Introductory Essay

Illuminating Socialist Literacy in Soviet Propaganda Posters

by

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Masterminded by the Russian intellectuals under the leadership of Vladimir I. Lenin and carried out by urban workers and soldiers, the Bolshevik Revolution overturned the Tsarist regime in 1917. This radical political event occurred in a largely rural and illiterate country. The illiteracy rate stood at 57% of the population in 1926 and likely higher around the earlier post-Revolutionary days.[1] Although the literacy rate reached 81% in the urban areas the same year, illiteracy was rampant amidst the peasants and the Central Asian republics at much greater figures.[2] In order to solve this problem, the government established the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (*Narkompros*), helmed by the leading Bolshevik intellectual Anataolii Lunacharskii. Nadezhda Krupskaia, Lenin's wife and former schoolteacher, also actively participated in the formation of *Narkompros'* mission. Against the backdrop of catastrophic events, namely World War I (1914-1919), Civil War (1918-1922), and famine, *Narkompros* undertook diverse campaigns for the "elimination of illiteracy" through establishing local schools, training teachers, and spreading pro-educational propaganda. After Josef Stalin assumed the leadership of the country in 1926, the "civilizing" missions of the state intensified. Stalin's brutal totalitarian rule that ended in 1953 linked the increase in the country's cultural level to the speed of its industrialization, thereby transforming education into a political and economic priority.

The selection of posters from the collection of William Cellini, Jr. demonstrates the iconographic strategies, including tactical depictions of books that Soviet artists deployed in order to encourage the spread of literacy and education. The posters on view also illustrate the changes in the State's campaign objectives, comprising the shift from "adult" education to the education of children. Above all, the exhibition illuminates the significance of posters as a key vehicle of communication with the illiterate portion of the populace during the campaigns. The new secular ideology of socialism penetrated remote parts of the country through speeches, printed material, and posters.[3] Since around 1917 only two out of five adults in the young Soviet state could be addressed by the printed word, it was posters that appeared the most effective means of mass mobilization, especially in the dissemination of pro-literacy ideas.[4] Combining politically charged slogans and visuals, the poster medium succeeded on two levels: 1) posters contained elements of writing, thus spurred the public to read; 2) the easily comprehensible compositions reached effectively the illiterate onlooker.

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[1] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 70. The overall population in this census was considered between ages 9 and 49.
[2] Fitzpatrick, 70.
[3] Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 160.
[4] Kenez, 73.

By the beginning of the 1930s, under Stalin's repressive regime, the country made astounding strides in raising the level of education; for example in 1939, 81% of the Soviet population was literate.[5] The message of a complete social transformation constituted an important part of Stalinist propaganda as evident in P.I. Luganskii's poster, *All children to school!* (1933) and I. Buev's *Komsomol member, help children study and play!* (1937). In the aftermath of World War II and the ensuing Cold War, the universal literacy of the Soviet society epitomized a central part of the argument against capitalism's purported neglect of education. In K. Ivanov's *In the USSR… In the USA* (1953), the illiteracy of 10 million Americans coupled with the extremely high expenditures of the US military is contrasted with the generous spending on school construction in the Soviet Union. Here, the artist conceptualizes literacy as a token of Soviet humanism accusatorily opposed to American aggression.

In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, Lenin pragmatically asserted: "The illiterate person stands outside of politics. First it is necessary to teach him the alphabet. Without it there are only rumors, fairy tales, prejudices, but not politics."[6] He understood that a successful political indoctrination and integration of the peasantry and the minority groups depended on the increase in their level of literacy, namely, their ability to read. This original link between ideology and reading is articulated in S. Ivanov's poster *A book is nothing else but a man addressing the public* (1920). The artist construes the theme of cultural enlightenment by alluding to a familiar religious symbolism: the book bearing the slogan descends from the sky, held down by two disembodied, proletarian hands. The volume acts as a secular displacement of the divine light associated with Christian devotional practices and iconography.[7] Contiguous to the book and in front of a crowd of workers, an agitated orator delivers a speech with his hand pointing toward the open pages. The book and the orator share the same physical locale – the stage – and also occupy the same semantic space, both emerging as projecting voices of ideology. The anthropomorphized book, however, begins to speak eloquently only when it is read. Implicitly, the poster insists that the onlooker's ability to read is a precondition for the understanding of political messages. The slogans that that the crowd carries further locates the social utility of reading solely in future political and economic triumphs: "One must be able to read in order to defeat the enemies of the working class;" "Long live the revolutionary union of science and labor;" and "A book is the light tower of communism."

Written in the Ukrainian language, Luganskii's poster *All Children to School!* (1933) manifests a change in the age of the addressee (note the type of older peasant portrayed in the earlier S. Ia.'s *The Sons of the Bourgeoisie*…(1919)). Luganskii portrays a modern Soviet mother. She wears a red kerchief, a short bob, and a straight skirt as she leads her son to school. Corralled by a male teacher, a throng of elated children in the background rushes towards a Constructivist-style building that bears the word "school." While this visualization celebrates the importance of education, it also serves as an idealized assertion of concrete changes. Within the pristine space of modernist architecture, Soviet children and young adults metaphorically transfigure from targets of literacy campaigns into their exalted results.

Similarly, in *Komsomol member, help children study and play!* (1937), Buev depicts a utopian, post-Enlightenment space of Socialist childhood and adolescence. Created at the height

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[5] Fitzpatrick, 70.
[6] Kenez, 72.
[7] The artist likely reinterprets the Old Testament story of Moses bringing down the tablets with the Ten Commandments inscribed by the hand of God. This poster is also briefly noted in Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 104-105.

of the Stalinist terror, this harmonious world appears as a positive outcome of the compulsory and free education. Leisure, literacy, play, and health, as well as the necessary association with the Communist Party, are entwined into a single message of progress. A Komsomol lad acts as teacher and moral ideological guide to youngsters, offering an exemplary synthesis of education and ideology. Like Luganskii's poster, Buev's does not implore the Soviet citizen to act against certain negative cultural aspects, thereby affirming their non-existence. Conversely, the poster calls for a perpetuation of the "perfected" status quo.

In their ability to signify on many levels, images of books proved critical in the visual discourse of literacy campaigns and other pro-education propaganda. Books embody the symbolic instruments of enlightenment but also establish an illusion of the already-achieved acculturation. Depictions of multitudes of books suggest ample readership and an interest in intellectual advancement in contrast to mere basic material needs. For instance, a Leningrad publishing house advertisement from 1925 presents a "shower" of books hailing down upon the Soviet land. Thrust to the forefront, the massive cascade of multiple volumes instills a sense of profusion of books and printed matter.[8]

Moreover, the authors and the titles that decorate these books "unobtrusively" designate and prescribe the horizon of *allowed* knowledge. The "shower" of books illustrates the narrow framework of approved reading. Thematically uniform and highly didactic, the books and text books boast titles like *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*, *The War and Crisis of Communism*, *War and Communism,* and *The Basics of Communism*, among others, while drowning out such books as *Alphabet*, *Books for Children,* and *Art*. In one poster *The Victorious Growth of Socialism* (1934), a smiling Central Asian woman holds up next to her head prominent volumes by Lenin and Stalin. In another poster, *We will fulfill the three precepts of Il'ich…* (1925), six unmarked books casually recline in the middle ground, while Lenin's visage above testifies to their authorship and integral ideological pertinence. The poster restates the famous adage-cliché, "to study, study, and study!," and commands to "take up a book!" With factory stacks and construction cranes in the background, this visualization affirms the utility of books in economic terms and agitates on behalf of those books that fall within the ideologically correct curriculum as defined by the great teacher, Lenin. Learning for the sake of developing a critical judgment evades the popular purview, wresting the idea of reading from its essential edifying capacities.

Collectively, the presented literacy posters elucidate a sinister condition of the Soviet cultural ethos: the systematic intensification of censorship linked to the official approaches in education. A proliferation of books and knowledge, as well as the promotion of pedagogy and schooling, occurred not in the name of rearing well-rounded intellectual beings, endowed with nuanced analytical skills. Instead, the Soviets, as it appears, equated the process of "civilizing" with that of political indoctrination, thereby focusing on the production of ideologically abiding workforce. It is not surprising then that images of writing scarcely appear in the literacy posters; they exist solely as part of institutionalized instructions rather than a spontaneous exercise, as in the anonymous poster, *The Pioneer sets an example for all children!* (c.1930s). The encouragement of reading acquires primacy throughout the early Soviet and Stalinist periods and books transform into pre-packaged, uncontestable knowledge. Reading more conspicuously relies on the absorption of ready-made information rather than its generation, closely associated with writing. Not surprisingly, in Stalinist posters, it is the leader who frequently monopolizes the role of a writer and an active producer of facts, while the public assumes the subservient position of a passive recipient.

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[8] A stack of several posters with their edges curling up in the upper right side of the "shower" is peculiar.