

Toward a socialist future: Children's picture books after the Bolshevik Revolution

Thomas Scripps
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A New Childhood: Picture Books from Soviet Russia, until September 11, 2016, at the House of Illustration gallery, London

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was the defining event of the 20th century. Its influence extended across virtually every aspect of human society the world over. The scope for study of the revolution and of the social order that emerged from it is immense, though generally overlooked in contemporary art curation. It comes as a welcome exception to see the attempt by London's House of Illustration art gallery in its exhibition, *A New Childhood: Picture Books from Soviet Russia*, to bring to light the artistic impetus lent by the revolution to children's book illustrations in early Soviet society.

The collection spans some 20 years, from a few pre-revolutionary examples, when only the well-off could afford books, to a number of works produced under the pressures of the civil war (1917-1922), through the flowering of Soviet picture books in the 1920s and finishing with a small selection of pieces from the mid- to late 1930s.

The period witnessed dramatic social upheavals and the works displayed palpably provide a sense of the intellectual urgency and energy of the era. They give us an important glimpse of the socialist society the Russian working class set out to build, above all the nurturing of a happy, literate and cultured younger generation.

Among the earliest examples of post-revolutionary picture books on display are those produced by the Segodnya (Today) Collective, established by the remarkable painter and illustrator Vera Ermolaeva in Petrograd in 1918. With all resources at the time directed towards the needs of the Red Army, Segodnya produced small "block-books" and *lubki* (single-page illustrated story sheets), popular with the lower classes in the 17th century but containing distinctly modern ideas. Nadezhda Liubavina's *How Baba Yaga Vanished*, for example, illustrated by Nikolai Lapshin—told the story of how a fabled witch was defeated by a young Soviet boy.

Also present from this early post-revolutionary period are illustrations produced by the Kultur Lige (Culture League), founded in 1918 with the intention of promoting Yiddish language and culture, after the new Bolshevik government lifted a Tsarist ban on Yiddish publishing. Among the artists associated with this group was El Lissitzky, the talented artist whose developing Constructivist style is clearly evident in the innovative illustrations for the Jewish Passover tale, *The Only Kid*.

The real strength of the exhibition lies in the breadth of its coverage of children's illustration during the 1920s. As the demands of the civil war lessened, resources could at last be devoted to domestic ends. By 1922, the state publishing house Gosizdat had some 50 local departments and more than 300 private publishers set up after the introduction of the New Economic Policy, which allowed the partial restoration of capitalism whilst keeping the commanding heights of the economy under state control. Cheap paper was produced and stapled to enable the mass circulation of inexpensive paperbacks.

At the same time, a broad debate took place on the role and direction of children's books in a socialist society. The result was a vibrant culture of children's literature and illustration, which sought to engage with every element of contemporary life and to create messages and understandings suited to the modern world. The concerns with education, internationalism, political activism, the natural world, technology and transport are all captured in the exhibition.

What is immediately striking to the viewer, aside from the creativity of the designs on show, is the commitment of the artists to raising the cultural level of the Russian population. The exhibition highlights a quotation from painter and graphic artist Vladimir Lebedev revealing the seriousness with which Soviet illustrators approached their work: "Art must be the same nut for a child as it is for an adult, only the nut intended for a child ought not to have too hard a shell."

Like El Lissitzky, Lebedev had originally worked as a civil war propagandist for the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA) and the Department of Agitation (Agitprop) in the years 1920 to 1922. Once the military threat to the new Soviet state receded, he turned his attentions to the peacetime domestic challenges and soon earned himself the title "King of the Children's Book."

For leading Soviet artists—indeed, for leading thinkers across all spheres of Soviet life—the period of socialist construction that began in the 1920s required as much energy and thought as had the period of civil war that preceded it.

The Russian working class, under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, had eliminated both the state power of the bourgeoisie and its military forces, and stressed the importance of socialist production. Enormous challenges persisted, however, in the sphere of economics, in the low level of education among Russia's majority peasant population and the significant influence of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois thought throughout backward

rural Russia under conditions of capitalist encirclement. For the new Soviet regime, it was therefore vital to wage an interrelated struggle for the elementary education of Soviet citizens and the development of a socialist consciousness among them.

Leon Trotsky devoted a number of articles to these questions. In *The Cultural Role of the Worker Correspondent*, published in 1924, he explained, “Once power has been taken, it is necessary to raise the cultural level of the working masses, for it is impossible to build socialism on the basis of underdeveloped culture.”

The Bolshevik Party meanwhile launched a number of literacy campaigns in the Red Army, the trade unions and peasant villages. Another quote—this time from Vladimir Lenin—displayed in the exhibition highlights the essence of their efforts: “Without [the alphabet] there are only rumours, fairy tales and prejudices, but not politics.”

Children’s literature was recognised as a vital element of this work. An article published in the Bolshevik newspaper, *Pravda*, in 1918, declared, “In the great arsenal with which the bourgeoisie fought against socialism, children’s books occupied a prominent role... we should fix children’s literature in the proper way to ensure an abundant harvest.”

Illustrated books like Lebedev’s *The Alphabet* and Olga Deineko and Nikolai Troshin’s *Alphabet of Metric Units* took up the task of basic education.

Eduard Krimmer developed an innovative technique for teaching numeracy in his book *Numbers*, which required children to look closely at pictures to determine what was being counted.

Nikolai Aseev’s *Red Neck* dealt with political questions, promoting the courageous defence of socialist ideas by telling the story of a young pioneer whose red scarf attracts the attention of a bull, but who refuses to give it up, eventually escaping. Natan Altman’s cubo-futurist inspired illustrations and use of colour lend a compelling power to the narrative in *Red Neck*.

Beyond directly political and educational goals, Soviet illustrators and writers worked to instill a more socially conscious attitude in their readers. The illustrations featuring technology and industry, in particular, demonstrate an overarching effort to connect young readers with the wider social world, the process of production and the scientific advances of the age. *The Table*, for example, shows the stages of a carpenter’s work, while *The Little Screw* introduces the reader to the world of factory production.

Nikolai Smirnov’s *Charlie’s Journey* (illustrated by Galina and Olga Chichagova, sisters who had been students of Alexander Rodchenko) combines the themes of technology and internationalism with an exploration of the various and developing means of transport used across the world. The book uses the popular figure of Charlie Chaplin as its protagonist, and has him express sympathy for a Japanese rickshaw puller.

Such concerns are largely absent from the final few illustrations on display, taken from the artistic dead-end of the school of Stalinist “Socialist Realism.” One example is Aleksandr Deineka’s *The Red Army Parade*, which evokes a militarism devoid of any social understanding or human empathy.

The failure to explain why or how this transformation of artistic culture occurred is a weakness in the exhibition. Various captions refer to the extension of censorship, the revival of anti-Jewish

sentiment and the persecution of artists that began in the early 1930s and point to the simultaneous stagnation of artistic creativity and rise of Socialist Realism. But little sense can be made of these developments if the bureaucratic degeneration of the Russian Communist Party and the Communist International and liquidation of their best elements are not explained. Only in this context can the collapse of innovative and thoughtful art in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s and beyond be understood.

By the early 1930s, a parasitic bureaucracy, headed by Joseph Stalin, had usurped political power from the working class. Arising from the international isolation of the Soviet Union and its economic backwardness and poverty, this social layer was irreconcilably hostile to the working class and to socialism. Its privileged position could therefore only be maintained through the physical destruction of the Marxist cadre of the Bolshevik Party and the deadening of socialist consciousness among the population. A policy of intense censorship and eventually mass murder and incarceration was pursued from the mid-1930s in furtherance of these ends.

Horribly, for example, the immensely gifted Vera Ermolaeva was arrested in 1934, found guilty of “anti-Soviet activity, expressed in propaganda promoting anti-Soviet ideas and for associating herself with anti-Soviet intelligentsia” and shot three years later in a forced labour camp.

In place of socialist internationalism, Stalinist art created a culture of hero worship and falsehoods, which endeavoured—in the face of continuing hardships for the population—to convince the Russian working class that all was well in the Soviet Union.

As Trotsky explained in 1938, “The style of present-day official Soviet painting is called ‘socialist realism.’... [T]he ‘socialist’ character apparently consists in representing, in the manner of pretentious photography, events which never took place. It is impossible to read Soviet verse and prose without physical disgust, mixed with horror, or to look at reproductions of paintings and sculpture in which functionaries armed with pens, brushes, and scissors, under the supervision of functionaries armed with Mausers, glorify the ‘great’ and ‘brilliant’ leaders, actually devoid of the least spark of genius or greatness.” (*Art and Politics in Our Epoch*).

This underdeveloped section aside, the exhibition is well composed and an instructive window on a little known aspect of Soviet society.



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