

***The 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the October Revolution and Soviet Poster Images as a Source of  
Historical Memory***

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In 1977, Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev noted, “October’s Victory is the major event of the twentieth century, which profoundly affected the development of the whole human race.” His words were spoken during the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Forty years later, on October 25, 2017, the Russian Federation will commemorate this same anniversary, albeit without a revolutionary, Soviet government leading the nation. All of the posters displayed at this exhibition illustrate the U.S.S.R.’s history and many of them are penetrated by the idea of a utopian vision of a socialist society.

The posters seen in this exhibition are a small selection of propaganda used by the Bolshevik Party from the period of the Russian Revolution of 1917 until the demise of the U.S.S.R. in 1991. While posters alone can’t fully convey the magnitude of Soviet Russia’s political and social issues, they do provide an overview of crucial moments in the Soviet history. The poster themes covered in this exhibit are the October Revolution, the Russian Civil War, the “cult of personality” of Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin, World War II, the Cold War, and the era of Perestroika.

In 1917, an enigmatic revolutionary named Vladimir Lenin led the Bolshevik Party. He became the standard bearer of the October Revolution of 1917 at the moment when the Bolsheviks had toppled the bourgeoisie and the centuries-old Romanov Dynasty in an effort to establish socialism and communism in the Russian Empire. Never before in modern times had such a powerful empire been taken down by a comparatively small group of political revolutionaries. The victory of the October Revolution in Russia laid the foundation for a new era that changed the course of global politics for the next seventy-four years. Perhaps, the most poignant of the numerous goals of the Bolshevik-led Revolution was their support of the working class in Russia. The Revolution established a government, coined the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” that ultimately became the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) in 1922. In theory, by destroying the last vestiges of Imperial Russia, the dictatorship of the proletariat would give the Soviet people in the U.S.S.R. full political supremacy and social freedom.

After reaching power, it can be argued that the Bolsheviks replaced the old monarchy with a hyper-political, militaristic government that selectively restricted various freedoms of expression within the population. On the other hand, the Revolution did empower the proletariat to a substantial degree in comparison to what the working class of Russia was offered under the Imperial rule. The Revolution also corrected several major deficiencies in Russian society such as decreasing illiteracy across the nation and ensuring that the working class was provided with cultural and political opportunities previously denied to them. The Revolution ended the Russia's military involvement in World War I and it prevented the loss of national independence and state sovereignty by cutting off portions of foreign capital inflow and outside (non-Soviet) investments.

On a global scale, the October Revolution bolstered the proletariat in other countries. This led to revolutionary movements outside the U.S.S.R. Communist Parties all over the world considered themselves working examples of Vladimir Lenin's revolution. In 1919, Communist expansionism led to the establishment of the Communist International, also known as the Comintern. The Comintern propagated a worldwide communist revolution and triggered separatist sentiments among colonized nations, leading to the initial breakup of an old colonial, imperialistic system that had long-dominated world politics.

Immediately following the October Revolution of 1917, the events in Russia escalated into a civil war. The Russian Civil War was fought between the Bolsheviks (Reds) and the Mensheviks (Whites), the opponents of the Soviet government. The posters, selected for this exhibition, reveal the importance of victory for the Bolsheviks in that war. These posters represent soldiers of the Red Army calling "red" civilians to be active in their military preparedness, along with several other topics of the period.

The "Cult of personality," covered in the exhibition, is another peculiarity of 20<sup>th</sup> century Soviet politics used to ensure the public's loyalty to the Bolsheviks and their "leader." While the term "cult of personality" often describes the Stalinist period, it is also applicable to the era of Vladimir Lenin. The image and words of Lenin were used as significant propaganda tools to motivate, promote, and develop socialist ideology. After Lenin's death in 1924, Joseph Stalin's image supplanted Lenin's image as the supreme and omniscient leader of the Soviet people. Propaganda after Lenin's death centered on Stalin (with Lenin in tandem) as a way to influence

public perception of “communism in one nation” under the guidance of “great Stalin,” the nation’s benevolent authoritarian.

Messages and slogans on the posters produced by the Soviets in World War II (The Great Patriotic War) are similar in message to those of the Russian Civil War. The whole nation was called on to fight against the enemy. While the Red Army was the primary combatant, cadres of Soviet citizens brought up the rear. Contrary to the Russian Civil War, however, the posters of World War II do not convey overwhelming themes of capitalism and communism. They call on Soviet citizens to engage in an all-out struggle against the Germans, the Japanese, and their axis cohorts to liberate the U.S.S.R. and free world.

The exhibition also touches upon the crucial role of civilians working as support during the Russian Civil War and in World War II. The contribution of these groups was significant in zones where the Red Army was powerless. Women and children, either waiting for or even losing their nearest and dearest on the front line, were not giving up on the bright future promised to them, as illustrated in some posters. Non-combatants toiled for years on the home front to turn the tide, and they were awarded the highest honors for their deeds, such as “Hero of the Soviet Union” and the “Partisan of the Great Patriotic War.” Soviet posters specific to World War II still maintain a key socialistic idea – “to do good for the sake of the whole community.” This message helped mobilize the population and win battles, with generous help from the Allied Forces, culminating in a victory for the U.S.S.R. on May 9, 1945.

Following World War II, nuclear arms escalation (chiefly in the U.S. and in Western Europe) was heightened to a perilous state when the U.S.S.R. developed its own nuclear weapons program. Decades of political and economic confrontation, known as the Cold War, followed. During this period, Soviet-style governments took hold in Eastern Europe, in various countries in Africa, and in the island nation of Cuba, one hundred and three miles from the U.S. shores. National security concerns for the West and for the U.S.S.R lasted roughly forty-five years before a lasting thaw was introduced.

As the Cold War posters in this exhibit represent, capitalism was displayed as the root of all evil, while the socialistic approach of the Soviets was depicted as superior. By representing all capitalist societies as hostile to the U.S.S.R., the Soviet Government isolated itself from cultural exchanges and it occasionally shunned outside economic opportunity in the hope of

accomplishing the goal of a perfect communist society within its own borders. That degree of isolation, coupled with an increase in military spending during the Cold War, caused an economic backwardness of the U.S.S.R.

The posters in this exhibition created during the mid-1980s to the early 1990s were published at the very apogee of the Soviet regime's economic and cultural crisis. Freedom of speech, "introduced" into Soviet society via Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost and Perestroika, allowed oppositionist voices to be heard. By the late 1980s, the political power of the government was undermined as censorship regulations that once suppressed individual expression in Soviet popular culture and politics were quickly lifted. This led to an outpouring of public thought and opinion that continued, nearly unabated, throughout the 1980s and at a pace that the government could not re-suppress.

The "openness" (Glasnost) was in contrast with the extreme reluctance of the Soviet leadership to change their system at risk of losing their own seats of power. This entrenched thinking of the political establishment accelerated public backlash in the streets and, coupled with an economic crisis, the U.S.S.R. collapsed in December 1991. Immediately after the collapse, a new country – the Russian Federation – was formed. However, it faced a multitude of political and economic calamities that brought complex challenges to the development of a new country in the 1990s. These political, economic, and even social challenges, while, perhaps, not as extreme as in the 1980s and 1990s, still impact Russian society today.