

Exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago

The photomontages of Soviet political artist Aleksandr Zhitomirsky (1907-1993)

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Humanism + Dynamite = The Soviet Photomontages of Aleksandr Zhitomirsky, at the Art Institute of Chicago until January 10.

An exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, *Humanism + Dynamite = The Soviet Photomontages of Aleksandr Zhitomirsky*, features the work of leading Soviet photomontage artist and designer, Aleksandr Zhitomirsky (1907-1993).

The comprehensive exhibition, showcasing over one hundred of Zhitomirsky's works and spanning a convulsive half-century, is the first significant display of the artist's photomontages since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. There are captivating and original works in the show.

At his sharpest, Zhitomirsky utilizes photomontage (the process of cutting, rearranging and overlapping photographs to create a distinct result) and other techniques to blend striking images and typography to powerful effect.

His designs are darkly satirical critiques of world politics in the middle of the 20th century and beyond. He shines most in his scathing critiques of American and European capitalism, as well as in his portrayals of the crimes of fascism and imperialist war. Of course, the emergence of counterrevolutionary Stalinism has to be taken into account in considering his artistic and political evolution.

Many of Zhitomirsky's works feel remarkably contemporary and true. Quite a few have an artistic and social significance that endures beyond their immediate historical and political context.

There are also less well-executed works, which seem to suggest their character as hurried propaganda efforts. His very weakest works include those glorifying the Stalinist bureaucracy (not on display at the Art Institute). Not surprisingly, given the ruthless censorship in place in the USSR, he was not able to make any public artistic appraisal of daily life in the Soviet Union. Still, the current exhibition is significant.

Zhitomirsky was born in 1907 in Rostov-on-Don, in southwestern Russia, a decade before the October Revolution of 1917. He died in the summer of 1993, a year and a half after the dissolution of the USSR. Zhitomirsky had a prolific career

in the graphic arts that spanned virtually the entire Soviet era. He rose to genuine prominence during World War II, producing anti-fascist photomontages for leaflets that would be dropped on German troops from the air.

Zhitomirsky grew up in a period of intense political and social conflict within the Russian workers state and internationally, an epoch dominated by the breakdown of capitalism, by war, revolution and counterrevolution. Zhitomirsky matured in the shadow of titanic political conflicts and pursued his art work under conditions of the cultural and political stranglehold of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

In June 1941, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, invading the Soviet Union, and catching the Stalinist apparatus disastrously off guard. Millions of Soviet citizens died in the war as a result of Stalin's policies. Despite the bureaucracy, the Nazi war of annihilation provoked immense resistance within the Soviet population. Zhitomirsky rose to the challenge of producing powerful leaflets, addressed to German soldiers and the Soviet masses.

Zhitomirsky's most effective leaflets sought to appeal to the thoughts and emotions of German soldiers. The propaganda material rightly blamed the conditions the latter faced on the Eastern front on the Nazi leadership. Images of fallen soldiers, of death and suffering and of the overall horrors of war predominate. Other leaflets showed what would happen to German soldiers if they surrendered: photos of German prisoners-of-war receiving food, medical care, etc. Life was rarely as happy in reality, but deserting troops were spared their lives (although large numbers died from hunger, disease and mistreatment).

One of the most haunting examples of Zhitomirsky's anti-fascist propaganda efforts appeared in September 1941. A soldier lies dead in the foreground, his mouth agape, eyes closed, chest slightly raised and head arched backwards. The nocturnal horizon is covered in explosions and smoke. Above the haze float images of his family and friends, happier memories. The caption reads, "Life could be beautiful—if Hitler did not exist! He wants you to die—for his interests and for the interests of the plutocrats."

The contrast of life and death is made even more explicit in leaflets like “Choose! Like This or Like That” (1941). Above—the barbaric aftermath of war; below—the prisoners of war eating together in better circumstances. A scathing and haunting work, in the vein of German artist John Heartfield, shows Hitler leading an army of skeletons, titled “This is the Fate of the German Soldiers of the Eastern Front” (1942).

Zhitomirsky indicated his purposes and thinking when he remarked, “In my photomontages I spoke to the single soldier who at that moment held the magazine in his hands. I related to him and put myself in his place. I was his interested interlocutor.”

After World War II, Zhitomirsky turned his artistic mirror chiefly toward the predatory aims of American imperialism in the Cold War. Some of his most striking and brilliant works can be seen in this period.

“A Wolfish Appetite” (1947) satirizes a Wall Street about to consume the world. It is a memorable composite image of a businessman with the head of a dollar, fork and knife ready, about to devour the globe, with the Manhattan skyline in the background. Zhitomirsky takes aim at the Marshall Plan, which sought to stabilize the European and world economy through American financial and political domination.

President Harry Truman—the butcher of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—is roundly satirized as a puppet of Wall Street and its warmongering aims. “Harry Truman: The Hysterical War Drummer” (1948) conveys the danger of fascism in the shadows. The image is evocative, distinct and original.

“The Right to Hang and the Right to Be Hanged” (1948) depicts the Statue of Liberty with a lynched African-American man hanging from her wrist, as she holds up the torch of democracy and freedom.

“The American Chief Justice” (1949) shows a bloated judge, his body a sack of gold, vastly out of scale to the street he is walking on, wearing a pendant that reads “Wall Street.” His head is the American silver dollar and he holds on his right hand a bundle of papers that reads, “lies,” “slander” and “forgeries.” The photomontage was a reference to the Smith Act trial against the US Communist Party leadership.

These ruthless and ironic critiques of the reality of life under American capitalism showcased its brutality, racism and corruption. Many of the images he produced in this period also offer a withering critique of colonialism and imperialism more generally.

The sincerity and convictions of artists like Zhitomirsky and Heartfield should not be questioned. However, the use to which their work was put by the international Stalinist movement was thoroughly cynical. To maintain credibility before the Soviet population and the millions of supporters of the various Communist Parties worldwide, who mistakenly believed that the Kremlin regime represented the continuity of the Russian Revolution, the Stalinists on occasion stridently denounced imperialism and its crimes. At the same time, the Stalinist

parties did everything in their power to suppress social revolution and Moscow feverishly sought ties and accommodation with global capitalism under the banners of “peaceful co-existence” and “détente.”

After the war, outbursts of anti-Semitism were revived and encouraged by the Stalinist bureaucracy. By 1949, many Jews were purged from the professions in the USSR and many were imprisoned. People close to Zhitomirsky were arrested and even executed for their Jewish ethnicity and cosmopolitan outlooks.

Photomontage as an art form increasingly came under fire in 1951-1952 as a formalist deviation from “socialist realism,” the official artistic trend in the Soviet Union. (As Leon Trotsky noted sardonically, the “‘realism’ consists in the imitation of provincial daguerreotypes of the third quarter of the last century; the ‘socialist’ character apparently consists in representing ... events which never took place.”) Zhitomirsky was effectively blacklisted for a decade. It was not until the late 1950s—after the death of Stalin and during the “thaw” period under Nikita Khrushchev—that Zhitomirsky was able to more freely take up photomontage work again.

By 1961, Zhitomirsky was once again making strong photomontages. “Sits and Begg” (1962) is a sharp critique of the role of the American press as the lapdog of Wall Street and finance capital. We see a silhouette of a dog, covered head to paw with the names of the major capitalist press (*New York Times*, *Time*, *Fortune*, *Newsweek*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Herald Tribune*, etc.), who begs for a silver dollar. It is a remarkably contemporary image.

It is worth quoting from Zhitomirsky’s own essay, “The Art of Political Photomontage” (1983). He asks, “What gives the power of dynamite to the photo-poster pamphlet? Foremost, its motto is humanism. And, of course, the ability to see in subjects something new that others do not see but that they by all means should see.” The best of his work deserves an audience today.



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