On February 21, 2003, the San Francisco Chronicle, Northern California’s largest paper, led with a headline “Photos show 65,000 at peak of S.F. rally.” This giant rally was representative of the large, vocal opposition to the Bush administration and its foreign policy, not simply in California, but around the world. In London, Berlin, Madrid, Rome and other major world capitals, millions of people marched in opposition to American foreign policy as it was then being articulated (figs. 14.1 and 14.2). The specific number presented by the Chronicle was taken not as an indication as to the size and strength of the protest, but rather of its paucity and weakness. In fact, the specific number—and the story which would unfold beneath it—did not concern themselves with the situation to which this mass of people had gathered to respond, but only with the situation of the mass gathering itself.ii

The original number of demonstrators, reported at two hundred thousand by both organizers and police alike, had been disseminated to news agencies throughout the world. So while this story was about the relative paucity of the crowd (at least compared to the initial estimates), it was essentially about the more general prob-
lem of visually representing the crowd—that is, of representing a phenomenon which was itself engaged in a particular act of representation. In so doing, the Chronicle unconsciously placed itself in a long line of questioning, within the arts and philosophy of the modern era, of this problem of “mass representation.” This tradition concerns both the crowd as a specific problem of visual representation, and the way in which this particular question of representing the masses comes to stand in for a more general question of mass representation as such within twentieth-century visual culture. This number reproduced in the headline—65,000—was shocking at the time because both organizers and police had estimated a much higher number. Throughout the 1990s, as various groups became adept at organizing large-scale demonstrations in Washington, Americans were treated to the “million man march,” the “million mom march,” the “Promise Keepers” rally, and so forth. In a quintessentially American “supersizing” of the demonstration, these increasingly regularized spectacles were greeted with progressively less and less media attention. According to Todd Gitlin, the practice of “splitting the difference” between often widely divergent estimates of the protesters and the police agencies was finally abandoned in the 1990s in favor of simply reporting both numbers—thereby admitting a certain representational instability. The size of the crowd, what has been called the “mythical number,” is by necessity what Alex Jones of the Harvard Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy calls “an emotional issue, not a factual issue” precisely in that, by seemingly adjudicating the very signification of the demonstration, it stands to confirm or deny the very existence of the situation to which the demonstration was ostensibly responding. For tens of thousands, the desire to be “seen, heard, and counted” was much more than an articulation of disagreement with state policy, it was in fact a primary instance of subjectification—a rare moment of both community-formation and disidentification from the world-as-presented through the often totalizing lens of the mass media.

Yet the Chronicle, which commissioned this particular survey, organized a very different kind of truth-claim based around a very different account of “representation.” Its representation of the demonstration was presented as the truth of the detached, objective view—a truth ostensibly beyond “emotion” and “politics,” gained through the resources of aerial photography and “scientific” procedure. “The world from above looks different than it does from street level” here signifies, “above the clamor of the street, above the intense emotions of the interested parties, above all that would distort one’s perception, there is a clear, objective view to be found—a ‘detached’ and therefore ‘truthful’ perspective” (fig. 14.3). In the upper-level corner of the page, under the heading “The Camera,” we encounter a torrent of seemingly superfluous technical minutiae. We find, for instance, that the camera’s aperture had been set to f4, its shutter speed was 1/300 of a second, and that the film used had been AFGA Pan 80. Rhetorically, this detail is essential
tenuous, nevertheless it provides some context in which to imagine the origin of meaning for the notion of “tolpa”, and that it was closely tied with the idea of space and the occupation thereof. Another hypothesis, even more imaginative, that the “pl” and “pla” (Ip and lpa by metathesis) of “tolpa” could be connected to the “pl” or “pla” as found in the ancient Latin “populus” is attractive because of its semantic proximity. This hypothesis has been dismissed, however, by Max Fasmer as “doubtful.” (see Fasmer p. 74)

The earliest known written usage of “tolpa” appears in an ecclesiastical manuscript of the late eleventh century, the “Service Menology for November 1097” (“Sluzhebnaia mineia za noiabr’ 1097” g.), a text written in Old Church Slavonic, the clerical tongue and early literary language for much of the Slavic world. “Tolpa” is used in this selection in reference to the twelve apostles—suggesting that at this point in time the term signifies merely a grouping of people, without the elements of mass and chaos that it bears today.

However, by the time that the “Laurentian Chronicle of the Tale of Bygone Years” (“Povest’ vremennykh let”) appears in the 12th century, “tolpa” seems to have already developed its denotation of the large crowd, the term being applied in one instance to a large group of people thronging at the gates (PVL 6582). Another interesting early occurrence of “tolpa” comes in the hagiography Pecherskii Paterikon (Paterik pecherskii), in which a certain Isakii “stood and saw the crowd and their faces” (“I stav Isakii, i vide tolpu i litse ikh...”). In this same portion of the document, Isakii is able to distinguish one face amongst the crowd whose countenance is brighter than all the rest. This moment provides an exact indicator of the boundaries of the word “tolpa”: the crowd exists as a collective body, with which one may come face to face, yet if any member of that collective differs strongly enough from the whole of the body, this individual may be independent of the crowd, though located simultaneously within.

Other early uses of “tolpa” come in Slavonic translations of the Old Testament and other religious texts in which, apart from its typical application to a crowd, the term may also apply to a body of soldiers (see Sreznevskii, I. l. p. 1046).

Another term that begins to appear in places where one might expect to find “tolpa” is the noun “chern’”. “Chern’” might also be translated as “crowd,” but brings with it the
distinction of the crowd of common people, more directly translated, the black masses. The etymology of “chern’” is tightly woven with the adjective “chernyi” (black) which historically had its application with the common people (“prostonarodie”)—e.g. the lower levels of society in ancient Novgorod were referred to as the “chernyi narod” (black folk), “chernaia sotnia” (black hundred), or “chernye liudi” (black people). The adjective’s nominal form, “chern’,” thus refers to the low, common, popular crowd.

The “Hypatian Chronicle” (15th century) describes the riots in Kiev of 1113 following the death of Prince Sviatopolk and before the coronation of Vladimir Monomakh. The citizens of Kiev, in a bout of mob violence, set about the city vandalizing, burgling, and using the lack of government as an opportunity to attack the city’s Jewish residents. The Hypatian chronicler used neither “tolpa” nor “chern’” in his description of the mob’s movement, opting to use the more specific, civic collective term “Kiiani” (“Kyanie”) (Kievans), the same term which he applies to the group of non-riotous Kievans who send for Monomakh to return order to the city. In the early nineteenth century, however, when Nikolai Karamzin retells the same events in his “History of the Russian State” (“Istoriia gosudarstva rossiiskogo”), the representation of the crowd has changed. He describes the peaceful Kievans writing to Monomakh asking him to save them from the “savagery of the mob” (“neistovstva cherni”). That the term “chern’” would be more appropriate to use in the 19th century than it was in the 15th century might be due to the development of a secondary definition for the word, mainly used in the rhetorical sense. This definition transfers the societal quality of lowness to an abstract, defined by Ushakov as “the ignorant, uncultured milieu, crowd” (“nevezhestvennaia, nekul’turnaia sreda, tolpa”) and by the Slovar’ “sovremennogo russkogo iazyka” as a reference “to the spiritually limited, dull-witted milieu, to the crowd, foreign to elevated thinking and motives” (“o dukhovno ogrаниченной, недалекой среде, о толпе, чуждой высоких помыслов, побуждений”). This same dictionary gives a supplementary definition of “tolpa” that demonstrates its connection to “chern’”: “Ordinary, average people, folk, as opposed to gifted, exceptional personages.” (“Obyknovennye srednie liudi, narod, v otlichie ot odariennykh, vydaushchikhsia lichnostei.”) By these definitions the activity of the Kievan mob of the 12th century could be interpreted.

Crowds. I tend to avoid them. The most memorable experiences? Political riots in Rome in 1954, when Italians were protesting the British occupation of Trieste. I blundered upon a crowd that was bent on finding and punishing British citizens (or subjects), property, and institutions. I heard the swell of the mob as I walked from Piazza Capranica towards Via del Corso. It was the noise that was most unnerving, for it was like a swarm of bees or locusts, utterly without specific direction or target. What did I do? Melted into a side street and proceeded towards home. I never feel curiosity for what the mob will do. One can be sure it will be up to no good.

Then in 1971, during the anti–Vietnam War resistance in Los Angeles, on the campus of UCLA, a police riot. Police were called in to suppress a crowd that had been demonstrating peaceably enough until someone (it turned out to be an agent provocateur of the Los Angeles Police Department) threw something—a rock, a trash can, who knows?—into a store window. This infuriated the police, who immediately dispersed over the entire UCLA campus, beating up people indiscriminately, invading the library where they seized people working at their tables in the Reading Room, put them in police come-along grips, and escorted them to the nearby vans for arraignment. Police helicopters overhead, tear gas everywhere, panic on the part of the faculty (who immediately thought that the rioters would come and destroy their precious research notes), a sense of high drama and delight amongst the principal student activists engaged in the event.

I witnessed a crime committed by a police officer (he had been undercover, enrolled as a student one of my courses, and “blown” a couple of days before when he gave testimony against the antiwar agitators: he had been assigned to gather dossiers on faculty and students suspected of participating in antiwar activities), and (foolishly) reported it to . . . the police! As a result, I found myself charged with having attacked this officer, having torn his uniform from his back (he was in civilian clothes), and so threatening him that he had had to flee for his life. All this on Los Angeles television within a couple of hours. I was then investigated by L.A. Police Internal Affairs, who had only to take a look at me to realize that the idea of my attacking two police officers was ludicrous. Nothing came of it.
as thoughtless and spiritually low, especially in the eyes of a 19th century historian such as Karamzin.

This conception of the crowd is eloquently and forcefully established in Pushkin’s 1828 poem, “The Poet and the Crowd” (“Poet i Tolpa”), in which “tolpa” and “chern’” are used interchangeably. The poet is confronted by a “cold and haughty group of unconsecrated people” (“a khladnyi i nadmenyi / Krugom narod neposviashchennyi”) who listen to him without understanding. The poem is constructed partially in dramatic format with the character ‘Poet’ having a dialogue with the character ‘Chern’, which, it should be noted, speaks with one voice. The poet is merciless in his upbraiding of this “chern’” and its inability to transcend their mundane terrestrial lives and be sanctified by his lyre. He calls them “mindless slaves” (“rabov bezumnykh”) and creates a pun from the word “chern’” referring to the crowd as “cherv’ zemli” (worm of the earth). This crowd is interested in poetry (and by metonymy, anything representing ‘high’ culture) only as it becomes practical for use in the humdrum of daily life—for Pushkin, this is the core of their philistinism, their ignorance of the spiritual value of poetry.

This juxtaposition of the lofty poet with the debased crowd is quintessential Romantic individualism, and it was confirmed in the work of other 19th century writers such as Lermontov (see “Death of the Poet”) and Herzen (“…We are rarely better than the crowd [chern’], but we express ourselves more softly, more deftly put off our egoism and passions.”) However, the modernist poetry of the 20th century is also rife with this conception of the crowd, especially amongst the Symbolists and Futurists, perhaps most notably in the work of Blok and Mayakovsky. Dictionaries also support the image of Pushkin’s image of the crowd as “mindless slaves.” For example, Vladimir Dal does just this with his definition of chern’ in his “Tolkovyj slovar’ zhivago velikoruskago iazyka,” wherein he provides an example of word usage that reads, “The crowd is raging—for what purpose it knows not!” (“Chern’ bushuet – o chem, ne znaet!”). Even more suggestive of the crowd’s lowness is Dal’s disclosure that “tolpa” is sometimes used in reference to livestock.

While “chern’” is almost exclusively negative, the connotation of “tolpa” is dependent on usage, but varies mainly between neutral and negative. The negative connotation seems mainly due to the association with Peace demonstrations and civil rights demonstrations in Washington in the fall of 1972: peaceful, pacific, flower-power mood, lots of good, decent people with their kids, expressing their belief in the constitution and civil rights.

My experience of crowds: I stay away from them unless I am compelled by some obligation to a friend or political ally to turn up for a demonstration.
mindlessness, imperviousness to higher thought and feeling. This specificity for the two terms is especially important as the Marxist rhetoric of masses and proletariat begins to hold sway in the 20th century. The “tolpa” remains somewhat undesirable, lacking direction, whereas the historically motivated forward movement of the proletariat massa gives the concept of the crowd an entirely new reading which departs wholly from the concept’s previous lexical incarnation in both “tolpa” and “chern’”.

**SOURCES**


Entry by Dustin Condren