

# SOVIET POSTER COLLECTION

Wright Museum  
of Art  
Beloit College

## Collection Catalogue

This catalogue was compiled by Anna Bryan '10 as part of her independent project for an honors degree in Russian.

# INTRODUCTION TO SOVIET PROPAGANDA

## ANNA BRYAN

### BACKGROUND ON PROPAGANDA

Propaganda was an important political tool in the Soviet Union. The Institute for Propaganda Analysis defines propaganda as "the expression of opinions or actions carried out deliberately by individuals or groups with a view to influencing the opinions or actions of other individuals or groups for predetermined ends and through psychological manipulations."<sup>1</sup> In other words, propaganda uses psychological means to direct the thoughts and actions of its targets towards a particular goal.

Among other things, Soviet propaganda was used to spread information, educate the populace, and mobilize it towards a common purpose, such as the establishment of Communism and "the development of a 'new Socialist man', one whose values and way of life would be appropriate to a future society in which there would no longer be class divisions."<sup>2</sup> Propaganda was necessary to maintain Communist regimes, because while it is true that many people submitted to Communist policies out of fear, a country cannot be run without some basis of popular support.<sup>3</sup> That is where propaganda came in: inspiring people to buy into a common ideology and support the accompanying policies of the State.

One of the reasons for the incredible success of Communist propaganda was its incorporation into all aspects of society. The Soviet government had complete control over mass communication and used art, film,

radio, literature, theater, music, posters, and more as propaganda.<sup>4</sup> Posters were "the quintessential form of propaganda," because they provided a cheap way to reach a wide audience, could be understood even by illiterate citizens, and could be changed quickly in response to political shifts.<sup>5</sup>

### PROPAGANDA AND IDEOLOGY

Propaganda has always been linked to ideology, but the nature of that link is not set in stone. Propaganda has been used in many periods and societies to spread and fortify ideologies. However, until the twentieth century, it appeared only as a by-product of ideological expansion. As such, "propaganda [did] not lead a life of its own; it emerge[d] only sporadically – when an ideology trie[d] to expand," and its form and content remained strictly in conformity with that ideology.<sup>6</sup>

Lenin took this traditional relationship, propaganda as a tool of ideology, and turned it on its head. He understood that "the modern world is essentially a world of 'means', that what is most important is to utilize all the means at man's disposal, and that ends and aims have been completely transformed by the profusion of means...[while] the ends had come to be secondary to the means or, in many cases, of no importance at all."<sup>7</sup> Lenin placed more emphasis on the development and production of propaganda, and less on the ideology, to the point where the propaganda apparatus became more important than the ideology itself.

In this new propaganda, “ideology and doctrine were merely accessories used by propaganda to mobilize individuals. The aim was the power of the party or State, supported by the masses.”<sup>8</sup> This new style of propaganda still utilized the veneer of ideology by incorporating Communist symbols and Marxist slogans. However, the true function of Lenin’s propaganda was not to serve and expand Communist ideology, but to shore up the power of the State. Given this new relationship, where ideology is a tool of propaganda rather than the motivating and controlling force behind it, propaganda became free to take on a greater array of forms and functions. As political policies shifted, propaganda could shift as well in order to better support those policies.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROPAGANDA POSTERS IN THE SOVIET UNION

Lenin and his fellow revolutionaries organized themselves in underground cells and used pamphlets and party newspapers to spread their ideology and incite revolution. However, after the Revolution they faced a new problem: how to build the Communist society they had fought for. They had to convey their ideology to the large percentage of the population not involved in the Revolution, and organize the masses in their favor. “The Bolsheviks were the first to face problems that turned out to be crucial for twentieth-century politics: problems of mass mobilization,”<sup>9</sup> and they tried to solve these problems in part through propaganda.

The Bolsheviks were experienced in the use of print media to spread ideas, but this method would not work for the country as a whole, since the majority of Russian people were illiterate and could not understand Marx’s or Lenin’s ideological works. Thus, newspapers alone could not

spread the revolutionary fervor and build a new society: *Izvestia*, the highest-selling Communist newspaper, had a high circulation of 400,000 copies, while *Pravda* reached barely a third of that number.<sup>10</sup> The Bolsheviks’ response to this dilemma was the propaganda poster. Political posters, following the example of the traditional Russian Orthodox icons, “could present symbols in a simple and easily identifiable way, even to barely literate peasants.”<sup>11</sup> In the early years of the Soviet Union, propaganda posters were used to spread literacy while at the same time indoctrinating the masses in Marxist-Leninist thought.



“If you don’t read books, you will soon forget how to read.” Book: *10 Days that Shook the World* by John Reed, about the October Revolution Ed2008.1.8 (reproduction)

During the Civil War (1918-1921), propaganda posters became an important weapon for the Bolsheviks. Posters were

used to glorify the October Revolution, mobilize people to join the Red Army, and vilify the White Army and its foreign supporters. The strains of the war on the new country led to the development of a harsh, strict set of political policies, known as War Communism. The State seized grain from peasants accused of “hoarding,” re-assumed direction of factories, and formed the Cheka (secret police). However, young, untrained artists such as D.S. Orlov and V. Deni were still allowed freedom in the production of propaganda. They produced posters in the avant-garde style, “of such design and imagination that they have often been regarded as works of art. Indeed posters of the Civil War period are regarded as being among the most impressive contributions to pictorial art ever made by the Soviet Union.”<sup>12</sup>

After the Civil War, Lenin instituted the more relaxed New Economic Policy (NEP), which temporarily allowed inequality in order to build up abundance. Lenin allowed the “acceptance of markets, commodities and pricing to woo peasants and improve the economy.”<sup>13</sup> The NEP period also allowed debate and discussion within the party and introduced limited cultural pluralism, leading to the Golden Age of Soviet Art. During this period, propaganda posters focused on the need to build a new world and way of life after the destruction of the Civil War, selling Communist ideology to the population by portraying the benefits to individuals, not just the State. Due to the freedom and exploration characteristic of the arts during this period, propaganda posters were drawn in many different artistic styles.



“Have you signed up as a volunteer?” D.S. Orlov  
Ed2008.1.4 (reproduction)



“You must work with a rifle beside you”  
Ed2008.1.7 (reproduction)



When Stalin came to power, he tightened State control over the economy and society, leading to the harshest period of Soviet rule, which lasted from 1928 until Stalin's death in 1953. Comprehensive state planning of the economy, centralized control of output and prices, agricultural collectivization, and a priority on heavy industrialization characterized this period. These policies were enforced through coercion – Stalin is famous for his rule by terror, mass purges, and gulag system. The role of propaganda during this time was to promote the benefits of State policies such as collectivization and industrialization and mobilize the masses behind them, as well as to provide an ideological justification for Stalin's terror. Propaganda artists also built up a cult of personality around Stalin, portraying him as the beloved father of the Soviet Union. Under Stalin, the purpose of Soviet propaganda became the glorification of the State, its policies, and its leader.

The massive famine, shortages, and inefficiency caused by Stalinism led to Khrushchev's "Thaw," a period of economic and social reform, in 1955. Khrushchev shifted emphasis from heavy industry to consumer goods, stressed quality over quantity, allowed private plots and a few small private businesses, and supported a policy of peaceful coexistence and competition with the West. In his 1956 "Secret Speech," Khrushchev denounced some of Stalin's crimes, especially the cult of personality. He also went on to empty the gulags and loosen censors, ending Stalin's reign of terror and creating a little more freedom in the arts. Posters from this period differ from Stalinist posters in their stress on abundance and happiness for the people rather than fulfilling quotas and five year plans for the glory of the State. They also return to a general glorification of Communism, reminiscent of the period immediately following the Revolution.



*"Don't chatter!"*

*"Be vigilant, in such days the walls eavesdrop. It's not far from chatter and gossip to treason."*

Ed2008.1.11 (reproduction)



*"Long live the worker-peasant's red army – the faithful guard of the Soviet borders!"*

Ed2008.1.9 (reproduction)

This introduction was intended to describe the origins and development of propaganda posters over the first half of Soviet rule and to create a political and historical context for the Wright Museum of Art's Soviet Poster Collection.

The Soviet Poster Collection consists of 16 original posters and 36 reproductions, spanning Soviet history from the October Revolution through Perestroika. The original posters were purchased from collector Yuri Mikhailovich Utkin in Moscow, Russia in 2007 and 2008 by Joy Beckman, Director of the Wright Museum of Art, and Donna Oliver, Professor of Russian.

The majority of the original posters in the Soviet Poster Collection at the Wright Museum of Art were produced during the second half of Soviet rule, and will be presented thematically in the following pages.

---

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Ellul. *Propaganda*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973, xi-xii

<sup>2</sup> Stephen White. *Communism and its Collapse*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2001, 6

<sup>3</sup> "Public Opinion in the U.S.S.R." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 11.1 (1947): 5-25. *JSTOR*. 4 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2745663>>, 8

<sup>4</sup> Alex Inkeles. "Mobilizing Public Opinion." *Soviet Society: A Book of Readings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961. 219-28, 220-6

<sup>5</sup> Peter Kenez. *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1985, 112

<sup>6</sup> Ellul, 193-4

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 195

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 197

<sup>9</sup> Kenez, 70

<sup>10</sup> Philip M Taylor. *Munitions of the Mind: A history of propaganda from the ancient world to the present day*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003, 119-200

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 119-120

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 199-200

<sup>13</sup> Friedman, 15



THE ORIGINAL POSTERS



WMA 2008.2.1, gift of Anton Rajer

*October, 1917-1920*

*Comrade! Having tripled our energy,  
Through the lines of guns and hackles of bayonets,  
Let's have a joyful meeting in a bloody battle of  
The third anniversary of the October Revolution!*

*It [the revolution] guarantees our imminent victory,  
We will never again be slaves!  
After temporary setbacks and misfortunes  
We march towards a joyous kingdom of labor.*

*Slain with the proletarian sword,  
With its last gasp the dragon of imperialism opens its jaws.  
The Soviet, federative, Socialist, and world  
Republic: Long live her power!*

Date and artist unknown.

After the Revolution, the country was plunged into a three-year Civil War for power. One of the reasons for the Red Army's victory was its successful use of propaganda. The Bolsheviks used propaganda posters to build popular support for the Red Army by advertising their cause in simple terms that could be easily understood by the largely illiterate peasant population. It is important to note the size of the image in relation to the text – the image is clearly more important than the poem.

This emphasis on conveying information through pictures draws its inspiration from the Russian Orthodox Church, which traditionally used icons as a form of visual scripture. Russian citizens were used to looking at religious icons and learning from the images and symbolism that they saw.

Not only did Soviet propaganda posters use this principle of the image as teacher, they also co-opted religious imagery, in this case Saint George the dragon-slayer. Saint George is very popular in Russian iconography: he is the patron saint of Moscow, and his image can be found on coins, statues, and other secular objects as well as on icons. In this poster, Saint George was transformed into a Red Army soldier slaying the dragon of imperialism, which is stifling a factory signifying the potential developed future of the country.





WMA 2008.7.4

*We will fulfill everything that the Party has planned!*

*We will give the energy of concrete actions to the 12<sup>th</sup> five-year plan!*

1986

I. Kominarets

The imagery of this poster is simple and clear. It presents the mobilization of the proletarian class under the red banner of Communism, marching forward to a new Soviet future. It presents the goal of a new Soviet landscape, promising future prosperity and pride. These messages are presented simply, with clean lines and only three colors: red, white, and blue, the colors of the Russian flag.

After the Civil War, the focus of propaganda posters shifted. Posters were aimed at gaining support for the Communist Party and affirming its legitimacy as leader of the newly-formed Soviet Union. The goal of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union was to build towards the idealized future of Communism. This required the building of a new Socialist country, through rapid modernization, centralization, and industrialization. Starting in the 1930s, the Soviet government put out a series of “five-year plans” – nation-wide centralized plans for economic development that set quotas for production. In order to fulfill these plans, the Soviet Union needed good workers. Towards this aim, propaganda posters presented a model for the ideal Soviet citizen, known as the “new Socialist man”.



WMA 2007.7.6

*We will execute ahead of schedule the task of the third year of the five-year plan*

1973

R. Suryaninov

This poster presents a similar message. It urges support for the five-year plan and fosters the desire to fulfill and exceed quotas. It also uses a similar style and imagery. This poster presents another model for the ideal Soviet man, looking forward towards a prosperous, industrialized future. It is also drawn simply, in order not to detract from the message. It uses simple, clean lines and an even more limited color scheme – red, the color of Communism and the Soviet Union.





WMA 2008.7.6

*Cattle-raisers!  
Compete for high efficiency of production!*

1976

Artist: I. Kominarets

Soviet propaganda posters emphasized the importance of food and agriculture as well as industry. The meat and milk trucks, large buildings, and silos in this poster illustrate the ideal of larger-scale food production, and the red flags and banners associate agricultural abundance with the Soviet Union and Communism. This poster also presents a model for the ideal Soviet woman. She is portrayed as strong and authoritative, advertising the possibility of equality for both sexes under Soviet rule.





WMA 2008.7.2

*Filling Station*

*Sign: To Abundance*

1962

Artist: Y. Fedorov

This poster also depicts agricultural abundance. However, the style is very different, with a much more cartoon-like feel. There are no direct references to the Soviet Union or Communist ideology, and the Soviet woman is presented more like a sweet farm wife than a strong factory worker. These factors are all representative of Khrushchev's thaw and the loosening of state control of the country, with the idea that better times are coming down the road.

This poster suggests that abundance will be reached by feeding cattle with corn so that they will produce a lot of milk. Khrushchev introduced corn to the Soviet Union on a massive scale, in an attempt to address the food shortages caused by Stalin and to compete with America and the West. To gain support for this transition to corn and ensure large harvests, Khrushchev launched a massive propaganda campaign centered around corn, "the queen of the fields."



WMA 2008.7.7

*Cherish bread – the pride  
and joy of our land!*

1982  
V. Maslennikov

This is yet another poster portraying agricultural abundance, this time showing the importance of grain. The unique feature of this poster is its mix of old and new, connecting the Soviet Union to the Russian peasant past. The central figure of the poster is a woman wearing traditional peasant clothing and welcoming the viewer with a traditional offering of bread. The lettering of the poster is also traditional and old-fashioned, similar to our Old English font, and is reminiscent of Old Church Slavonic, the style of writing used in the Russian Orthodox Church. The sun image formed with wheat behind the woman is similar to the halos drawn behind saints in icons, an example of the continued use of religious imagery in Soviet propaganda posters. In contrast to this traditional peasant and religious imagery, we see the landscape and technology of the modern collectivized farm in the background. The gold coloring of the poster seems to represent wheat, happiness, and wealth.





WMA 2008.7.3

*Glory to the Great October!*

*“Ahead to Communism!”*

*“Decisions of the XXIV  
Party Congress – into life!”*

*“For the intensification of  
agriculture!”*

1974

G. Solonin

This poster offers a different take on agricultural abundance. It depicts the joyousness of the people in response to abundance, and focuses this enthusiasm towards the glorification of the country and the party that provide it. The most prominent features of this poster are the autumn leaves and berries along the border, the new industrialized landscape of the collective farm, and the celebration of the October Revolution and the 24<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress. The juxtaposition of these images visually links agricultural fertility with the Communist Party and its centralized system of agriculture.





WMA 2007.7.4

*Strictly execute Soviet laws and military regulations!*

1987

V.E. Zvyagintsev (author)

A.A. Roshchin (artist)

The Soviet Union also produced posters stressing citizens' duty to their country, depicting ways in which Soviet citizens could repay the country for the abundance and freedom that they have been provided with. This duty can be seen in the earlier posters urging workers to meet and exceed quotas, and again in this poster focusing on the importance of following and enforcing Soviet laws. This poster also introduces the theme of the military, which was a common feature of many propaganda posters. This poster emphasizes the role of the military in maintaining order. It also presents a model for the ideal Soviet soldier, who should be strong, decorated, and obedient to the Soviet Union. This soldier is backed by a red star, symbolizing Communist ideology, and the Soviet Constitution, symbolizing power and authority.



*Constantly prepare for the defense of the gains of Socialism!*

1985

A. Onyptsuk

WMA 2007.7.3

This poster again emphasizes the military and Soviet citizens' duty to the State, this time the readiness to fight for and protect their country and ideology. However, it is important to note that although this message seems hostile, the poster is in fact presenting the Soviet Union as a defender, not an aggressor.

This poster was made to commemorate the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February – the Day of the Soviet Army and Navy – a national holiday in honor of all those who had ever served in the Soviet military. It is a celebration of the armed forces, with flags representing the army, air force, and navy, and all of their victories. The poster uses simple, clear imagery, a Communist red star and WWII victory ribbon, behind a photograph of a modern soldier, linking the present with the victorious past.





2007.7.7

*We are faithful to this memory!*

1982

V. Konyukhov

In addition to posters celebrating military victories, the Soviet Union also produced posters such as this one remembering and honoring the fallen. This poster depicts the human side of war, contrasting the innocence of the young girl with the horrors of war on the flag behind her. It also presents a model for the ideal Soviet child. She is a pioneer, which was the equivalent to our boy and girl scouts, but with an additional ideological component. She also remembers the sacrifices made by the soldier, and memorializes them with carnations, a practice that can still be seen in Russia today. There is also a lot of general Soviet imagery in this poster, in the form of the red flag, star, and pioneer scarf.





WMA 2008.7.5

*Project: Worldwide Treaty  
on the Non-use of Force in  
International Relations*

*Peace to the World!*

1976  
V. Briskin

Propaganda posters also called for peace, in order to avoid more loss. These calls for peace often occurred on an official level, in the form of treaties and international negotiations. This poster paints the Soviet Union in a positive light, as a protector of peace rather than an aggressive military superpower. It is drawn in a simple, modern style, using clear imagery. Once again only the three colors of the Russian flag are used. Red is used to form the shape of the Kremlin wall, along with one of its characteristic star-topped towers and the call of “Peace to the world!” This clearly associates the Soviet Union and the Communist Party with the call for peace. Blue is used to form the shape of the globe, emphasizing the international scope of this call. Finally, white is used as a background to the text about the treaty, forming a shape resembling the wings of a dove, a symbol of peace.



WMA 2008.7.1

*People of all countries,  
Nationalities and races,  
Simple people,  
He was thinking of you!*

1970

E. Efimov (artist)

A. Shklyarinskovo (poem)

Propaganda posters also stressed peace on a personal level by depicting international friendship and goodwill between peoples. However, at the same time many of these posters reflected the Soviet Union's own imperialistic actions – in this case the sphere of influence that they built in third-world countries. The Soviet Union aimed to spread Socialism and Communist ideology throughout the world, and they did this with Lenin at the helm. This involved the creation of an extensive personality cult around Lenin. His image was idealized and used regularly in propaganda posters as a symbol of wisdom and hope. In this poster, he is depicted as the beloved father of all peoples.





WMA 2007.7.1

*Lenin's genius –  
In the affairs of  
generations!*

1961  
Leseгри (artist)  
K. Polyakova (text)

This poster provides another example of the cult of personality that was built around Lenin. In this case he is portrayed as the genius responsible for Soviet success. He is painted in red, the color of Communism, against the backdrop of the new Soviet landscape that he helped create. He is looking into the distance, making plans to ensure the future success of the Soviet Union. This poster shows us that propaganda posters no longer needed to borrow from religious imagery. They replaced it with newly-formed Soviet imagery: Socialism replaced Orthodoxy as the moral framework for life, Communism replaced heaven as the idealized future, and Lenin replaced God as the all-knowing provider.



WMA 2007.7.2

*“To us the preservation of peace is more valuable than anything.”*

– Lenin

*Decree on Peace, 1917*

1987

E. Tsvik

This is an example of a modern poster recalling and idealizing Lenin’s role as the founder of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. It provides another example of Lenin’s personality cult, as well as yet another assertion of the Soviet Union as a protector of peace rather than an aggressor. This poster is one example out of a number of posters that re-visualized Soviet history and built a new national identity. This poster builds on nostalgia for the past and establishes a connection to the present through Lenin, using both his image and his words. This poster uses simple imagery, a picture of Lenin giving a speech in front of a stylized hammer and sickle, the symbol of the union between the workers and the peasants on which the Communist Party was built. Again only red, white, and blue are used.





*Union, Born of October,  
1917*

1987  
S. Shakhunov

WMA 2007.7.5

This is another example of a poster that illustrates the re-visualization of the Soviet Union's origins. It celebrates Soviet history using strong, clear, dramatic imagery: the hammer and sickle representing workers and peasants, the ideal Soviet citizens, being forged on the anvil of the 1917 October Revolution. The use of the word 'born' in the caption also points to the development of an origin myth.



WMA 2008.7.8

*Power – to the Soviets  
And there is no higher  
power!*

*Sign: No to the political  
power of bureaucracy!*

1990

G. Semenova (artist)

A. Zemlyanichenko  
(photographer)

This is the most recent poster in the collection. It depicts a political demonstration or rally, and represents changes both in politics and art. This poster presents Communist slogans and sentiments about the power belonging to the people, but someone in the crowd is waving a plain red flag rather than the Soviet flag, and another person is holding up a sign protesting against bureaucratic power. This seems to suggest that the crowd, while in favor of Communist ideology in general, disagrees with the way that the Soviet Union is being run. This sentiment is significant, as the poster was produced not long before the collapse of the Soviet Union. This poster signifies not only the impending death of the Soviet Union, but also the death of an art form. This poster consists simply of a photograph and text, and depicts real people rather than the idealized models of earlier times. It doesn't fit in stylistically with the earlier propaganda posters represented in this collection.



**Acknowledgments:**

I would like to thank my advisor Donna Oliver for her mentorship in this project, as well as Joy Beckman and Craig Hadley at the Wright Museum of Art for their support and access to the collection. I would also like to thank John Rapp and his *Communist and Post-Communist Systems* class for introducing me to the Soviet Poster Collection and starting me off on my propaganda research. Finally, I would like to thank Olga Ogurtsova for her translation help and instruction on all things Russian.

---

**Bibliography:**

- Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.
- Friedman, Edward, "Three Leninist Paths within a Socialist Conundrum," in Dorothy Soliner (ed.), *Three Visions of Chinese Socialism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984): 11-39
- Inkeles, Alex. "Mobilizing Public Opinion." *Soviet Society: A Book of Readings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961. 219-28.
- Kenez, Peter. *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1985.
- "Public Opinion in the U.S.S.R." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 11.1 (1947): 5-25. *JSTOR*. 4 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2745663>>.
- Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A history of propaganda from the ancient world to the present day*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003.
- White, Stephen. *Communism and its Collapse*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2001.