

Soviet era posters at London's Tate Modern

From Bolshevik internationalism to Stalinist nationalism

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14 November 2005

Soviet era posters on display at London's Tate Modern museum are a powerful record of how the bureaucratic degeneration represented by the rise of Stalinism destroyed the young workers' state founded on the basis of Bolshevik internationalism.

The exhibition charts the change from vivid and inspirational posters drawn in a multitude of styles in the immediate post-revolutionary period to dull and hackneyed socialist realist lithographs of the Stalinist regime.

The posters belong to the artist, author and historian David King, who has spent most of his adult life rescuing photos, paintings and posters from the Soviet era and has built up the largest collection of its kind in the Western world.

At a recent talk to about 300 people crowded into the small Soviet Graphics gallery at Tate Modern, King insisted that the podium be placed in front of a simple black and white portrait of the Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky who represented "an alternative to Stalinism, but one that that retained the tradition of international revolution."

King recounted how the artist Sergei Pichugin had drawn the portrait in 1923, but was forced to hide it in his studio covered by a piece of white board, where it remained for 70 years. The portrait now hangs in the gallery with remains of the board around its edges—a poignant reminder of the affection and respect that surrounded the co-leader of the revolution with Lenin and the failure of the Stalinist dictatorship to expunge his memory or ideas from history.

In the period immediately following the revolution, Soviet art flourished. The poster was an ideal medium to reach out to a largely illiterate population and to reach a large audience in conditions of civil war where paper was short and there were few printing presses.

Posters of the period proclaimed the political perspective of the Bolshevik Party, advertised social issues such as health care and literacy and attacked the civil war opponents of the Bolshevik government.

Despite the difficult economic conditions of the post-revolutionary period, the workers' state supported artists generously because it understood that only the free expression of artistic creativity and open debate could contribute to the development of socialist consciousness.

Trotsky wrote in *The Revolution Betrayed* how the young workers' state "had a seething mass-basis and a perspective of world revolution, it had no fear of experiments, searchings, the struggle of schools, for it understood that only in this way could a new cultural epoch be prepared. The popular masses were still quivering in every fiber, and were thinking aloud for the first time in a thousand years. All the best youthful forces of art were touched to the quick."

Such "best youthful" artists must have been responsible for many of the early posters in the gallery, but their names are now largely forgotten. Dmitrii Moor (1883-1946) is perhaps one of the better known artists. He subverts the allegorical myth of St. George and the dragon in his sumptuously rich poster *Death to World Imperialism* (1919) Workers, soldiers and sailors are fighting a green scaly imperialist dragon wrapped around a mountainous pile of black smoking industrial buildings from

behind which peeks a multicoloured sun. Its rays shine down on the workers who poke the dragon's wide, white eyes and round, red mouth with their bayonets and red flags.

The poster *Ukrainian and Russians have a common cry—We must not let the landowners rule over the workers* (1920), designed by the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), is altogether of a more simple design showing two workers holding aloft on the bayonets of their guns a fat capitalist with a twirling yellow moustache. It was published by the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA), which became famous for its satirical political posters carrying the latest news. They were based on the traditional "lubok," a leaflet that combined text and pictures often in an allegorical and satirical manner to convey religious, political and social issues.

The Bolshevik's international orientation is expressed in Red Moscow: Heart of World Revolution, published by the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops VKhUTEMAS. It is in a bold cubist style, announcing the formation of the Third International.

The same theme, but in a different style, is shown in *Long Live the Third Communist International* by Sergei Ivanov (1885-1942). A worker in a green shirt and brown leather apron holds a billowing red banner with the slogan emblazoned in Russian and beckons to two more cosmopolitan looking workers behind him. The poster repeats the slogan underneath in English, French, Italian and German and indicates that class and not nationality or religion was the basis for political and social unity.

By the end of the three-year civil war about 3,600 poster designs had been created—more than 20 per week—by about 453 different organisations. It is worth noting author Victoria Bonnell's observation that "considering Lenin's position in the Bolshevik pantheon, it is striking how few political posters with his image appeared before 1924 and how reserved was the depiction of his relationship with ordinary people" (V. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*).

One example depicting Lenin is Comrade Lenin cleans the land of garbage by Viktor Nikolaevich Deni (1893-1946). Affectionate and somewhat humorous in character, it would have been inconceivable in later years. Instead, Lenin's image increasingly appeared from the mid-1920s as always severe and surrounded by large anonymous crowds to artistically justify the slogans of Stalinist nationalism. The Bolsheviks had always understood that a nationally self-contained socialist state, especially one based on a country as economically and culturally backward as Russia, could not be viable.

The exhaustion of the Russian working class in the aftermath of the civil war, economic shortages, the continued existence of social differences and inequalities all contributed to the growth in the political power of the Soviet bureaucracy. This was exacerbated massively by the defeats suffered by the European working class—particularly in Germany, which preserved the isolation of the Soviet Union. These were the decisive factors in Trotsky's fall from power, and the adoption of the Stalinist programme of rejecting world socialist revolution in favour of building

“socialism in one country”—with the accompanying development of the concept of “proletarian art.”

The subsequent history of the USSR and the international socialist movement is the record of the bloody consequences of the violence employed by the Stalinist bureaucracy to consolidate its power and privileges following the repression of the Left Opposition and exile of Trotsky in 1928. The consequence in the cultural field was the enforced silence, suicide or extermination of many of the best artists.

Stalin launched the First Five Year Plan in 1928 and embarked on the reckless and brutal collectivization of agriculture—the same year his image starts to appear in posters, albeit subordinated to Lenin.

Georgevich Kotov’s (1889-1968) *Bread to the Factories: Peasants strengthen the power of our Factories* (1929) is an interesting comment on the problems encountered with forced collectivisation. The title hints there is a crisis—peasants were hoarding grain and slaughtering livestock—but Kotov paints an idyllic picture of wheat-sheaves, grain silos and happy peasants unloading their carts at the station. Trains rush with the produce to factories where workers load up barrels, tractors and agricultural implements onto wagons for the return journey.

The posters designed by Gustav Klutis are more unsettling, making use of simple Constructivist designs printed in red and black colours combined with photomontage and bold typography. A particularly sinister and sycophantic example is *Under the banner of Lenin* (1930), which shows a ghostly image of Stalin’s face merging into a calm solid photo of Lenin, the whole amalgam contrasting with the feverish construction work below and the thrusting diagonal lines and text.

In 1931, all poster production was taken over by the Art Department of the State Publishing House (Izogiz) and directly subordinated to Stalin’s Central Committee.

Klutis’s huge *Hold Up the Banner of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin* (1933) consists of four photos separated by sharp, diagonal lines building on the myth that Stalin was Lenin’s legitimate heir and followed in the political footsteps of the great Marxist teachers. Whilst Marx, Engels and Lenin face to the right, surrounded by scenes of street fighting and battles, Stalin rises above a peaceful column of happy workers and has a full-on gaze that follows you around the gallery. Hundreds of thousands of copies of this poster were produced in more than 20 languages over a four-year period.

In the same year the Brigada Artists Group produced a series of lithographs on the theme *From the First Five Year Plan to the Second Five Year Plan*. They are quite complicated or rather confusing images made up of layers of photomontage and blocks of text in red and black. One explains that “the capitalist elements in the town and country have been smashed, the basis of the Soviet economy has been built. The victory of socialism in the USSR is guaranteed.”

A simple red poster with white lettering by an unknown artist undermines this illusion by calling for “class aliens and hostile elements, degenerates, opportunists, double dealers, careerists, self-seekers, bureaucrats and morally decayed persons” to be cleansed. Bureaucrats in this context should be understood only as those who fell foul of Stalin’s immediate clique!

The victory of Hitler in 1933 marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of the Stalinist regime. Confronted with a serious threat from a powerful fascist regime for which his own policies were centrally responsible, Stalin tied the defence of the USSR to political alliances with imperialist states at the expense of the interests of the international working class. The role of the USSR in world affairs assumed an openly counterrevolutionary character, which found murderous expression in the betrayal of the Spanish Revolution, the purging and extermination of Old Bolsheviks, the hunting down of revolutionary opponents of the regime outside the USSR, and finally in the Stalin-Hitler Pact.

Stalin used every means at his disposal to combat the social protest

mounted by the working class in opposition to forced industrialisation, which had restored production to pre-revolution levels by 1934 but greatly increased social polarisation. Oppositionist sentiment was widespread within the party and Stalin reacted by carrying out three official party purges from 1933 to 1936, in the course of which several hundred thousand party members were expelled.

In the field of culture, Stalin decreed that all art had to conform to “Socialist Realism”—a style that brought to new heights the falsification of the real relations tearing apart Soviet society and which continued after the dictator’s death in 1953. Everyone had to be portrayed smiling and determined—healthy young workers and soldiers as well as the ubiquitous Stalin dressed in his simple grey tunic. Klutis’s *Long Live Our Happy Socialist Motherland—Long Live Our Beloved Stalin* (1935) shows Stalin standing on Lenin’s mausoleum waving along with smiling faces at the head of the massed ranks of the proletariat at a line of aeroplanes flying above. On the underside of the first is the name Lenin and on the second is that of Stalin.

In 1938, three years after he produced this poster, Klutis was arrested. He died not long after in the Butovo prison near Moscow.

With the Nazi invasion in June 1941 and the threat of military defeat looming over the USSR, images of Stalin virtually disappeared. Instead the propaganda harks back to the visual imagery of the civil war, but linked to everything the revolution was careful to avoid—patriotic appeals for the motherland, the evocation of great national warriors and battles of the past and the threat posed to women and children by the barbarian aggressor such as *Red Army Warriors Save Us* (1942) by Viktor Koretsky (1909-1998).

The exhibition also has another poster by Koretsky produced in 1948, entitled *A talent’s way ... Give way to a talent*. It contrasts a young downcast violinist in the West walking the streets compared to a handsome and confident youth playing in a grand concert hall in the USSR.

After the liberation, posters once more showed Stalin, but now as a triumphant military commander decked out in full marshal regalia as illustrated in one of the last pictures in the exhibition, *Following Lenin’s Path towards Communism* (1951) by Konstantin Ivanov. By this point we have the perfect marriage of reactionary politics with suitably bad art.

References:

Internet Museum of Russian Posters <http://eng.plakaty.ru/>

Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin, Victoria E. Bonnell, 1999

The Bolshevik Poster, Stephen White, 1990



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