ICONOGRAPHY OF POWER: SOVIET POLITICAL POSTERS UNDER LENIN AND STALIN,

One of the most important methods by which Soviet leaders attempted to influence public opinion was through the use of political posters, which were seen as an effective means to reach a broad public. The messages of these posters changed over the course of Soviet history; in the initial stage of the 1917 Russian Revolution political posters attempted to foster zeal for the revolution and enthusiasm for creating a socialist society. Later posters were used to garner support for the Bolsheviks against their primary opponent, the Whites, or for social programs such as better health care or literacy campaigns. Following Lenin’s death, Stalin took complete control of the Soviet state and was able to use political posters to promote his agenda of industrialization, collectivization of agriculture, Five-Year Plans and political discipline. Through the use of strong, contrasting shapes and colors, photomontage and diagonal lines political posters from Stalin’s era created a dynamic, powerful impression.

This book examines Soviet political posters from the years 1917 - 1953, focusing, in particular, on the style of representation, the visual vocabulary and grammar of political posters created in the period of the Civil War, the 1920s and 1930s, World War II and High Stalinism. It begins by discussing the ideology underlying the Soviet attitude towards art, and how they reflected their view of their new socialist society in political posters. The author investigates the role of posters as symbolic representations of power and discusses how visual propaganda is received today.

The book contains six chapters, and in each chapter the author provides an analytic framework based on a linguistic analogy, treating images as part of a visual language.

Before the Soviets, the centrality of visual images and rituals in Tsarist Russia, especially in the Russian Orthodox Church made for a highly visual traditional culture. The Russian Orthodox icon
occupied a central place in Russian religious practice, since the image itself had sacred powers for the Orthodox believer. When the Bolsheviks came to power, they also appreciated the effectiveness of images for reaching ordinary people with their message. Political posters displayed in public places offered a more effective way of delivering the Bolsheviks’ political views and occupied a central place in their strategy to mobilize the population on a grand scale and implant a new orientation toward the self and the social and political world. The party leadership understood that traditional ways of thinking were deeply rooted and resistant to change, therefore, the transformation of mass consciousness would require extraordinary measures. As a result, the visual images on political posters were the best means to implement their policies and to transform the masses.

The author asserts that political artists took their inspiration from a number of sources - Russian popular culture, commercial advertising, fine arts, religious and folk art, classical mythology, the imagery of Western European labor and revolutionary movements, and political art of the tsarist era. Different elements were incorporated at different periods, and mythical elements from these diverse sources were fused with contemporary ideology, creating a unique visual language.

The first chapter of the book is devoted to the iconography of the worker. According to the author, the worker-icon proved to be a versatile symbol that could be changed as official conceptions of the proletarian basis of political power evolved. The worker-icon was also an important indicator of what was considered sacred in Soviet society, since the proletariat was regarded as the chosen class in Bolshevik ideology, and, according to the "laws" of Marxism-Leninism, possessed the superhuman power to transform nature.

From 1919 to 1930, the dominant iconographic image in Bolshevik visual propaganda was the worker-blacksmith. However, after 1930 the blacksmith almost entirely disappears from political art, and a new image of the worker appears. The transformation of the worker-icon in the 1930s coincides with a general decline in the representation of workers in political art and the shift of the sacred center to a new locus.

The second chapter focuses on the representation of women in early Soviet political posters, beginning with a quotation from Joan Wallach Scott: "gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power". She argues that important messages about relations of domination and subordination, both in the realm of social interaction and in the broader sphere of political life is conveyed by the visual imagery of men and women. The depiction of gender has particular significance in periods when authority relations are in flux, such as the Civil War years and the 1930s. Civil War posters depicted a predominantly male world, with women often being represented allegorically until 1920, when the first images of the woman worker and the peasant woman appeared. Women were usually depicted in a subordinate relationship to male workers and peasants, creating the impression that women played a minor role in events until 1930. The exception was collectivization, which was presented visually in the female idiom.

The third chapter examines the visual representation of peasant women as part of the new Stalinist ideology in the 30s. At this time political posters devoted to rural themes began to depict collective farm women, transformed into a kolkhoznitsa. According to the author collective farm woman were given a central place in Stalinist iconography. The publisher Izogiz selected a few main slogans and then the posters were distributed throughout the country; posters for the non-Russian population were modified as necessary. Later in the chapter the author discusses the effect of the
collectivization campaign on political posters.

Chapter four examines the iconography of the Vozhd (leader). The author discusses the issues related to the depiction of Lenin’s image before 1924, noting that the depiction of Lenin’s relationship with ordinary people was reserved. Under Stalin, however, all forms of mass propaganda were used to praise and adulate him, creating a virtual cult of Stalin. The author describes how Stalin takes center stage in as a living god in visual propaganda, displacing both his predecessor Lenin and the proletariat as the core elements in Bolshevik mythology.

Chapter five focuses on the issue of demonology in visual propaganda, that is the depiction of enemies, both internal and external. The representation of enemies remained relatively consistent between 1917 and 1953, due to the continued use of standard styles of satire and caricature. The writer argues that the depiction of enemies helped to reinforce a Manichean world-view that divided the world into two sides of good and evil.

Chapter six examines posters produced between the years 1946 – 1953, which were distinctively different from anything that had been previously produced, despite incorporating elements from earlier periods. The author argues that these posters depicted a vision of the "divine order" of Soviet society, in which abundance and harmoniousness were the essence of the new Stalinist imperial order. Many of the traditional class markers and attributes of Soviet citizens had disappeared and were replaced by a new image of Homo sovieticus.

The author has made a significant contribution to the understanding of the posters used during the creation of a new socialist society in the Soviet Union their value as an extremely effective means of propaganda. In addition, this work provides important insights into how the policies of a state in creating a new political system can be carried out through a marriage of art and politics. This book can be recommended for those interested in issues related to art and politics and/or early Soviet history.

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