



Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin

By Victoria E. Bonnell

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Masters at visual propaganda, the Bolsheviks produced thousands of vivid and compelling posters after they seized power in October 1917. Intended for a semi-literate population that was accustomed to the rich visual legacy of the Russian autocracy and the Orthodox Church, political posters came to occupy a central place in the regime's effort to imprint itself on the hearts and minds of the people and to remold them into the new Soviet women and men.

In this first sociological study of Soviet political posters, Victoria Bonnell analyzes the shifts that took place in the images, messages, styles, and functions of political art from 1917 to 1953. Everyone who lived in Russia after the October revolution had some familiarity with stock images of the male worker, the great communist leaders, the collective farm woman, the capitalist, and others. These were the new icons' standardized images that depicted Bolshevik heroes and their adversaries in accordance with a fixed pattern. Like other "invented traditions" of the modern age, iconographic images in propaganda art were relentlessly repeated, bringing together Bolshevik ideology and traditional mythologies of pre-Revolutionary Russia.

Symbols and emblems featured in Soviet posters of the Civil War and the 1920s gave visual meaning to the Bolshevik worldview dominated by the concept of class. Beginning in the 1930s, visual propaganda became more prescriptive, providing models for the appearance, demeanor, and conduct of the new social types, both positive and negative. Political art also conveyed important messages about the sacred center of the regime which evolved during the 1930s from the celebration of the heroic proletariat to the deification of Stalin.

Treating propaganda images as part of a particular visual language, Bonnell shows how people "read" them—relying on their habits of seeing and

interpreting folk, religious, commercial, and political art (both before and after 1917) as well as the fine art traditions of Russia and the West. Drawing on monumental sculpture and holiday displays as well as posters, the study traces the way Soviet propaganda art shaped the mentality of the Russian people (the legacy is present even today) and was itself shaped by popular attitudes and assumptions.

Iconography of Power includes posters dating from the final decades of the old regime to the death of Stalin, located by the author in Russian, American, and English libraries and archives. One hundred exceptionally striking posters are reproduced in the book, many of them never before published. Bonnell places these posters in a historical context and provides a provocative account of the evolution of the visual discourse on power in Soviet Russia.

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Editorial Review

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The Bolsheviks, Victoria Bonnell writes, were the world's first masters of visual propaganda, a form necessary to spread revolution in a largely illiterate nation. Political posters took the place of religious icons as a means of unifying the people, and artistic experimentation was encouraged—at least until Stalin came to power. After his ascension, artists were ordered to "typicalize" their work, to ignore present realities and instead imagine a glorious socialist future. This idealized artistic representation led to depictions of female collective farmers who might have been fashion models and to other such distortions. Bonner's text is packed with visual examples, and the whole book is a fascinating study in political imagery.

Review

"This book reveals a great deal about Soviet culture and should become essential reading for all those interested in the history of Russian politics, society, culture, and art."--Christina Lodder, "Slavic Review

From the Inside Flap

"An invaluable book that makes available a huge fund of visual material from Soviet Russia and provides a rich contextualization of these images. Much larger in scope than a study of political posters, *Iconography of Power* traces the remarkable evolution of Soviet culture."—Katerina Clark, author of *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution*

"In this wonderful book, Victoria Bonnell draws us into the dramatic world of Soviet political culture in the times of Lenin and Stalin. Using the powerful images encoded in a dazzling array of political posters, she enables us to experience Soviet values and sensibilities. *Iconography of Power* is vibrant, lucid, and elegant.—Nina Tumarkin, author of *Lenin Lives!*

"A worthy contribution both to the study of Russia's visual arts in the Soviet era and to sociology and political thought in the Soviet Union down to the 1950s."—S. Frederick Starr, author of *Red and Hot*

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