In the revolution and Civil War years anarchy spread more rapidly and fully in Ukraine than it did anywhere else in the Russian Empire. Events there created for most people a state of persistent uncertainty, fear, and anxiety, as competing powers sought to establish, defend, and regain authority in cities and the countryside. Until the establishment of Soviet rule in 1920 at least nine governments tried to secure their authority over the land, but none succeeded. The democracy of the Provisional Government, the moderate socialism of the Rada and its General Secretariat, left- and right-wing communism, the Cossack Hetmanate and the German occupation armies, the proto-fascist Directory, peasant anarchism, and the military rule of the White Armies all failed. With each year the country disintegrated further, until by 1919 it no longer represented one country but a constellation of isolated communities.¹

Some of these powers ruled cities and provinces again and again, and changes of rule occurred quickly. Rule of Kyiv, for example, changed five times in 1919 alone. The large picture of Ukraine during this time—that is, the military maneuvers, political upheavals, and economic hardships—has been

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well documented. We know less about the impact of these events on individual residents and their daily lives.

It was a time, surely, when residents had little choice but to try to navigate the demands and dangers from these takeover efforts, doing what they could to maintain their health and security. But what did this attempt at navigation look like? How did such rapidly spreading administrative anarchy affect individual residents, and how did individual residents experience these events? These questions provide the framework for this study, which explores the revolution and Civil War diaries of two residents in the city of Poltava, Ukraine—Olesandr Oleksandrovich Nesvits’kii (Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Nesvitskii, 1855–1942) and Vladimir Galaktionovich Korolenko (1853–1921).

These diaries record two men’s efforts to give structure to the chaotic life in Poltava, and they speak to their ability to act with noteworthy independence, prudence, and constancy. They express the men’s subjective wrestling with events and the agency they assigned themselves. These diaries reveal that within this context of ongoing anarchy some individuals sought to create manageable, understandable, and morally acceptable lives for themselves and others.

I treat the diaries as texts and investigate them in order both to reflect on the characters of these two men and to shed light on individual experiences and fates in Poltava at this time. On first glance, we might anticipate


3 For Nesvitskii’s diary during this time, I draw on O. O. Nesvits’kii, Poltava u dni revoliutsii ta v period smuti 1917–1922, ed. A. O. Rotach (Poltava: Derzhavniu arkhiiv poltavn’ko oblasti, 1995). He wrote his diary in Russian, and thus when I refer to him in the text of this paper, I will use the Russian transcription of his name (Nesvitskii). For Korolenko’s diary, I refer to two volumes: V. Korolenko, Dnevnik. Pis’ma 1917–1921, ed. V. I. Losev (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 2001); and P. I. Negretov and A. V. Khrabrovskii, eds., V. G. Korolenko v gody revoliutsii i grazhdanskoj voiny 1917–1921: Biograficheskaia khronika (Benson, VT: Chalidze Publications, 1985).
encountering the men’s similar understandings and experiences in these diaries. They were contemporaries, acquaintances, well known, and progressive. For Nesvitskii, this part of Ukraine was home for most of his life. Biographical information on him is scant, but it explains that he left the Poltava and Kremenchuk areas only for his university studies, when he attended the St. Petersburg Medical-Surgical Academy and the University of Kyiv.4 He was born in Kremenchuk, completed his secondary schooling in Poltava, and then left for St. Petersburg. In early 1879, in his fourth year, he was arrested at a student gathering and sent back to Kremenchuk in his parent’s charge and under police surveillance. In 1880 he was freed from surveillance, went back to St. Petersburg, and petitioned for readmission to the academy, but was denied. He completed his studies in Kyiv and returned to the Kremenchuk district in 1882, where he served as a zemstvo doctor, established and organized its zemstvo medical services, and recorded and published medical articles and public health statistics. He moved to Poltava in 1902 and took leadership roles in developing health services, organizing the city outpatient health care clinic, and working as the city doctor.

Korolenko’s move to Poltava in 1900 was a return to Ukraine for him, albeit to a new region. Born in Zhytomyr, he had studied as a boy and youth there and in Rivne, before moving to St. Petersburg and then Moscow for postsecondary studies. He spent much of the years 1876–84 in various forms of exile, first for speaking out against school authorities, then for his involvement in populist activities, and finally for refusing to swear allegiance to Alexander III. On returning from exile he settled in Nizhnii Novgorod, before moving to St. Petersburg in 1896. By the time he left the capital for Poltava in 1900, Korolenko’s stories about Siberia, his journalism (social and literary commentaries), his editorial work, and his humanitarian activism, most famously his work during the famine of 1891–92 and his public defense of Udmurt peasants in Viatka province falsely accused of making human sacrifices (1892–96), had earned him recognition throughout the Russian Empire. Although now distant from major centers, neither Korolenko nor his writing

4 Kremenchuk city is located on the Dnieper River approximately 75 miles southwest of Poltava. For this short sketch I draw on three brief sources: the biographical entry on Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 3, which is reproduced from I. F. Pavlovskii, ed., Kраткий біографічний словник ученкі і письменників Полтавської губернії з другої половини XVIII століття (Poltava: PUAK, 1912), 127; the notice of Nesvitskii’s death on Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 11, which is reproduced from Golos Poltavshchini, 3 May 1942; and the entry “Nesvitskii Aleksandr Aleksandrovich” in Деятели революційного руху в Росії: Біо-бібліографічний словник. О. Предшестників до падіння території, ed. VI. Vilenskii-Sibiriakov, Feliks Kon, and A. A. Shilov et al. (Moscow: Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo politcheskichh katorzhan i ssyl’no-poselentsev, 1927–35), 1020–21.
and activism had slowed down or lost significance. (See I. E. Repin’s 1912 portrait of Korolenko, figure 14 in the gallery of images following page 270.)

By their ages, intellectual accomplishments, and involvement in society, these men belonged to the Russian intelligentsia and shared its commitment to critical thinking and civic involvement. In addition, they knew Poltava life well, and residents often turned to them for assistance and advice. Though there is much here that affirms the similarities that we would expect in their diaries, a parallel reading of them soon reveals that the men were different sorts of writers, each with his own understanding of the scope and types of detail that diary-writing demands. These differences in scope and detail hint also at differences in the men’s interaction with the events of revolution and civil war.

Their diary-writing during these five years was remarkably unflagging, and thus it shows their impressive commitment to creating narratives of this time. These were demanding years for both men, their diaries suggest, and the regularity with which they wrote in them expresses the importance they placed on recording and reflecting on what they learned, what they experienced, and what they did. There might have been specific reasons at this time in the Russian Empire for men of their upbringing and stature in society to keep diaries, but for the purposes of this paper I look at the diaries in four ways: (1) as expressions of uncertainty about the present situation and what was to come; (2) as records of material conditions that shaped existence in Poltava; (3) as chronicles of individual residents in revolution and civil war; and (4) as articulations of their personal involvement in events.

My analysis receives fuller meaning when we situate the men and their diary-writing. Poltava’s location between Khar’kiv and Kyiv, Ukraine’s two chief cities during the revolution and Civil War period, almost certainly

5 The opening entry in Nesvits’kii, Poltava, is dated 12–14 August 1917. It is not clear from this publication or from other research whether diary-keeping was usual for Nesvitskii or prompted by the revolution and Civil War. Korolenko had kept a notebook (zapisnaia knizhka) and diary at least since 1879 and 1881 respectively.

earned the city the competing authorities’ political attention and thus the related changes, dangers, and challenges to residents’ lives that Nesvitskii and Korolenko expressed. The city’s appeal to these authorities surely was enhanced by the fact that it was a self-sufficient and developing administrative center for Poltava province. By the beginning of 1916 its population was 61,458 (including 2,225 evacuees and mobilized soldiers), and many people could be employed there at a range of relatively large industrial works, repair shops, processing plants (particularly in agricultural raw materials), iron foundries, tobacco factories, garment shops, printing offices, mills, and small enterprises. Residents had ready access to news, essays, and works of literature from St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kyiv, Odessa, and other cities, and they could boast churches of different denominations, synagogues, health care facilities, schools, libraries, a museum, and a theater. Poltava possessed a relatively energetic political scene, having become home to a community of politically minded individuals and an active group of exiles in the late 19th and early 20th century. Indeed, at the turn of the 20th century these groups had strong appeal to the leaders of the rival factions of the Russian Social Democratic Party, Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) and the Mensheviks’ Iulii Martov (1873–1923), as these men discussed ways to forward their political goals and, among them, possible places from which to circulate what would become the political newspaper Iskra (Spark). Poltava’s residents also understood their own political opportunities, and they did not shy away from meetings,

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7 On 1916, see Statisticheskii spravochnik po poltavskoi gubernii na 1917 god (Poltava: Tipografiia t-vo pechatnogo dela, 1917), 4. The 1897 census lists Poltava’s population as 53,703, of which Ukrainians formed more than half (30,086), and Russians and Jews made up approximately one-fifth each (11,035 and 10,690 respectively). N. A. Troinitskii, ed., Pervaia vseobshchaia perepis’ naseleniia Rossiiskoi imperii, 1897. XXXIII: Poltavskaia guberniia (St. Petersburg: Tsentral’snoe statisticheskoe ministerstvo vnutrennikh del, 1904), 1: 100–03.


demonstrations, walkouts, and strident demands for better working conditions.\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps most memorably, Poltava province witnessed peasant uprisings against landlords in 1902, fueled by peasant land hunger and nationalist aspirations.\textsuperscript{12} Finally, Poltava had other connections to political figures in the revolution and Civil War years, too. It was the birthplace of the Bolshevik and future commissar of enlightenment Anatolii V. Lunacharskii (1875–1933) and the Ukrainian Civil War leader Simon V. Petliura (1879–1926), both of whom in these years would return to the city and would receive mention in Nesvitskii’s and Korolenko’s diaries.

We learn from Korolenko’s early 1917 diary entries that at the beginning of that year Poltava residents were finding out through political channels and word of mouth that sociopolitical tensions enhanced by World War I were reaching a peak in Petrograd. Korolenko notes on 26 February 1917 that “[a]s of the 23rd in Petrograd there are troubles [besporiadki]. They’re talking about it in the Duma, but there are no details in the newspapers. It’s obvious that it has to do with hunger; there are lines outside bakeries and complete disorder in the capital’s provisions.”\textsuperscript{13} Then, on 3 March 1917, he records that “[p]eople arriving from Petrograd and Khar’kov reported that on 1 March there was revolution [perevorot] in Petrograd…. For us in Poltava it’s quiet.”\textsuperscript{14} Less than a week later he writes that “events have been racing with such swiftness that there’s no time to discuss or even simply write them down.”\textsuperscript{15} Korolenko’s letters to family members at this time clarify what people in Poltava were learning about events in Petrograd—about the tsar, about the motivations behind events in Petrograd, about the war, and about the revolution—and what changes were occurring in Poltava. In one letter he underscores that things are “going well: here the authority has already recognized the new government. Committees have been elected. The police voluntarily submitted to the city’s administration…. the mood everywhere is peaceful and joyful.”\textsuperscript{16} Although people seemed to welcome the news that the tsar had abdicated and the

\textsuperscript{11} O. A. Belotskaia, Iu. P. Lavrov, and V. H. Sarbei, Khronika revoliutsionnogo rabochego dvizheniia na Ukraine (1900–1917): Spravochnik (Kiev: Naukova dumka, 1987). See the entry for the workers’ strike of 17–22 February 1905 for the additional conditions noted here (60).


\textsuperscript{13} Korolenko, Dnevnik, 13 (26 February 1917).

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 13–14 (3 March 1917).

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 15 (9 March 1917).

\textsuperscript{16} To Praskov’ia Semenovna Ivanovskaia (sister of Korolenko’s wife), Negretov and Khrabrovskii, V. G. Korolenko, 18 (6 March 1917).
Provisional Government had taken over authority, residents of Poltava still were looking for some indication of what was coming next.

Through the first nine months of 1917, politics and events in Poltava were relatively calm. The local Duma, the Central Rada, the Provisional Government, and the Soviet of Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies all received some support there. As the year went on, however, social and material conditions in Poltava deteriorated. In August Nesvitskii records the arrival of reserve and regular forces that wandered through the markets, taking things without paying.17 In the fall, Korolenko and Nesvitskii write of strikes, robberies, shortages of firewood and coal, and a general mood of anarchy.18 Korolenko notes his receiving news of the Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd and Moscow in his entry of 13 November 1917, and a month later he describes Russia as “a worm, which has been cut up into pieces. Each part lives its own life.”19 Events in late October and November led to a wave of public anarchy in Poltava that would last through the next four years. Disorder, robbery, and drunkenness were common. Through December, though power most often seemed to be in the hands of the Soviet of Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies, there were discussions between it and the representatives of the Central Rada. This situation changed on 6 January 1918, when Bolshevik forces occupied Poltava.

Korolenko and Nesvitskii had been living in Poltava long enough to appreciate that changes occurring there during 1917 were extraordinary, particularly as the excitement of revolutionary victory in February and March gave way to anxiety and uncertainty about what this victory would bring. Their entries of that year make clear the men’s worries about the conditions of daily life in Poltava, and thus about the setting for transition to a “new” life. Whether life would settle down or gain some state of normalcy is a central theme in their diaries in the second half of 1917; moreover, it is a theme to which both men return throughout the revolution and Civil War years, and which therefore underscores their attention to residents’ constantly unstable and perilous existence. This lack of knowledge and uncertain leadership made life difficult for many in Poltava to navigate, but also, and more importantly, it caused people to resort to extreme behavior, on the one hand, and to accept such extreme life as usual, on the other, revealing perhaps an inevitable decline in the humane attitudes that previously had informed residents’ behavior and those routines.

17 Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 16 (20 August 1917).
18 Korolenko, Dnevnik, 29 (2 November 1917); Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 18–20 (19 September–26 October 1917).
19 Korolenko, Dnevnik, 52 (15 December 1917).
Already in late August 1917 Nesvitskii, in deadpan factual prose, refers to a breakdown in authority and civic behavior, when he writes about the murders and robbery of people he knew personally.\textsuperscript{20} His choice to record examples of residents’ taking matters into their own hands in the face of uncertain or weak local power and resorting to banditry and wanton aggression expressed his concern with this behavior. In mid-October, for example, he notes that the historical museum commemorating Peter the Great’s victory over the Swedes was broken into and robbed; in the middle of November he describes how thieves stormed clubs and a teahouse to search and rob the people who were there.\textsuperscript{21} The violence prompted some residents to take retaliatory action, as Nesvitskii records on 27 November 1917:

Theft, robbery continue, they are robbing at night, in the evenings, and in the daytime. [Thieves] went right up in a cart to the shop of the merchant Al’tshuller, loaded the cart with goods, and hauled it away. [Then] they appeared at the gentry’s warehouse and demanded 28,000 rubles, which they received on the very same day.

A crowd gathered at the judicial militia and demanded that the thieves, who were part of a group of twelve, be handed over. The crowd rushed in by force, dragged out one thief, and killed him. An armed detachment was called in. Gunshots could be heard; the thieves were moved to the Red barracks and from there to jail.\textsuperscript{22}

Though an image of justice appears in these brief paragraphs—the thieves are in jail—the thieves are the ones who get what they demand—the money—and it is the crowd demanding justice that acts brutally. It is obvious that the effect of such thieving is breaking down usual behaviors, yet Nesvitskii allows himself no commentary or personal reaction. On their own these facts lay bare the present state in society, making clear the effort of residents to set and carry out their own punishment of unstoppable robbery. As these incidents suggest, the impact of this uncertainty in these first years of the revolution and Civil War is as noteworthy as the uncertainty itself. Not only is this uncertain existence leading to thievery and thus putting people on edge, there also is a growing sense that some residents are losing or giving up control of daily habits, routines, security, and usual understandings of justice. In the face of such behavior, Nesvitskii’s seemingly dispassionate tone stands out.

\textsuperscript{20} Nesvits’kii, \textit{Poltava}, 16–17 (27 August 1917).
\textsuperscript{21} Nesvits’kii, \textit{Poltava}, 19 (14 October 1917), 23 (18 November 1917).
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 24 (27 November 1917).
Nesvitskii and Korolenko are sensitive to the changes occurring around them, and in late 1917 they begin to comment more specifically on the growing presence of the Central Rada, the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies, and the Bolsheviks in residents’ lives in the streets, in curfews, and in searches of their homes. The men’s diaries give detail, shape, and cause to an existence that seems fragile and chaotic to many people. For Korolenko, feelings of uncertainty often result not from the type of change or the force with which change was effected, but rather from the speed with which seemingly vital events occurred. On 30 January 1918 he begins his diary for the day with that admission:

“Events supersede each other so quickly that you can’t note even the most important one. Today there is celebration and a parade—the Bolsheviks are celebrating victory: Kyiv is destroyed, bloodied, in many places turned into ruins, and is under the power of the soviets… Such are the fruits of replacing an external war with an internal one. Indeed, it’s a fatal illness that’s been driven into the organism.”

Korolenko’s juxtaposition of celebration and parade in one clause with destruction and bloodshed in the next exposes the tradeoff of this “victory,” and his comments that follow it disclose his concern for the power battles—and their collateral destruction—that have begun in earnest. It is plain from these last sentences that he opposes the Bolsheviks’ actions, and that he opposes them because of the destruction and human tragedy that they have caused in Kyiv. On the same day, Nesvitskii also documents the Bolshevik seizure of power in Kyiv, recording the events more briefly and making no comment on them: “A public expression of power in the Bolsheviks’ taking Kyiv. They’re saying that Kyiv suffered from the bombing.” Does he lack the information that Korolenko has? More and more, as we consider the diaries, we see that the men adopt different styles when recording events.

In these months Korolenko is struck by the impact that competing rule, random gunfire, violence, and rapid changes are having on residents’ sense of what is usual. In March 1918, when Bolshevik forces were retreating from Poltava and German forces were arriving, he observes how the mix of constant insecurity and danger was redefining everyday life in Poltava. In a letter he

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23 See Nesvitskii’s entries from 13 December to 31 December 1917 (Poltava, 26–33) and Korolenko’s from 6 December to 31 December 1917 (Dnevnik, 49–60).

24 Korolenko, Dnevnik, 81–82 (30 January 1918).

wrote over 17–21 March 1918, he believes that the cumulative negative effect of such living would be physical, emotional, and moral:

The Bolsheviks are “packing up” but still acting like despots and carrying out savage requisitions. The Ukrainians will arrive—they will begin, probably, to act despotically in another way. And then, probably, all kinds of despotic acts “of restoration” will begin. And still there will be darkness all around. Nowhere can we see simple, clear, straightforward ideas about the principle of freedom... Well, that’s all clear, and it’s no good to repeat it. Now we wait for the darkest days: when one group will begin to leave and the other will arrive. However, all of this has become usual. Our nerves have become dull.26

Korolenko is frustrated and worried. His lament over the decline of political rhetoric and his dread of numbed nerves express concretely his social concerns and beliefs. He fears greatly at this time people’s indifference to decent, morally acceptable responsibilities. Nesvitskii’s entries at this same time confirm Korolenko’s concerns. Nesvitskii writes on 14 March 1918 that Bolshevik soldiers are robbing residents at will, the mood of residents is uneasy, schools are closed, and those breaking curfew are being handed over to revolutionary courts.27 Days later, as he reflects on skirmishes between Bolshevik and German forces, Nesvitskii brings facts together to offer a mixture of potential danger and business as usual in Poltava, highlighting unwittingly that dulling of residents’ nerves that worried Korolenko:

The city is being bombed. Every now and then gunshots and the rattle, the “ta-ta-ka,” of machine guns can be heard. Bullets flying into the city knock on the iron roofs like hailstones. But, despite this, many people are walking the streets, and one doesn’t hear that anyone’s been killed or wounded. Adults are out walking, children are running. On the cliff behind the cathedral, where there’s a pavilion, above the precipices stand crowds of onlookers, who are watching the shooting coming from the train station, that’s being made by the guns of the city, and one doesn’t notice panic anywhere.28

26 To an unidentified addressee in Petrograd, Negretov and Khrabrovitskii, V. G. Korolenko, 93 (17–21 March 1918).
27 Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 44 (14 March 1918).
28 Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 46 (17 March 1919). His account recalls Tolstoy’s description of Sevastopol nearly 70 years earlier.
There seems to be quiet surprise in Nesvitskii’s voice as he records these facts. There is nothing cavalier in such residents’ behavior, his entry suggests; rather, residents in Poltava have become so used to violence that gunfire and skirmishes have become an expected part of life. For Korolenko these are manifest reasons to worry about what people are becoming.

This numbing of nerves also appeared in more harmful and inexcusable behavior, according to Korolenko’s thinking, in attacks directed at Jews and the tormenting of prisoners in Poltava. The degeneration of public behavior prompted him to publish a short article titled “Sin and Shame” (“Grekh i styd”), condemning such acts and calling upon readers to return to moral behavior: the “struggle of the people must be different from an animal fight,” he proclaims.29 Indeed, in these months the men’s steady mention of gunfire, robberies, and chaos in Poltava becomes usual, such that we no longer are surprised by it. The striking contrast Korolenko draws between a city “at the mercy of open robbery,” with “cross-fire on the streets,” and the “quiet” or “calm” to be found there on the same day emphasizes how possible yet unpredictable these surges in behavior might be.30 In their diaries neither man attributes the quiet or calm to the efforts of any particular governmental authority.

The challenges and anxieties that people faced in getting even minimal material goods, in maintaining their health, and in protecting themselves and those close to them are central topics in the diaries. Nesvitskii and Korolenko took pains to record in factual detail changes in prices, the availability of supplies, and challenges and tragedies of health and security. They document how prices were going up more quickly than wages, supplies were going down, and such everyday items as flour, kerosene, and tea at times were unavailable. By mid-1918 speculation was rampant.31 By 1920 and 1921 prices had increased many thousand-fold over what they had been in 1917. Subsistence was impossible for most people, and some tried to make a few rubles selling valuables. Nesvitskii offers the “sad picture” of educated (intelligentnye) women peddling their personal belongings at the second-hand market.32 Others turned to hold-ups and break-ins. Rising costs and decreasing supplies of firewood, soap, kerosene, vegetables, and water affected people’s health significantly, and refugees arriving in the city and province in poor health created moral and concrete challenges for health care providers, facilities,


30 Korolenko, Dnevnik, 92 (30 January 1918).

31 Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 57 (10 June 1918).

32 Ibid., 121 (19 August 1919).
and residents, as well as for other aspects of the local infrastructure and supply systems. On 7 December 1918 Korolenko notes the trip he took that day with a member of the city government to the outskirts of Poltava, where refugees were living in a community dubbed “Infectious Town” (Zaraznyi gorodok). People in general became weaker and dirtier, and the city less hygienic and less able to provide effective health care for its inhabitants. To add to this state of emergency, residents were suffering from sickness. In late September 1918 there was a large outbreak of influenza, and 1919 began with a frightening outbreak of typhus. In descriptions of such outbreaks and the attempts to combat them, Nesvitskii hits a descriptive and analytical stride in his writing that rarely appears elsewhere in his diary. His access to medical statistics gives these narratives painful effect and rich historical value as they expose the results of outbreaks of epidemic disease. We learn of the extraordinarily large increase in cases of typhus in 1918 (482, as compared to 55 in 1917, 55 in 1916, and 80 in 1915), while by 4 February 1919, according to his diary, there had been 359 reported cases since the beginning of the year. For the month of April 1919 there were 10,415 acknowledged cases of spotted typhus in Poltava province. As he confides in his diary on 30 December 1919, Nesvitskii was working from morning until mid-afternoon in surgery and was on house calls from then until late evening, making 15 to 17 visits each day and having to decline still more. People are living in conditions that cannot promote recovery, he observes on 24 February 1920, and one senses the informed despair in his voice:

There are terrible cold spells. It’s brutally cold weather. They’re selling firewood for thirty rubles a pud. To economize residents fix up for themselves little iron stoves; they warm their rooms with them and cook on them. There’s still typhus; over February 805 were registered with spotted typhus and 4,920 with recurring typhus. In all 1,462 became infected!!

33 Peter Gatrell, A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 21, 58. Nesvitskii, Poltava, 67 (27 October 1918).
34 Negretov and Khrabrovitskii, V. G. Korolenko, 144 (7 December 1918).
35 Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 89 (4 February 1919).
36 Ibid., 105 (16 May 1919).
37 Ibid., 150 (30 December 1919).
38 Ibid., 157. A pud is 36 lbs. or 16.38 kg.
The magnitude of the health crisis dwarfs the "little iron stoves" that appear as the most noteworthy protector against the "brutally cold weather." Yet Nesvitskii seems to hold back from stating that the little stoves do not have a chance against sickness. In the earliest diary entry in which he mentions typhus (12 December 1918), Korolenko anticipates Nesvitskii’s observations, connecting the disease to terrible living conditions. We learn also about outbreaks of cholera near the end of the Civil War. Nesvitskii notes two cases on 19 April 1920, but later he includes statistics showing that this rate picked up frighteningly over the next 15 months. He records that over the 25-day period from 17 June to 10 July 1921 60 people contracted cholera and 27 died from it. The famine and epidemics, products of the cumulative disruptions from the civil war that raged in and around Poltava, took a great toll. On 7 January 1920 Nesvitskii describes a terrible impression that stays with him: sledge-loads of bodies, piled high and covered with a tarp, being steered through the city to the cemetery, where the bodies are put into mass graves.

Korolenko’s and Nesvitskii’s concern for the high mortality produced by famine and drought in 1920 comes through in their diaries clearly. On 31 May 1920, after many months of famine, Korolenko records with despondency that "the famine of 1891–1892 was a joke in comparison with the famine that has seized all of Russia…. Many people won’t survive this winter. In addition to the famine, the cold will be our undoing." And in early 1922, Nesvitskii records the image of rail cars carrying some 2,000 frozen corpses of famine victims, which had been collected along the rail lines to Poltava. His son, who worked at the railway station, struggled a long time to free himself from this horrible sight.

These detailed records inform our sense of the catastrophic state of everyday life in Poltava. The men’s similar choices in what to record speak to the priority that they place on the dramatic changes in public well-being over political events. Writing with little emotional or moral commentary, both diarists

39 Negretov and Khrabrovitskii, V. G. Korolenko, 144–45 (12 December 1918).
40 Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 159 (19 April 1920).
41 Ibid., 208 (10 July 1921).
42 Ibid., 151 (7 January 1920).
43 In November 1918 Korolenko also wrote publicly about children who were dying from hunger throughout the empire ("Na pomoshch′ russkim detiam," Kievskiaia Mysl′, 5 November 1918. See Makagonova and Piattoeva, Neizdannyi V. G. Korolenko, 2: 409–13.
45 Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 217–18 (13 January 1922).
choose to let such facts tell most of the story about the absence of order and increasing brutality of life in Poltava.

In their descriptions of others and of their own actions both Nesvitskii and Korolenko express a desire to give human face and feeling to the everyday life, sacrifices, battles, and achievements created by the revolution and Civil War. Central to the men’s chronicling are their efforts to provide identity and agency to individuals who were affected by or played a role in the events of these years. Records of residents as victims of famine, illness, robberies, murders, arrests, and executions, as well as of residents as robbers and, perhaps, murderers themselves appear throughout the men’s descriptions and anecdotes. When Nesvitskii and Korolenko refer to individuals by name in these diaries, most often they do so for one of the following reasons: to refer to someone whom other residents of Poltava would know and thus who matters to a local history of Poltava, to name someone from outside Poltava who warrants an entry for his/her role in the events (positive or negative), to give a diary record to victims of executions, or to include a family member in their narratives. Korolenko’s entries are more descriptive and, at times, emotional. He often identifies an individual and then analyzes his psychology or highlights the actions that the individual carried out or that affected him. Among the many hundreds of individuals who make it into these diaries, we read of the deaths of Mariia V. Rakhubovskaia, Poltava resident and niece of the writer N. V. Gogol’, and Nikolai V. Bykov, Gogol’s nephew. We learn of the arrival in Poltava of the brutal Bolshevik officer M. A. Murav’ev, a “coarse figure” (grubaia figura), in Korolenko’s words, and of the hundreds of people executed by the city Cheka, whose names, charges, and personal information the men transcribe into their diaries from newspapers and lists posted throughout the city. The diaries also record the fates of revolutionary political leaders such as K. I. Liakhovich, Korolenko’s son-in-law, a social democrat and member of the Poltava Duma, who died in a Poltava jail on 16 April 1921 from typhus that he contracted there.

At times his relationship to residents gives Nesvitskii cause to elaborate on them or on why he has recorded them, but in these moments his entries are

46 Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 15 (22 August 1917), and 81 (1 January 1919).
47 Korolenko, Dnevnik, 74–75 (7 January 1918).
48 For example, see Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 172–73 (1 July 1920); and Korolenko, Dnevnik, 303–07 (14 June 1920). The diaries suggest that the largest number of executions on one night was 85, which occurred on 7 October 1921 (Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 213 [20 October 1921]).
49 Negretov and Khrabrovitskii, V. G. Korolenko, 318 (18 March 1921), 323–25 (entries for 9, 16, and 17 April 1921); Korolenko, Dnevnik, 383–85 (17 April 1921).
restrained. We receive names of residents whom he has treated and who have died during these years, and we learn of families who have had contact with his relatives in the past, but these comments are rarely more than a sentence or two of elaboration, elaboration nonetheless that creates human connection and a sense of community among Poltava residents. At other times, it is clear that his entries serve to keep a *Who's Who* record of activities in Poltava, and in these entries too, he is brief and to the point. Korolenko’s project is different in this regard, and perhaps that fact should not surprise us. He was a writer after all. If an anecdote requires a full description for him to make his point, then he provides a full description. In a lengthy entry of 6 November 1917, for example, he recounts his chat with a soldier on sentry duty, a young man who is convinced of Russian officers’ guilt in not establishing peace and ending the war. Certain that this young man is spouting Bolshevik-influenced renderings of events, Korolenko pushes him on his convictions. To his surprise and horror he listens to the soldier tell him of his experiences, when officers at the front spoke openly of regular soldiers as expendable and necessary cannon fodder, and how officers pushed the soldiers into action when action was not necessary. As he is listening to the soldier, Korolenko recalls in his diary, “a dark, somber, fantastic tangle of that mood rises up before me, in which the entire psychology of our anarchy and our defeat is stuck.”50 Such entries reveal important elements in the collective attitude at that time. For example, dissatisfaction with the officers and with the war—and thus with those who support it—was real and founded on appreciable causes. In addition, they disclose how Korolenko uses his diary as a place to think out loud, to express his thoughts and feelings, and to work through them. These processes of thinking and feeling are keenly important to Korolenko the diary writer, and, as his chat with this young man suggests, they are, for him, the foundation for shared understanding among people, too. These efforts to understand what is happening among residents, and thus to understand the complexity of that historical moment in which he and others are situated, concerns Korolenko as much as making the diary record concerns him.

The sense that they were part of a larger collective appears in every one of Nesvitskii’s and Korolenko’s entries. One of the striking omissions from them is any extended description of their own interests, experiences, and sufferings. When they do write about themselves, these descriptions are brief, employed usually to shore up the truth of facts and details. Their gaze, rather, tends to turn outwards to the changing complexion of Poltava, to the ways in which abrupt changes are affecting the population and altering individuals’

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50 Korolenko, *Dnevnik*, 34 (6 November 1917).
sense of who they are. It is this interaction between the changes and the city’s residents that defines Poltava, to their minds, and that attracts their attention.

The diaries also reveal the extent to which Korolenko and Nesvitskii regard the changes brought on by revolution and civil war as a call to action, a call that for both men has no obvious connection to political groups, but that sounds in accord with their understandings of ethical rightness, their professional responsibilities, and their physical capacities. The diaries themselves, of course, are one response to this call, but the men also respond more publicly and interactively in the events of this period.

Both men give place to their work and professional obligations in these diaries, expressing their particular identities among Poltava residents and the responsibilities attached to these identities. The physician Nesvitskii, we know already, writes of being busy in the surgery, making house calls, and carrying out official functions such as attesting to deaths. At other times political groups call on him for medical assistance. In these entries he neither draws attention to himself nor pushes his importance aside. In addition, in comparison with what Korolenko notes in his diary, Nesvitskii appears more interested in the physical effects of revolution and war on residents, perhaps because of his professional training and interests. Over a few days in late March 1918, for instance, he writes of residents’ injuries and deaths from bombings, of little girls who are sleeping on an institute’s corridor floors, and of Jews being beaten and killed, and none of this information appears in Korolenko’s diary.51 Nesvitskii’s records are the more striking because he makes them with no comment. The best indicator of his personal reaction to events appears in his modifiers and punctuation. We know he is sensitive to events when he describes moods, impressions, images, pictures, reports, and actions with such adjectives (and their adverbial forms) as dispiriting (udruchushchii), horrible (uzhasnyi), anxious (trevozhnyi), and grave (tiazhelyi). Exclamation marks draw attention to a small number of statements, but ones that might seem odd without them: “It’s true, it’s already our thirteenth government [in Poltava]!!!”52 He also uses them not to criticize a political or military individual or group, but to stress the sadness and anger that he feels when he visits an inadequately run typhus ward. Consider the following long excerpt, which is one of Nesvitskii’s most emotional:

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51 Nesvits’kii, Poltava, 49 (18, 19, and 20 March 1918). In the entries for March 1918 Nesvitskii can be less exact than he is in later months in noting whether his entries correspond with the Old Style calendar or the New Style calendar.

52 Ibid., 142 (28 November 1919).
All the medical personnel at the field hospital, which had been set up in the theological seminary to treat patients with typhus, abandoned it, leaving the patients to the will of God. Linen, clothing, medication, provisions, and other goods were taken. Patients were lying on hospital beds, wrapped in old overcoats, and for a few days had been without assistance. In the entire field hospital one nurse remained from the medical personnel. In the washroom, on beds, and on the floor were several dead bodies. Because of the total absence of heating and lack of firewood, the patients were moved to a different place, and during the move three patients died. My colleague at the ambulatory, second doctor Samuilo Frantsisk Onufrievich, was posted to provide medical assistance. It was disgraceful for the medical personnel to give in to panic and to abandon the field hospital in a helpless situation, which was filled with typhus patients, many of whom were so seriously ill that they died without any help right there and then in the field hospital and during the move to the other place. But it was even more disgraceful, taking advantage of the general panic, to clean out the hospital, all its equipment, instruments, and so on, and so on!! And because of the circumstances, all this proceeded without consequences for these inhuman offenders of duty and honor.53

The last three sentences are rare in his diary for their tone and judgment. Here unlike anywhere else he decides guilt, assigns shame, and reveals his anger and disappointment. In hundreds of other moments, he mutes such commentary, but in this medical context that defines him most fully, he cannot hold back. To be sure, he assigns blame to the medical staff, to private individuals rather than to political or military representatives, and we might appreciate in such commentary an informed yet safe stand for him. Nesvitskii is willing to take responsibility for such judgments in those areas—solely medical ones—where he feels able to act knowledgeably and responsibly. He limits, or perhaps disciplines, himself to commenting in his diary on those activities that he is able to complete with clarity, integrity, and meaningful effect.

Whether he should limit his stand would never have entered Korolenko’s head. For decades he had maintained a diary as the place for him to record, to reflect, and to comment. The scope in his entries is broad and his tone ranges from informal and curious to declamatory and accusing, just as it did in his personal interactions and journalistic writing. For instance, in November 1917 he has nothing but contempt for an article by recently appointed Commissar of Enlightenment Lunacharskii, who speaks positively about writer and

53 Ibid., 140–41 (25 November 1919).
journalist Ieronim I. Iasinskii (1850–1931). On 4 July 1918, in an expansive entry in which Korolenko writes of news refuting the execution of the tsar, he extends his thoughts to other rumors and from there to complaining over the mayhem and seeming unconcern throughout society:

There are rumors all round... There are “punitive expeditions,” and after them, the usual gossip and assumptions... [...] Instead of reasonable resistance and struggle of valid forces, there have been murders on the sly and savage punitive measures... This shouldn't destroy anyone's resolve [to do something], and for the intelligentsia there's the most appropriate role: subservience before the masses, who just don't want to acknowledge what’s best, what the intelligentsia might bring about, so there’s subservience before the worst: before murders on the sly. As it is the masses are given to this. To indulge this inclination doesn’t mean to serve the people properly... 

And in September 1920 he decries Bolshevik measures thus: “One spurious step draws another after it, [and a] third. Bolshevism already has made so many spurious steps, that for it, it’s very likely, there already is no return and it will have to go through to the end.” We see none of this stream of consciousness and brainstorming in Nesvitskii’s diary, none of the suppositions or social analysis, and yet this rhetoric and these topics are common in Korolenko’s diaries. Korolenko’s attachment to the idea that revolution would bring about discussions and conscious efforts towards freedom kept him from accepting compromises on, let alone challenges to, this stand. To be sure, he had his human limits, and in an entry from 27 June 1919, we witness a rare moment of indifference from him:

Executions happened twice: at one, 13 bandits and 1 of Denikin’s scouts were executed, at the other, 4 bandits. Among the bandits were some who were extremely dangerous—one who had escaped from prison and after the escape had committed another murder. Some were connected to the robbery of Tsarenok, and among them Ekaterina Petrash, a participant in a lot of murders... Now this no longer creates any particular impression, not even on me.

54 Korolenko, Dnevnik, 43 (22 November 1917).
55 Ibid., 114 (4 July 1918).
56 Ibid., 338 (30 September 1920).
57 Ibid., 215 (10 July 1919).
My point here is not whether Korolenko is correct about the Bolsheviks, but rather that he sees his diary as a place to vent or rant, when he feels inclined. It discloses his impressions and usually critical reactions, as he records events and thinks about them, and consistently criticizes the absence of freedom, the abuses of power, and the excesses of atrocities.

Korolenko did not save such outbursts or complaints for his diary. In these years he maintained the identity that he had created and assumed in tsarist times as an advocate for justice. During the revolution and Civil War he continued to send telegrams, write newspaper articles, and give speeches to protest against injustice and share information. In addition to acting as a personal intermediary for individuals, he worked in a variety of organizations to relieve sickness, hunger, and other forms of distress, such as the League for the Rescue of Children, founded in Poltava in 1918, for which he served as honorary chairman. Although his range of activities was broad, its motivation is singular; he does all he can to help residents.

Nesvitskii’s and Korolenko’s Poltava diaries are historically important for both the insights that they yield into the impact of revolution and civil war and the literary and personal response that they reveal to the sufferings of those years. Both diaries display the men’s access to public figures, events, newspapers, circulars, meetings, and ways that their work and prominence in Poltava gave them entry to interactions and events that other residents might not have had. Read together, the diaries reveal the men’s similar attention to those factors that placed the safety and wellbeing of Poltava’s inhabitants under persistent threat and kept the city in harsh flux. Moreover, Nesvitskii’s and Korolenko’s interest in and responses to the forces that made this time a tumultuous one enliven those factors, displaying the situation the factors created for residents, the feelings they produced in the men, and the agency they compelled these diarists to embrace. Against the background of the “rapidly spreading anarchy” of these years, the diaries appear as instructive expressions of the men’s efforts to gain some control over the moments that make up this time, a control that appears in the constancy, detail, and breadth of their writing, and thus in their efforts to embrace responsibility to navigate and record that time.

58 Negretov and Khrabrovitskii, *V. G. Korolenko*, 136. In late November/early December he was also elected honorary chairman of the Poltava branch of the Political Red Cross (144). On 27 July 1921, though in poor health, he agreed to serve with Maksim Gor’kii (1868–1936) and others on the All-Russian Public Committee to Aid the Hungry, the committee that earned the support of Herbert Hoover and the American Relief Association, which helped to relieve the famine and guide relief efforts (see 342–46 for his correspondence with the committee and Gor’kii).
The men’s reactions to what they learn and experience in these years give significant shape to their behavior and diaries. In Nesvitskii’s diary facts almost always stand without commentary. Although the constant tallying of facts creates a mix of weighty prosaic detail with scenes of potentially debilitating uncertainty and anxiety, Nesvitskii’s entries disclose his efforts to maintain self-discipline, integrity, and clarity in order to endure the uncertainty and anxiety of the times. Such prudence, his diary lays bare, was as practical and productive an approach to diary-writing as it was an approach to living in Poltava in these years. Korolenko’s diaries express his concern also with many of these details, but more strikingly they reveal his preoccupation with social behavior, especially with extremism. Thus his diaries display the noteworthy emotion and reflection that result from his efforts to respond to people’s needs and actions and to account for them, to help residents tolerate and survive the time and to understand causes of and solutions to what was happening. His diaries depict a consciousness stimulated by its feelings of outrage and compassion, a consciousness that is uninhibited in protesting against violence and suffering. These diaries, then, both in the information they record and in how they are written, reveal one way in which the men interacted with that time’s events, changing circumstances, and news.