newspaper. Only in the issue of November 19 did a brief message from Petrograd appear: «Kyiv has announced a new stage of self-government, emphasizing its loyalty to federal Russia» [17]. The lack of commentary and analysis may indicate the editorial board's reluctance to legitimize the Ukrainian state-building process even within the federation.

The November battles on the Southwestern Front and the internal crisis in Russia led to a change in focus. In an article dated November 28, L'Action française acknowledged the existence of the «Republic of Ukraine» with a population of 30 million and rich resources, but at the same time described it as «an anarchic state that, by withdrawing troops from the front, facilitates the German offensive» [18].

In December 2017, changes were felt on the pages of L'Action française (see, for example, [19; 20; 21], etc.). Articles during this period focused more on dry reporting on events related to Ukraine: the Bolsheviks' ultimatum to refuse any support for the Cadet and other movements hostile to them. Instead, Ukrainian troops disarmed Bolshevik supporters on their territory, and a transition to confrontation between the parties took place. The change in tone of the publications is quite logical, given that the newspaper clearly expressed a negative attitude towards Lenin's supporters («maximalists», as they were called there).



The beginning of 1918 brought a symbolic breakthrough to Ukrainian diplomacy: on January 9, a message arrived from Kyiv that General Tabouil, head of the French military mission on the former Southwestern Front, had handed the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Ukrainian People's Republic a letter appointing him as the official representative of the French government in Kyiv. The newspaper «L'Action française» recorded this event as a moment of de facto diplomatic recognition: «France recognizes Ukraine» [22].

Somewhat later, in February, the same newspaper published an interview with Jean Brunes, who recalled with some irony that back in 1916 the idea of a separate existence for Ukraine had aroused open skepticism in European diplomatic circles: «...at that time Ukraine did not exist... all our diplomatic authorities claimed that there were no Ukrainians, no White Russians, no Siberians... All this was the dream of minorities...» [23]. However, he noted, within a year it had been «love at first sight»: from denial to trust. At the same time, «L'Action française» continued to demonstrate a superficial understanding of Ukrainian realities. In March 1918, this French newspaper used the terms «Soviet Ukraine» and «Ukraine» interchangeably. For example, in the report on the return of Odessa by troops «loyal to the Soviet Union and Ukraine,» it is difficult to understand whether it refers to two separate political forces or to one [24]. Similarly, the April note mentioned the «Ukrainian Soviet troops» and the «Rada troops» supported by the Germans [25], although the terms «Ukrainian People's Republic» or simply «Ukraine» were sometimes used later. The change of power and the figure of Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky in May 1918 were interpreted by the French publication more as a poetic metaphor than as a complex political process. In the article «Hetman» («L'Hetman»), the author romanticized the image of the Hetman, but at the same time emphasized that he was «born» by German policy, which sought «institutions in the legendary past» to



justify its occupation presence. Such an interpretation reduced the Ukrainian state-building process to an instrument of German strategy [26].

Journalists often demonstrated elementary ignorance: in the July issue, Skoropadsky was called «Skorop Adski» and reported that he had handed over power to the Austrian Archduke Wilhelm [27]. In the following months, mentions of Ukraine in the press were often reduced to brief, sometimes dubious reports — for example, that «Skoropadsky surrendered» and General Denikin became dictator «with the consent of the Entente» [28].

In December, an article was published with reflections on a possible Entente intervention in Ukraine. The author warned that if the Allies came as «protectors of property,» they would suffer the fate of the Germans, and if they supported radical social changes, they would in fact legitimize Bolshevism. The tone of the material reflected the general confusion and lack of a clear strategy [29].

The final chord of the year was a loud note about the murder of the French colonel de Villenin, which was attributed to the «Ruthenians», but with the clarification that «outside Galicia... they call themselves Ukrainians». This tragic incident was used by journalists as evidence of the «danger» of the combination of Ukrainian and Polish national movements in the region, as well as as an argument against the projects of «reorganization of Russia» [30]. The beginning of 1919 for Ukraine appears in the newspaper reports of *L'Action française* as a period of deep disorder. As early as January, the French reader could learn about a series of anti-Semitic pogroms in Berdychiv and Zhytomyr, during which, according to the correspondent, «the Jewish militia was disarmed and Ukrainians were killed» [31]. The authors emphasized that «anarchy persists in Ukraine» and that the troops of the Directory were unable to restore order. This created the image of a country where the central government, even with formal army structures, did not actually control the territory.



Against this background, the Bolsheviks actively shaped their political message, seeking to present themselves not as invaders, but on the contrary - as «creators of Ukraine as an independent state». In January, «L’Action française» reprinted the statement of the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of the RSFSR on the annulment of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty and the refusal to recognize Ukraine as a subject of international law. The tone of the document was final: all Ukrainian institutions on the territory of Russia were to «immediately cease their activities» and remove any signs of official status [32].

At the same time, the situation on the fronts was volatile. In some reports, the image of the Ukrainian army as an organized force capable of victory appears. Kovno reported that the first Bolshevik army, which operated along the Pripyat River, «surrendered to the Ukrainian national troops,» and some of the prisoners voluntarily joined the ranks of the UNR army, fighting against the Bolsheviks near Zhytomyr [33].

Interestingly, from the spring of 1919, the newspaper began to quote Soviet Ukrainian representatives more and more often, rather than UNR figures. For example, on May 13, it published a report on a telegram from the president of «Soviet Ukraine» to Berlin demanding the release of Karl Radek, under threat of «arresting the consul and German citizens as revenge» [34]. This reflected a change in the informational emphasis in the French press: the UNR was no longer the only «voice of Ukraine» in the eyes of the European reader.

In July, Soviet leader Kh. Rakovsky acknowledged the criticality of the military situation: «Denikin has broken through our line... Kharkiv is taken, the enemy threatens Katerynoslav» [35]. Despite this dramatic rhetoric, the newspaper did not consider it necessary to explain that at that time several centers of power were operating simultaneously in Ukraine. Only in the July issue did an almost accidental mention appear of the unification of the governments of the ZUNR and



the UNR under the presidency of Ye. Petrushevysh [36]. August 1919 was a time of renewed presence of the «Ukrainian voice» in the French media space, when the UNR troops won a series of victories. A message on behalf of S. Petliura, transmitted by the Ukrainian mission in Bern, emphasized the «complete unity of all national forces» and the establishment of «the most friendly relations» with Romania [37]. A few days later, the Bolsheviks were already being called «gangs» in the article, and their defeat at Vasylkov, Fastov, and in Western Ukraine was presented as evidence of the restoration of law and order [38]. Despite this short-lived wave of sympathy for the UNR, Ukraine remained primarily an object of geopolitical and economic interests in the pages of *L'Action française*, rather than a full-fledged political subject. A typical example was the publication of September 19, 1919, where the country was described as a «continental granary,» important primarily for the supply of resources: «For the granaries to be full, there must be order in the house. Is it impossible to restore order in these parts of Europe?» [39].

The beginning of 1920 was marked by a new wave of Bolshevik expansion for Ukraine. As the Parisian «*L'Action française*» wrote, Bolshevik forces had already appeared west of Kyiv, and although their units were still small, it was felt that a large-scale offensive on the entire territory of the country would soon begin. «They will try to seize all the wheat they can find,» the publication emphasized, noting that «the whole of Ukraine west of the Dnieper has again fallen into complete anarchy, and thus the richest wheat-growing lands in the world have been lost to the world» [40]. At the same time, skeptical voices were also heard in the French press about the very existence of Ukraine. In a February article by Aventino, it was noted that in foreign sources «Little Russia is mistakenly confused with Ukraine (because the latter does not exist ethnologically or politically, the word Ukraine simply means «Marches» (steps, steps))» [41]. Although the main theme of the article was religious, a clear political line was visible here: the denial of Ukrainian statehood,



the perception of the region as a space for the influence of great powers — Russia, Poland or Rome.

These ideas partly reflected the economic collapse of the time. Ukraine had recently been called the «granary of Europe», but, according to Prince Kochubey, since the summer of 1917 all governments — from the Central Rada to the Bolsheviks — had turned out to be «ephemeral», and the country's territory had been devastated by requisitions and war. Large estates had been destroyed, herds had been slaughtered, and agriculture was in ruins. «It is enough to gather a few hundred bandits to unleash terror in any region on behalf of any government,» he observed, emphasizing that revival was possible only under the leadership of a «sufficiently cultured» neighboring state, «the role of which rightfully belongs to Poland.» [42]

In the spring, the situation changed dramatically due to the Polish offensive. The newspaper emphasized that Poland, having «dispelled doubts about its statehood,» went on the offensive against the Red Army, and Pilsudski's alliance with Petliura caused peasant uprisings in the Bolshevik rear. «Poland is impossible without Ukraine, Poland is impossible with a great Russia,» the publication wrote, assessing this campaign as a struggle of a European nation for its own life and interests. [43]

Despite the political situation, attempts by Ukrainian diplomacy to enlist the support of France continued in Paris. At a June banquet of the Association of Christian Journalists, Count Tyshkevych compared Ukrainian and French peasants, emphasizing their «sentimental, historical, and economic affinity» and his vision of France as «the greatest civilizational force in the world.» The speech was met with warm applause, and those present urged journalists to study foreign policy more actively, because it was thanks to this that «France will regain its traditions and influence in the world.» [44] However, in August the tone of the publication changed dramatically: «Ukraine» was practically identified with «Soviet Ukraine» under

Bolshevik control. A statement by Rakovsky from 1915 about German-Russian reconciliation was quoted, which was now presented as evidence of the farsightedness of Bolshevik strategists. [45] The year culminated in a publication in December, which depicted the large-scale terror of the Bolsheviks in Ukrainian villages: a system of total surveillance, mass requisitions, the destruction of entire settlements. Particularly striking was the description of the destruction of six villages in the Baltsky district, the shooting of women and children, the deportation of livestock and grain to central Russia. Even everyday life turned into a struggle for survival: «400 grams of salt cost 8,000 rubles; 16 kilograms of potatoes — 130,000 rubles; a pair of boots — 230,000 rubles.» There was no soap, needles were replaced with scraps of wire, and hemp oil became the only lighting in the huts [46].

As for 1921, «L’Action française» was usually limited to brief «dry» reports on the course of military operations in Ukraine, without giving them any assessments (e.g., [47; 48]).

Conclusions and prospects for further research. Summarizing the results of the analysis, it can be stated that the rhetoric of «L’Action française» on the Ukrainian issue during the Liberation Struggles of 1917–1921 underwent a noticeable evolution, caused both by the internal logic of the ideology of the French ultra-right and the changing international situation. At the initial stage, during the February Revolution and the first attempts to form Ukrainian state institutions, the newspaper demonstrated significant distrust of the idea of Ukrainian independence, viewing it through the prism of monarchical centralism and the traditional French right-wing sympathies for «one and indivisible» Russia. During this period, Ukraine appears in the publications of «L’Action française» primarily as a geopolitical space that risks becoming an arena of chaos, anarchy, and loss of cultural continuity, rather than as a self-sufficient political entity.



At the same time, the events of 1918–1919, in particular the aggravation of the Bolshevik threat and the intensification of German policy in the East, forced the newspaper to partially reconsider this approach. In the materials of that time, there are increasingly frequent hints of the possibility of the existence of Ukraine as a «buffer» state, which would restrain the spread of Bolshevism to the West, although this perception is not accompanied by a full recognition of Ukrainian statehood as a value in itself. Such a situational acceptance of Ukraine was dictated by French foreign policy considerations and the desire to limit the influence of Germany and Soviet Russia, and not by a change in the fundamental worldview of the editorial staff.

During 1920–1921, with the final consolidation of Soviet power over most of the Ukrainian lands, the rhetoric of «L’Action française» returns to a more pessimistic and even fatalistic tone. Ukraine once again appears not as a potential ally, but as a lost source of raw materials and bread, the «breadbasket of Europe,» which has fallen under the control of «anarchic» or «despotic» regimes. This interpretation conveys a kind of nostalgia for the «stability of imperial structures,» which, according to the authors of the articles published in the newspaper, modern Eastern European states lacked. Such nostalgia did not mean direct support for the Bolsheviks, but was an expression of conservative skepticism towards any forms of republican statehood, especially in territories with an unstable political culture in the eyes of the French right.

Thus, the research tasks allowed us to chronologically reconstruct the thematic stages of Ukraine coverage in «L’Action française» and show that the rhetoric on the newspaper’s pages changed from pro-Russian centralism to the situational recognition of Ukraine as a buffer against Bolshevism, but never reached the perception of Ukrainian independence as a value in itself. Ukraine in the French right-wing press appeared more as an object of geopolitical projections – «part of

Russia», «anarchized republic», «breadbasket of Europe», or «Bolshevik threat» – than as an independent political actor. These discursive models directly depended on the political events of the time, territorial changes, relations with Russia, Germany, the Bolsheviks, etc.

In the future, it would be interesting to expand the study to other extreme right-wing movements in France through the prism of their mouthpieces in the form of newspapers. It would also be interesting to conduct a comparative analysis with the representation of Ukraine in British or German far-right publications of the same period. This will allow for a more comprehensive study of the problem of the image of Ukraine during the Liberation Wars of 1917-1921, which is one of the key stages in the history of the Ukrainian state.

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