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### An Introduction to Soviet Political Posters

Bold, laconic, and commanding in every sense of the word, the political posters that emerged during the Bolshevik reign of power were not quite like anything that had ever been seen in Russia before. These posters quickly “capitalized on the highly visual nature of Russian traditional culture” and were soon to become a crucial element in the Bolsheviks’ quest to completely transform public attitudes and beliefs (Bonnell, 4). Low literacy rates in both the cities and the countryside and the understanding that each poster would be able to reach a large audience allowed them to become a primary means by which to disseminate propaganda throughout the Soviet Union (Bonnell, 4). The sheer volume of posters produced during this period makes an exhaustive study extremely difficult, but from even a small collection, such as the one now housed at Willamette University, we can gain much insight into this stretch of early twentieth century Russian history. Before we delve deeper into a particular study of any collection of these iconic posters, however, several questions must be addressed: What were the roles of the political poster in Soviet society? What artistic developments and influences can be said to have contributed to their distinctive appearance and what, in turn, was their role in the overall artistic development in Russia? Finally, how exactly did these posters fit in the political activities of the Soviet Union?

#### 1. Roles of Soviet Political Posters

In general, the role of the political poster in the Soviet Union was much the same as the

role of any other form of visual propaganda. It helped to establish a sort of invented tradition, in which certain norms, values and forms of behavior were “implanted by repetition, automatically implying a connection with the past” (Bonnell, 1). When the Bolsheviks suddenly seized power in 1917, there was no consensus on many fundamental issues of interpretation, both in the public realm and in the party (Bonnell, 1). This made establishing an invented tradition all the more necessary for the survival of the fledgling state; the Bolsheviks realized that without some sort of cohesion and legitimacy, the foundation of their power was sure to crumble. For example, in the dawn of Soviet rule, because the Bolshevik claim to authority rested on an ideology that accorded “world-historical” importance to the rise of the proletariat, the party needed to convey to the people a concrete image of the new worker-heroes (Bonnell, 2). Through the posters and other visual aids, such new symbols as the hammer and sickle, the red star, and the heroic worker soon became commonplace, thoroughly indoctrinating Soviet citizens in the ways of communism with the constant “drizzle” of propaganda (Bastian, 3).

In order to make the drastic change from an old administration perpetuating privileged power to a new system involving the “informed” participation of all citizens, especially ordinary workers, the party needed a way to connect directly with the masses. Ironically enough, the centrality of visual images in both old world pageantry and the Russian Orthodox Church, two institutions which the Bolsheviks adamantly rebelled against, established an important precedent for the essentiality of images in everyday Russian life (Bonnell, 4). This precedent created the opportunity for images to be used as an effective means for reaching the public, an opportunity which the Bolsheviks very well understood. Even Lenin’s wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, espoused that “For the present and near future, a peasant can learn to improve his production only if he is taught by visual example. And in general, the peasant, just like the workers in their mass, thinks

much more in terms of images than abstract formulas” (Bonnell, 5). The reasons for manipulating often distinctly old-world style elements, such as those used in creating icons, for the conveyance of a radically new type of message extended beyond even the sense of identification automatically produced by such images. As expressed by Victoria Bonnell in *Iconography of Power*, “the prevalence of religious icons in Russian life [...] gave Russians familiarity with a certain type of imagery and an assumption of its sacredness” (4). By forming visual images in the traditional Russian style, the Bolsheviks hoped not only to inspire feelings of recognition and affinity within the population, but also to lend an air of authenticity, bordering on sanctity, to their message. This authenticity would certainly, they believed, help push the Russian population down the path to acceptance of and eventually assimilation to the new model, aiding the Bolsheviks' quest to essentially “create” a new person: a Soviet citizen.

Posters in particular provided an ideal means for spreading propagandistic archetypes throughout the Soviet Union. For one, visual propaganda lessened the need to comprehend the written word as a prerequisite for understanding its message (Bonnell, 4). Most of the population in Russia was illiterate; twenty years before the October revolution data showed that fifty-five percent of people in urban areas and eighty-three percent in rural regions were unable to read (Bonnell, 4). On top of that, the concept of literacy was applied very liberally, and included even those people who possessed only the most rudimentary ability to read (Bonnell, 4). The emphasis on visual over textual communication became even more pronounced in rural areas. This occurred both because of the already lower literacy rates in these areas and also because the majority of the Soviet population lived in rural areas—thus the Bolsheviks most needed to reach out to these places, utilizing their visual propaganda, in order to mobilize the population (White, 19).

The disruption of the printing presses during the revolution and subsequent civil war also led to the Bolshevik party's reliance on such forms of mass propaganda as political posters. Paper shortages, due partly to the loss of Baltic provinces (in WW I) that had previously supplied Russia, and breakdowns abetted by a lack of staff, equipment and fuel eventually led to complete shutdowns of some printing presses in Moscow and Petrograd (White, 19). The distribution of political books and newspapers outside of major urban areas was also curtailed as public transportation was thrown into disarray by military actions, exacerbated as well by the lack of fuel and equipment (White, 19). Overall, posters provided an easy and economical way to reach a larger audience than a newspaper or book would, making better use of limited paper and ink supplies, and even could be produced by hand if need be.

In everyday Soviet life, political posters certainly had a large presence. All manner of public places were emblazoned with posters, and even in homes and dorm rooms citizens often displayed these colorful pieces. As voiced in 1923 by American journalist Albert Rhys Williams, "The visitor to Russia is struck by the multitudes of posters—in factories and barracks, on walls and railway-cars, on telegraph poles—everywhere" (Bonnell, 6). Where previously there had been virtually no poster production at all, between 1918 and 1921 alone over 3,100 posters were produced by more than 450 different institutions (Bonnell, 5). Litizdat, one of the major organizations for poster production, helped to ensure that a massive number of posters went into circulation throughout Russia (Bonnell, 5). Over the four years following 1919, this company alone distributed a total of 7.5 million posters, postcards and lubok pictures (Bonnell, 5). According to poster artist, poet, and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), while addressing the first all-Russian Congress of Rosta (the Russian Telegraphic Agency, which had authority over the press) in 1920, the task of Soviet poster work was to "seize public attention, to

compel a crowd of pedestrians, whether they want to or not and by whatever means, to stop in front of the slogans in front of which we want them to stop” (White, 111). And it certainly seems as if that aim was largely successful, considering the sheer bombardment of Soviet posters that made it virtually impossible to ignore them and subsequently the various messages, admonitions, and advice they announced from every home and street corner.

## 2. Influences: Lubki, Icons, Satirical Journals, and Pre-Revolutionary Posters

Contrary to what some Soviet historians might claim, the Russian political poster did not simply spring up, fully formed, from the inspired “genius” of the revolution. The first posters of the revolution that appeared in 1918 were steeped in historical Russian and European influences. Even though the Bolsheviks sought to separate themselves from the past, thereby creating a bright new future for the Soviet state, they still built on previous traditions in order to reach their intended audience. According to Victoria Bonnel, the party “sought to create a new, specifically proletariat culture, but the effectiveness of political art depended on the artist’s ability to ‘speak the language’ of the viewer, to use images, symbols and styles of representation that people could understand [...] [which] meant drawing on familiar vocabularies and forms in order to convey a new message” (7). These “familiar vocabularies and forms” were drawn from many sources, but most especially from four, on which I will elaborate in the next few paragraphs. Two of these, the lubok and icon, connect Soviet political posters to “some of the oldest traditions of Russian art,” while the other two, satirical journals and the pre-revolutionary advertising poster, connect them to the “flowering of graphic arts that occurred in late nineteenth to early twentieth century” Russia (White, 1). Clearly, although the political poster was very much a product of the new Soviet state, it was also greatly influenced by many of the artistic developments that came before it.

Lubki [sg. lubok], peasant illustrated woodcuts or broadsides, were first developed in the early seventeenth century in Russia (White, 1). The earliest ones were paper copies reproduced from a carved wooden block. As their popularity continued to grow the wooden block became a copper plate, until by the nineteenth century the lubki came to be manufactured lithographically (White, 2). It is generally thought that the first lubki were probably produced in Kiev in the early 1600s, and were heavily influenced by West European engravings, traditional icon painting, and the Russian decorative arts (White, 1). Lubki, like later political posters, combined illustrations with text, and covered subjects that ranged from “religion and folklore to political developments and social issues” (White, 1). At first, representations of folkloric or religious characters, such as the Russian folkloric character Baba Yaga, were the norm. From the eighteenth century on, however, lubki began to depict realistic figures from the society of the time, as well as “hunting, pastoral, amorous, and other scenes” (White, 2). By the nineteenth century, the lubki paid greater attention to such social problems as drunkenness, poverty, and the place of women in society (White, 2). Perhaps not surprisingly, throughout the centuries the role of the lubok came to be as diverse as its subject matter. A Soviet scholar has explained that the lubok “served as an encyclopedia, newspaper, satire sheet, book and entertainment [...] [and] also as a song-book, a guide to polite manners, and a repository of literature, poetry, folk-tales and fables” (White, 2). No matter what its other functions, though, the lubok always served firstly as a forum with which to comment on political and other developments, first in an indirect and allegorical manner and later in a much more direct style (White, 2).

In many ways, the lubok had a direct and profound impact upon the political poster. At the beginning of WWI, though lubki in their original form had mostly disappeared, the Russian government established a publishing house called “The Contemporary Lubok,” which “churned

out patriotic lubki to aid the war effort” (White, 3). Many of the artists who were later prominent in the creation of political posters, like Mayakovsky, Dmitri Moor (1883-1946) and Kasimir Malevich (1879-1935), were involved in the production of these lubki (White, 3). Each of their distinctive artistic styles was undoubtedly influenced by this early involvement with the lubki form. Aleksei Radakov (1879-1942), for instance, though not involved in this wartime lubki production, nevertheless drew from the simple, clean narrative style of the lubok in many of his posters (White, 3).

There also was some continuity in format between the lubok and later political posters. Despite controversy that developed in the 1930s when Soviet officials and artists sought to create a new proletarian style of art largely unrelated to traditional forms, the lubok format was commonly used up until and throughout this time. Certain characteristic features, such as contrasting panels showing “then and now” or “we and they,” were still popular with Soviet poster artists, as was the custom of depicting heroes as larger-than-life figures (such as was sometimes done with the figure of Lenin) (Bonnell, 12). Also, the general “boldness, energy, humor and popular appeal” usually exhibited by these pieces became important elements, not only in political posters, but in the Russian graphic arts in general (White, 3). Perhaps it was the lubok’s “bold” satirical commentary on Russian political and social life, or its distinctively bold graphics, but they continued to grow in popularity after their conception in the early 17th century. The transition in lubki production from reproductions made from carved wooden blocks to copper engravings, and finally to lithographic means, was directly necessitated by their increased popularity. By the late nineteenth century the printing house of I.D. Sytin (1851-1934) in Moscow, for example, was producing an astonishing output: over fifty million lubok pictures annually (White, 2).

The influence of the lubok can perhaps most clearly be seen in the appearance of the instrumental “Rosta Windows,” produced between 1919 and 1922, with which Mayakovsky was also involved (White, 3). Both traditional lubki and the Rosta Windows had a sequence of frames that told a story and were accompanied by a rhyming verse (White, 3). This simple, engaging style, much similar to that of a modern comic strip, was perhaps the biggest factor in the Windows’ huge success within the populace (Bonnell, 200). In the Rosta Windows, the images of individual figures were subordinated to the storyline, which largely concentrated upon a single theme. By the end of the Civil war, however, styles that emphasized the effectiveness of certain iconographic images of both heroes and enemies had superseded the Rosta’s more narrative approach, mostly because of the party’s determination to develop potent symbolic representations of the enemy (Bonnell, 200).

Although Soviet historians would have vehemently discounted religious connections to their propaganda, a second important influence upon the political poster was the icon. These paintings certainly had been a part of everyday life in Russia. Indeed, nearly every peasant had one in his or her home (White, 3). To the devout Russian Orthodox Christian, icons were not the mere visual representation of biblical characters or stories. They were an expression of the holy truth on par with the biblical texts, and they were every bit as revered. It is obvious, with their renunciation of religion and other traditional institutions, why the Bolsheviks would not have wanted to claim any connection between the art of icon painting and the style of their political posters. However, it is also apparent that utilizing such traditional iconography would be to their distinct advantage because of the average Russian's familiarity with the icon, which is perhaps why we see so many similarities between these two distinctive art forms.

The art of icon painting rubbed off on poster artists in much the same way that the artists’



involvement with the lubok did. We can see that elements of the characteristic format and style of icons would often reappear in these artists' later political posters. Some artists who were later extensively involved in poster production started out as formally trained icon painters, such as Alexander Apsit (1880-1944), one of the "earliest and most instrumental political artists" in the years of the Civil War until his emigration to Latvia in 1921 (Bonnel, 11). Others, though not specifically trained in the art of icon painting nevertheless would personally attest to its influence. Dmitri Moor for one drew heavily on the composition, use of color, narrative and illustrative techniques, and "simple yet extraordinary form" of the icon in his own pieces (White, 7). Moor, who would go on to create some of the greatest paragons of Soviet political art, recalled in his later autobiography that "All this [The color, narrative & illustrative techniques and form of the icon] lay at the foundations of my own work" (White, 7). He, like other poster artists, would synthesize a unique style for Soviet political art using some elements from Russia's most traditional and revered art form.

Both icon and political poster artists often "coded" their compositions using different hues, and both favored the color red in many of their pieces. Traditionally, this color represented the blood of martyrs and the fire of faith; even the Russian word for red means both "red" and "beautiful" (White, 5). In the icon, red was often used for the cloak of Mary, while in Soviet posters it was employed to mark out the proletariat, the great hope of the Soviet state (White, 5). This was most likely a clever tactical decision, as the strongly religious and positive connotations of the color were hoped to lend an air of sanctity and "rightness" to the exalted position of the working class, and to the Bolshevik message in general. Other colors, such as black, appropriately used to symbolize evil or humankind's "grave abyss" in the context of an icon, was assigned to the bourgeois, and yellow or green to the Poles. These colors, just like red, were used

to easily distinguish standard characters in a poster (White, 5). A Soviet citizen could then, just by glancing at a poster, almost immediately discern which peoples were represented there and perhaps would even subconsciously connect the Bolshevik message with a not-too-distant, and at least in most peoples' eyes not too debased, Russian past.

Theological subject matter from the icon infiltrated Soviet political posters as it was “adapted to secular and propagandistic purposes” (White, 5). The tale of St. George and the dragon, for example, became a popular subject for the re-imaginings of poster artists. In a religious context, it symbolized the victory of Christianity over paganism (White, 5). When put in the Communists' hands, and with a certain amount of tweaking, it became a representation of the triumph of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie (White, 5). Other popular religious motifs, such as “The Virgin and Child,” were also adapted to fit the state's propagandistic needs. In a particularly memorable poster by Viktor Deni (1893-1946) called *Village Virgin*, we see two white leaders (who led the anti-Communist forces against the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution of 1917-22) portrayed as “saints” looking upon the “virgin” (actually socialist revolutionary Viktor Chernov) and “child: (white admiral Kolchak) (White, 6). Many of these “new icons” of Soviet ideology, like their Orthodox precedents, featured saints, working class heroes or leaders, who “opposed the devil and his accomplices,” state enemies, in a “set and predictable pattern” (Bonnell, 7). Because of their similarity to such traditional subjects and forms, posters modeled after the icon held a certain sway with the average Russian.

A significantly more recent influence upon the Soviet propaganda poster, the satirical journal was one of the most touted inspirations for political art by Soviet scholars. In actuality, satirical writing had formed a large part of Russian literature long before graphics were even brought into the mix (White, 7). The first significant satirical journal to include graphics, *Iskra*

(*The Spark*), was first published in St. Petersburg in 1859, but it was forced to appear without illustrations after 1870, and then was shut down just three short years later—both latter changes being caused by its increasing radicalism (White, 7). After these years, the inclusion of graphics became more standard. In the years of the 1905 revolution (1905-1907) when censorship in Russia was lifted, the production of satirical journals picked up. During this period, no fewer than 249 satirical journals were newly published in Russia, as compared to the mere eighty-nine that had come out in all of the nineteenth century (White, 8). These journals were remarkable not only for their sheer number, but also for their incredible “aesthetic quality” (much improved from previous centuries), and their “open and biting criticism of the government and other institutions” (White, 8). These satirical journals had one of the most profound impacts upon later political art in Russia.

Many poster artists rose through the ranks and were able to develop their art through the satirical journals of 1905 to 1907. Among them were such giants as Dmitri Moor, Aleksei Radakov, Ivan Malyutin, and Sergei Chekhonin (1878-1936) (White, 8-9). Though it did not necessarily follow that those who had worked on the satirical journals would automatically turn their skills to poster-making, in many instances they did, partly because it was virtually the only work available to them under the new regime. They and others often borrowed directly from the journals for the themes and subjects of their pieces. The “Before and After” type poster, originally seen as a satirical postcard during the October revolution, was adapted after the revolution to contrast the Soviet and Tsarist Rules; for example, Moor’s 1920 colored lithograph that depicts before, “one with the plough, seven with a spoon,” and “now,” “he who does not work shall not eat” (White, 11). Notably, a satirical journal illustration entitled “Clock” by artist I.I. Mushketov was blatantly altered in 1919 to serve as a piece of Soviet propaganda (White, 9).

The piece had formerly depicted the head of a worker located at the twelve of a clock face, with the sharp sword of the hour hand advancing towards the worker's neck (White, 8). When reproduced for Soviet purposes in the newspaper for peasants *Poverty* (Bednota), under the headline "Happy New Year, Bourgeois! It is Five Minutes to Midnight," the head of the worker is substituted for the head of a capitalist, and the minute hand instead of the hour hand is in the form of a sword, now labeled "communism" (White, 9). Examples like this one, in which poster artists clearly drew much of their inspiration from an earlier satirical graphic, show the direct influence that some of these illustrations had on the poster-production industry.

Lastly among the earlier artistic connections to the Soviet political poster, the pre-revolutionary poster perhaps provides the most obvious and direct link. Commercially oriented pre-revolutionary posters appeared in Russia and other countries during the late nineteenth century. Poster production was, at that time, much less developed in Russia than in other countries because of Russia's low level of urbanization and commercial capitalism (for example, the 1897 international exhibition of posters in Paris displayed only twenty-eight posters from Russia of the 727 total posters on display) (White, 14). Nonetheless, in Russia there was a growing trend towards poster advertising at this time (White, 14). Many of the most prominent artists of the day were employed in this process, which reached its height during WWI when posters played a crucial role in appealing to the public for "funds, recruits and moral support" (White, 11).

The Soviet poster in many ways grew straight out of the tradition of these earlier works. The Bolsheviks too used poster advertising to appeal for funds for victims of war, orphans and refugees (White, 12). Stylistic elements and tendencies were, for instance, frequently picked up from the older posters. For example, as in the pre-revolutionary posters, early Soviet pieces

depicted ordinary Russian soldiers realistically, as hardworking people who “carried out a risky and thankless task” (White, 14). The image of a worker holding up a red flag became a hallmark of many of the Soviet posters produced directly following the revolution, and this image was borrowed straight from a similar one showing a soldier hoisting a flag that was developed in the pre-revolutionary posters (White, 14). Also, the depiction of one’s enemies as removing a mask in order to reveal the “true” (despicable) character underneath, which was made popular in posters before 1905, came to the surface again after the revolution (White, 17). As with the satirical graphics, we can see that many of the same motifs were taken straight from the pre-revolutionary posters to fit the needs of the new, Communist state. Overall, the very concept of poster advertising as a means to disseminate ideas and instructions was proven extremely useful in Russia by these pre-revolutionary masterpieces.

### 3. Soviet Posters and Political Activities

When the provisional government fell in October 1917 as the Bolsheviks seized power, the party required a new set of symbols, ideals and styles of representation to emerge as the visual personification of the radically changed state structure. These early years of Bolshevik rule coincided with a period of great change in the landscape of Russia’s visual arts, and were some of the freest and most diverse in terms of artistic expression within the Soviet Union. Nowhere, “not among artists, viewers or even officials,” was there a consensus on what types and styles of representation would be most appropriate for conveying the Bolsheviks’ message (Bonnell, 65). There was, so far, no centralized control over the mode of visual propaganda. Yet, with civil war (1918-1922) “polarizing the country” and with the “increasingly urgent demands for mass mobilization,” there was a great need for an “immediate political campaign” (Bonnell, 65). Adapting to the heady combination of urgency and increased artistic license, propaganda

artists began to enthusiastically experiment, employing elements from various traditional Russian sources, such as the lubki and icon, and from pioneering avant-garde sources, such as those produced by the cubist and futurist movements (Bonnell, 65). The “neoclassical movement, canons of the French Revolution, political art from the tsarist era and even Grecian myths” all also contributed to the broad array of artistic inspirations that were incorporated into both the Soviet political poster and the graphic arts of the time as a whole (Bonnell, 65).

The years 1918 to 1921 were essentially the high-Renaissance of Soviet poster production because of the overall quality and sheer volume of posters produced: over 3,600 of different kinds appeared in the Soviet Union (White, 91). Neither the subject matter nor the quantity produced remained steady throughout this time. On the contrary, the industry tended to “experience sharp peaks of output as well as a constantly shifting focus due to the fluctuating urgency and character of political concerns” (White, 91). Over the post-revolutionary years, the output of posters rose steeply, reaching its peak in 1920 (White, 91). At this time, poster production was certainly at its most urgent stage because of the increasing intensity of the Civil War (White, 91). The following year, in 1921, the number of posters produced dropped sharply and continued into a steady decline over the following years, effectively ending this first stage of propagandistic poster creation (White, 91). At this time the Bolsheviks had come to full power and the country was certainly in a sorry state, having not yet begun to recover from the devastations inflicted during the Civil War.

An examination of the different categories of posters produced during this time will tell more about contemporary national concerns and events. Broadly speaking, shifts in focus and output in the poster industry tended to correspond to the government's fluctuating concerns in the Soviet Union during these years (White, 91). Up until 1920 there had been a steep increase in the

amount of Bolshevik posters made that were of a “military character”; by that year, nearly half were war-related (White, 91). Posters on economic themes, scarcely seen in 1919 and 1920, reached their highest level in 1921, when they too accounted for almost half of the posters produced that year (White, 92). Similarly, the output of posters concerning educational and cultural issues also reached its peak in this same year of 1921 (White, 92). This trend in the character of posters produced relates fairly closely to specific developments in Russia. First, the Bolshevik regime “establishes itself” in 1921 and political and economic posters are of the highest concern (White, 92). Next, the country is “threatened from without and within” as the civil war at its peak devastates citizens. Naturally, military posters receive the highest priority at this time (White, 92). Finally, “having secured its borders and quieted revolt,” the government’s focus turns to problems of a more peaceful nature, like social and economic development, and posters of the time therefore turn to these problems as well (White, 92). As Mayakovsky described, “the changing subject matter represents a protocol record of a most difficult three year period [1918-1920] of revolutionary struggle, conveyed by means of spots of paint and the echoing sound of slogans” (White, 92).

Who was involved in this industry, and why? What effect did their involvement have, both on themselves and the industry? During the civil war years, most poster artists were not even communist party members. In fact, almost all came from a non-proletariat or even privileged background (White, 116). Because of civil war, during the early post-revolutionary years the Bolsheviks could not establish a clear direction and strict method of supervision for political poster work, and even more or less anti-Bolshevik individuals could become involved in that work (White, 116). It is perhaps then easy to see why some posters that were submitted to the Gosizdat, the state publishing house, during this time were “politically illiterate or even

harmful,” if those who either knew little or cared little about the communist ideology were in fact producing them (White, 117). Lenin himself pointed out a poster which had clearly misunderstood the nature of the new regime, in which the phrase “The rule of the workers and peasants will last forever” essentially amounted to a very un-Bolshevik declaration because the socialist society would “ideally be classless” (White, 115). Often, too, at the local level the supervision of poster work was entrusted to questionable parties. Stephen White explains how, in the city of Orel (south of Moscow), all poster work was given to a non-party member who was “evidently poorly informed politically” (White, 116).

Many artists turned to poster making, not necessarily because they either agreed or disagreed with the Bolsheviks’ message, but because it was one of the only means by which an artist could make a living during these years. In the words of Edward Bagritsky (1895-1934), an artist of the time, it was “only a duty, only a means of making a living” (White, 117). Many times those who directed poster production, as in the case of Nikolai Kochergin (1897-1974) who found work decorating the Red Army barracks for starving artists in Kiev during the spring of 1919, felt an obligation to their colleagues to provide them with some sort of living (White, 117). With these circumstances producing such a heterogeneous group of artists, it is actually surprising that more ideological or communicational “mistakes” were not made (White, 117).

Through an almost accidental association, futurist artists came to dominate the landscape of the Soviet political poster during, and for some time after, the civil war years (White, 127). Though audiences during the early years of the revolution tended to prefer more realistic and generally orthodox designs (which were more easily understood and relatable), the very concept of futurist art offered an opportunity to escape the more traditional arts and establish a whole new style of representation not tainted by the past. Early on futurist artists came to wield



significant power in various establishments of art throughout the Soviet Union, such as within the Visual Arts Department of Narkompros, the People's Commissariat for Education, which was actually closed in 1921 (White, 127). This type of art was supported by such influential figures within the Soviet Union's art-scape as the Commissar for Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933), who moderated attacks on avant-garde art and literature. His retirement in 1929 and death a few years later, however, marked the beginning of the end for avant-garde poster production (White, 127).

The political poster experienced a decline after the civil war years in almost every way, exhibiting "poor or inappropriate content, bad draftsmanship, clumsy text [...] it was a matter of their overall appearance" (White, 120). This was due in part to the ending of the somewhat improvised arrangements that had prevailed during the civil war, during which artists had been freer to react in a lively, though still pro-Bolshevik way for the most part to developments occurring in the country (White, 125). Now that the urgency for the mobilization and support of the general population, which was present during the war, had declined, the Bolshevik party set to strictly organizing its propaganda, centralizing poster production and devoting fewer finances to the process (White, 126). Many artists remarked upon this phenomenon, and some even abandoned the medium at this time, such as Adolf Strakhov (1896-1979), who stopped producing political posters in the belief that they had been "superseded" by monumental art (White, 120). Cheremnykh, Deni, Moor and many of their contemporaries continued to produce posters, though more occasionally than they had previously, while such artists as Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956) and the Stenberg brothers (Vladimir [1899-1982] and Georgii [1900-33]) developed commercial, educational and theatre posters inspired by the constructivist movement (White, 121). Innovation did not completely die out however, and influential for

younger artists of the time was the work of Gustav Klutsis (1895-1944), whose photomontage posters helped to inspire a wave of similar creations in Russia during the 1930s (White, 121).

A different set of circumstances took hold in the Soviet Union following the transition from civil war to “peaceful reconstruction” (White, 126). The New Economic Policy (1921-1928), which established some semi-capitalist conditions, revived economic activity, in particular private trading (White, 126). Posters which had previously been given out for free now had to “be paid for and justify their existence in cost-accounting terms,” and shops were “less willing to take up window space with propaganda posters now that they actually had something to sell” (White, 127). Cinema posters had at this time, as noted by Mayakovsky, almost replaced all other kinds of posters (White, 127). Furthermore, many civil war artists transferred their talents to the satirical journals of the 1920s, which had become more popular as newsprint became more freely available. For example, the new periodical *Krokodil*, founded in 1922, “drew directly upon the [core of Rosta] poster artists” (White, 127). With their paid subscriptions, these journals could also offer far greater pay to artists than could the remaining poster publishers whose finances were severely limited (White, 127).

The political pressures also increased after the end of the civil war. For the first time, in 1931, the Art Department of the State Publishing House (Izogiz), under the direct supervision of the Central Committee, brought all poster production under its supervision. Therefore all poster themes, texts and images were scrupulously “subordinated to official ideology” (Bonnel, 6). In 1932 the Central Committee argued that the field of art was “being used for the contraband infiltration of anti-Soviet ideology” (White, 128). The “bourgeois tendencies” of recent posters were attacked, including those posters which were considered “painterly,” “passive,” “formal” or even “mystical or symbolic” (White, 128). Even giants like Deni and Moor were criticized for

failing to develop “sufficiently agitating posters with appropriately heroic figures” (White, 128). Under Stalinism, those artists whose work was “highly experimental” or who had “lived or studied abroad” suffered the most, which facilitated the decline of the futurist and other avant-garde poster artists (White, 128). For example, Vladimir Lebedev (1891-1967), a successful and innovative Rosta artist, was criticized multiple times, first at a conference on children's literature in the mid-1930s and then later in the newspaper *Pravda* for his “Renoirist tendencies” and the “formalism” and “suprematist stylization” of his works (White, 128). Though propagandistic posters continued to be produced, and in large quantities, it was during Stalinism that the medium perhaps experienced its greatest decline in terms of stylistic innovations, as talented artists like Lebedev continued to be ostracized and, in some cases, even harmed. An “otherworldly socialist realism,” which depicted life in the Soviet Union as far more glorious than it actually was, pervaded the High Stalinist posters (Bonnell, 7). This style is generally characterized by a fairly bland and predictable character, the principles of which are sometimes drolly described as “girl meets tractor.”

#### 4. The Willamette Poster Collection: the Systemization of Health Care & Stalin's Campaign

Though we have already touched briefly in the above essay on some of the main political concerns during the Civil War and NEP years, as well as on art and propaganda under Stalin, it will be useful to conclude with a closer examination of these issues in order to understand the environment in which many of the posters in our collection were produced. Just a year after the Bolshevik revolution, by the summer of 1918, Russia was in the beginning stages of civil war. Though the country was in the midst of a brutal struggle, the war did not in fact stop Soviet officials from planning for the future. One item in particular would occupy them for years to come: the systemization and reformation of healthcare in the new state. Already in 1918 Soviet

delegates were meeting to discuss what form the new healthcare system should take, agreeing that they must first unify Soviet medicine, then provide treatment “by qualified professionals free of charge” and finally concentrate on “sanitation and other social measures aimed at alleviating disease and improving the living conditions of the poor” (Weissman, 97). The government established the Narkomzdrav, the Commissariat for Public Health, in July 1918 with hopes of soon reaching some of these goals, but of course the Civil War took its toll in preventing the organization from taking any sweeping strides for a number of years (Weissman, 101). However, certain of its efforts did prove successful, as for example the sanitation propaganda campaign targeted at the Red Army during the final years of the war, thanks to which the fighting forces were treated to “sanitation lectures” and made to form “disinfection detachments” (Weissman, 107).

Following the vicious Civil War, and while entering into the New Economic Policy era of 1922-1928, Russians were in desperate need of healthcare on a scale of which their country’s resources were not nearly up to the task of providing. Here, then, was another opportunity for the poster medium, which aided in reaching citizens both in the countryside and in the city, at home and at work, to instruct them on matters of sanitation. Posters could play a part in circulating and advancing practices “for better public hygiene, health education, and preventive medicine to lower the rates for all infectious diseases” (Davis, 147-8). Even though the country reportedly had “inadequate public sanitation and water supply” and the efficaciousness of the healthcare system in general was low, Russia was nevertheless beginning to recover from the war as well as the famine and disease that had recently plagued it, perhaps due at least in small part to measures like the poster campaign enacted by the Narkomzdrav (Davis, 146). Certainly several of the posters now housed in the Willamette University collection fall under the category of this post-

Civil War “sanitation campaign.”

Finally, particularly helpful for our understanding of the context of the Willamette posters is a discussion of Stalin’s “revolution from above,” which began upon his ascent to the leadership of the Bolshevik Party in 1928. During his reign Stalin launched a “makeover” of Soviet society which included three broad aspects: “complete nationalization and socialization of all non-farming activity; central state planning, under which economic decisions were made at the top and transmitted down to all enterprises; and extensive expansion of mechanization and new technology in every branch of economic activity” (Thompson, 232-3). For our purposes, it will be enlightening to briefly consider three secondary aspects of Stalin’s wide-reaching program: agricultural collectivization, the Cultural Revolution and the 5 year plans which involved industrial output.

In order for collectivization to occur, all peasant land had to be first transferred into large collective farms which peasants were then required to join and to which they were to donate most of their equipment and livestock. A share of the harvest was automatically accorded to the state, while the rest of the profits were divided among the members of the farm in proportion to their contributions. This drastically altered state of affairs was not met with happy acceptance by everyone. For their part propagandistic posters were needed to promote collectivization, such as we can see in certain examples from the Willamette collection

With the Cultural Revolution came a two-pronged plan of attack that first targeted the threat of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, or “bourgeois specialists,” and then attempted to educate workers and peasants in order to fill their positions. While the specialists had proven useful during the NEP era, as the country was attempting to rebuild itself, they along with

others—such as rich peasants (“kulaks”) and rich private traders (“Nepmen”)—were now increasingly subject to arrest (some were granted a “trial,” though these were largely only for show) and property seizure. The plan, after the bourgeoisie was disposed of, was to then educate and eventually create new leaders in the various professions and politics from the ranks of the proletariat.

As phrased by Sheila Fitzpatrick, the educating of the proletariat was the “affirmative action” component of the Cultural Revolution, which also included efforts to “revolutionize daily life” (Fitzpatrick, 6; Kelly 257). At the forefront of this effort, Catriona Kelly explains, was a special concern for children’s daily habits and reading (Kelly, 257). Importantly, much of the circulation of lists of reading materials, instructions on how to order one’s day and information about hygiene was done by means of poster advertising. Other forms of propaganda such as to-do lists, manuals and brochures also helped to disseminate the regime’s expectations of the activities and tasks that children and their families were to carry out in order to lead healthier and more educated lives. Posters were part of this tradition, containing a strong message which details the means by which Soviet citizens were encouraged to maintain a healthy body, home and work space.

Under Stalin the Soviet Union’s first five year plan was also initiated in 1928. The first plan included the goal to increase industrial output by 120 percent, already a hefty target made still more ambitious just a year later when Stalin decided to double this goal. Workers poured into cities in huge numbers. More than ten million peasants left their towns in order to become industrial workers (Fitzpatrick, 6). The infrastructure of the cities simply could not support such a large influx in population, and this migration quickly and inevitably led to various problems, such as housing shortages and sanitation concerns. The spread of such diseases as gonorrhoea was

especially alarming, necessitating a health and sanitation campaign from 1928 to 1932, in which posters like those found in the Willamette collection played a vital part in educating the masses in prevention techniques to slow the spread of disease.

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