

‘So let’s drink to the hope that our desires always coincide
with our opportunities’

The Integration of Folk Culture and Bolshevik Ideals in Soviet
Visual Propaganda

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Table of Contents	
Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	4
Part I- What is to be Done?	6
i) The Propaganda State	8
ii) The Folk Culture Phenomenon	11
iii) Folk Culture and the State	14
iv) Dvoeverie – Ancient and Modern	17
Part II - The Interplay	20
i) Rosta Windows	21
ii) The Influence of the Icon	24
iii) Thematic Manipulations	30
iv) Lacquer Boxes – The New Soviet Icon	34
v) Portable Folk Culture – Folklore and Soviet Traveling Folk Groups	38
vi) The Glorification of the Leaders	41
Part III – The Transformation	49
i) The Transition in Academia	50
ii) A Critique of Hilton	52
iii) A Critique of Miller	54
iv) ‘Bolshevik’ Folk Culture	57
Conclusion	59
Bibliography	62

I am indebted to two brilliant women for instilling in me a love of all things Russian.

To Professor Gerstein, who uses her wisdom to amaze and inspire.

To Professor Bain, who taught me the beauty of Damp Mother Earth.

And to my parents, my original story tellers.

Just after the fall of the Tsar in the October Revolution of 1917, a joke began circulating around Moscow. In it, an old woman visits the Moscow Zoo. Upon seeing camels for the first time, she exclaims, “look what the Bolsheviks have done to the horses!”¹ Even in the earliest years of Soviet rule, the people understood the authoritative, all-encompassing control of the state. The power of the Soviet Union was a reality the masses were forced to face in their every-day life. Few would argue that the Bolshevik government that resulted from the October Revolution does not provide an excellent example of a totalitarian government; but the full breadth of their power conversely cannot be nearly as simple as this old woman would have us believe.

Perhaps the Soviet government did not have the power and ability to transform horses into camels; what is important is that the people *thought* they could. The image of the state as a stronghold of absolute power in the Soviet Union was ingrained in the minds of people worldwide. Under Lenin, and even more so Stalin, the Bolshevik state underwent one of the most daring transformations in the history of government. To convert the loosely connected mass of Russian citizens into the original members of worldwide socialism was bold, to say the least. To the Bolshevik government, however, it was a task they believed they alone could accomplish. Though the path to socialism included much government control, it also included small instances of self-asserted power from the masses.

In the Soviet Union, the road to socialism was paved by the creators of visual propaganda. Propaganda is *the* way to both create and reshape mass society. One of the mediums artists and government officials incorporated into their work was Russian folk

¹ Ben Lewis. “Hammer and Tickle.” *Prospect* 122, May 2006. (An article about Soviet anecdotes)

culture. From posters to traveling singing groups to lacquer boxes, the presence and influence of Russian folk culture in this socialist state was apparent. It appealed to the masses in a way that legitimized and explained Soviet ideals, while the government itself was legitimized through this connection to Russia's past and its people. In the movie *Prisoner of the Caucasus*,² a young Soviet folklorist goes to the Caucasus to collect local folklore. What he finds is a satirical integration of folk culture and modern Soviet ideals. The first toast he learns from the Caucasian hotel manager ends with the line, "so let's drink to the hope that our desires always coincide with our opportunities."² In the Soviet Union, the overwhelming desire of the government was socialism. The means to this goal were found in the opportunistic use of Russian folk culture.

This case represents a rare instance where history can look at power in the Soviet Union equally from both a top-down and a bottom-up perspective. Most importantly, it represents a unique compromise in the Soviet system. Bolshevik ideology as represented in visual propaganda was a clear assertion of power. But by including folk culture as a framework through which these ideals were understood, the possession of power became much less clear. By joining folk culture and Soviet ideology in the medium of visual propaganda, how did the two work together? How did these two distinct fields retain aspects of their unique identity, and where did they concede? Folk culture as a product of the Soviet Union was neither a horse nor a camel. What folk culture became as a result of this compromise requires a much closer look.

² *Prisoner of the Caucasus, or Shurik's New Adventures*. Dir. Leonid Gaidai. With Aleksandr Demyanenko and Natalya Varley. Gosudarstvenii Komitet po Kinematografii, 1967.

Part I - What is to be Done?

The Revolution of 1917 brought to power an entirely new type of government. The people that replaced the Romanov dynasty wanted to send the people of Russia in an entirely new direction. Armed with substantial new ideals, goals, and perspectives, the Bolshevik party aspired to completely transform Russia into a system of government the world had not yet tangibly seen. For the first time in history, a burgeoning government undertook the task of creating a new humanity suitable for living in the new society of communism.³

This was certainly no easy task. Until midway through the 19th century, Russia was essentially living in the Middle Ages. Serfs had only recently been emancipated, and at the time of the Revolution urban and rural poverty weighed heavily upon the state. In industry, Russia lagged grossly behind Western Europe. Its transportation system, agricultural technology, and civic involvement rendered Russia profoundly backward in almost every respect. Communism required a much more progressive standing; a standing that Russia could certainly not achieve in the lifespan of the people who brought about the Revolution. How could communism ever be realized within this framework?

The solution to this problem was found in the ideology of Vladimir Lenin. Leninism differed from Marxism in how it envisioned the path to communism. Marx spent much of *The Communist Manifesto* discussing the different stages society must

³ Peter Kenez. *The Birth of the Propaganda State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 4.

undergo to eventually generate communism. Going back all the way to medieval feudalism, Marx traced the progress of the proletariat through a windy road of successes and hardships. He believed these steps to be absolutely essential because they serve the foundation of communism. Only by living through the oppression and enslavement of capitalism can the proletariat foster a love of community values that is fostered by communism. Class-consciousness comes from experience and the 'true knowledge' that enables communism.⁴

Lenin, however, understood class-consciousness to have a much more flexible foundation. His revision of Marxism stated that Marx's stages did not need to be experienced but instead could be taught. The proletariat must be informed by the Party and forcibly led into communism. This is an essential point of departure from Marx for a few reasons. First, it establishes a precedent for how the Party interacts with the masses. By establishing that communism could be taught, the implication is that there existed a select group of people who could do the teaching. Within the framework of communism, this elite group is highly patronizing. To believe in the establishment of a system where all people are equal while simultaneously understanding the superiority in their own knowledge is condescending. Though superficially equal, these teachers establish themselves as communist elite. From the very inception of communism in the Soviet Union, contradictions existed that foretold how the masses were to be treated.⁵ This distinction made by Leninism was to have far-reaching consequences in the unique realization of communism in the Soviet Union.

⁴ Karl Marx. The Communist Manifesto. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988. (Originally published in Germany in 1848)

⁵ Kenez. The Birth of the Propaganda State. 7.

The Propaganda State

The other obvious consequence to this mutation of ideology is the birth of what Kenez calls the 'Propaganda State.' As soon as the Bolsheviks came to power, they were faced with the task of making ordinary Soviet citizens suitable for life in a communist state. The emphasis on education was obvious, but the question remained as to how it would come about on such a large scale. The teachers of Leninism needed proper tools. Propaganda was one of the major factors that contributed to the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War and was, therefore, already highly acclaimed by the government in power.⁶ It is also important to keep in mind that mass society and propaganda cannot exist without the other.⁷ The use of propaganda is the essential tool in the construction of mass identity, which in turn fuels the need for more propaganda. This relationship to mass society and its success in the Civil War were the two initial factors that led to the Soviet Union's early dependence on propaganda.

The propaganda of the Soviet Union was complete and thorough, permeating almost every aspect of life. Visual propaganda was the most influential in the socialist education of the masses for many reasons. The most pressing need for the incorporation of a visual dimension to propaganda was the overwhelming illiteracy rate. In the first census of the Russian Empire carried out in 1897, the literacy rate registered at 28.4 percent of the total population between the ages of nine and forty-nine. Large sections of the population, such as the people of Central Asia, were almost wholly illiterate. By 1920, the rate had risen to about forty-four per cent, but major segments still remained

⁶ Kenez. The Birth of the Propaganda State. 1.

⁷ Ibid. 2.

untouched by state literacy efforts.⁸ One segment that remained largely untouched was the rural peasants, who often had no need of the ability to read and therefore, were largely illiterate. The eighty-five percent of Soviet citizens that lived outside the cities were the hardest to reach, but also the most important recipients of Soviet doctrine.⁹ The huge need for successful agriculture made the rural masses some of the most essential in the Soviet Union. Their concept of the 'working class' was by far the murkiest because of their distance from city life. The socialist education of this segment of the population was, therefore, absolutely vital to the success of communism.

Visual propaganda solved the problem of misunderstanding due to illiteracy because it did not require the ability to read. Though most posters included some text, the message of the poster was also visually obvious. Posters were especially successful because the message could be quickly understood and did not require a rational argument.¹⁰ Thus, by putting propaganda in a visual form that did not require literacy and was easily understandable, the Soviet government could reach the largest range of people.

Logistically, the technology of the Russian printing press was another major obstacle to widespread distribution. Seriously damaged by years of international and domestic warfare, the printing industry lacked the ability to circulate documents such as books and newspapers. The loss of the Baltic provinces, the supplier of half of Russia's paper stock, along with the damage of their own supply made paper a rare commodity.¹¹ Lack of experienced workers was another shortcoming of the industry; by 1921, only

⁸ Stephen White. The Bolshevik Poster. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988. 18.

⁹ Victoria Bonnell, Iconography of Power. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1997. 22.

¹⁰ Kenez, The Birth of the Propaganda State. 111.

¹¹ White. The Bolshevik Poster. 19.

about half of the printing presses that had been around before the war were still able to produce.¹² To communicate the sweeping reforms of the Soviet Union through books and newspapers was completely irrational with such a limited printing capacity. Visual propaganda, mainly through means of poster art, required much less paper and manpower. This logistical barrier is one reason visual propaganda grew so quickly at the beginning of the Soviet era.

The basic concept of deriving moral lessons from visual sources was already well established in Russia at the time of the October Revolution.¹³ Icons and holy symbols were a basic household staple among Orthodox families. Additionally, the interiors of churches were covered with murals and frescos depicting stories from the Bible to an audience of illiterate believers. Thus, there already existed in Russia a highly visual tradition fueled by the Russian Orthodox Church. Established visual references helped the Soviet government's visual propaganda campaign to succeed quickly.

Visual propaganda was *the* way the Soviet government communicated with the majority of its citizens. Lenin's adaptation of Marxism stressed education instead of experience, facilitating the rise of propaganda by the Soviet state. Pre-existing circumstances made visual propaganda the most effective means of large-scale communication. After Leninism facilitated the creation of the Soviet propaganda state, other issues remained unsolved. How could the ideals and goals represented on posters and other visual forms be accepted and understood by such a vast nation of people? What would give content to such a radically different form?

¹² White, The Bolshevik Poster. 19.

¹³ Bonnell, Iconography of Power. 4.

The Folk Culture Phenomenon

If visual propaganda was the medium, then folk culture was the paint that breathed life into the form. The leaders of the Soviet Union faced a very unique problem at the dawning of their reign. The establishment of communism in the former Russian Federation was the first instance of such a total upheaval anywhere in the world. Centuries of autocratic Romanov rule were overthrown in favor of a system that the world had not yet tangibly seen. Bolshevik leaders were adamantly convinced of the moral and social superiority of their new system. The soldiers who worked to overthrow Nicholas and his government were confident in the legitimacy of their struggle. The majority of the population, however, had no idea what it meant to be a communist state. If visual propaganda played an important role in getting the message to the people, what helped the people understand the message? What legitimized the rule of the Soviet in the eyes of the people and of the leaders themselves? The adoption of Russian folk culture by the leaders of the Soviet Union gave substance to their visual propaganda campaign.

But what exactly is ‘folk culture?’ In even the most civilized of people, there survives something of their ‘prehistoric age.’ Though it is usually degraded to the ranks of superstition and folklore, these beliefs represent the core characteristics of a people.¹⁴ Even in the face of modernity, these beliefs persist in subtler, more acceptable forms. Part of the beauty of studying mass history through folk culture is that this culture can have so many different meanings depending on the audience. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will include in my definition of ‘Folk Culture’ the popular traditions of the

¹⁴ G.P. Fedotov. The Russian Religious Mind. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960.

Russian Orthodox Church as well as Russian folklore. I find both of these topics to be at the very core of 'Russianness.' I can make no claims on the folk culture of non-Russian people living within the Soviet Union and its satellite states. But it is the folk culture of the Russian people that affects state policy and therefore, is the folk culture that most strongly shows a connection between the people and the state.

Vladimir Propp was the foremost figure in the world of Russian folklore. Much of his work was done during the early days of the Soviet Union, so he serves as both a historical figure who was an active participant in Soviet intellectual culture and an academic giant whose work is still revered today. He defined folklore as, "an ideological discipline, whose methods and aim are determined by and reflect the outlook of the age."¹⁵ This definition reveals a popular, but also scientific, study of a native country and its people.¹⁶ Folklore represents the emotions, dreams, and realities of the group Propp called the 'oppressed people' and in this respect is one of the few ways to gain the perspective of the masses. For purposes of this analysis and Soviet Union studies, folklore is absolutely essential.

In such a diverse land, what kind of folk culture did the Soviet system manipulate for its own use? The Soviet Union clearly encompassed more than just people who knew Russian folklore. There existed no single 'folk culture' to unite all the different peoples and beliefs in the expansive USSR. Initially, Soviet officials embraced this fact because it was an indication of the diverse nature of socialism. Their dream of building a communist international was very much alive after the Revolution. Government officials

¹⁵ Vladimir Propp. Theory and History of Folklore. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid. 4.

were quickly beginning to realize how difficult this task would prove. In 1945, Stalin gave a speech that, for the first time, publicly stressed a uniquely Russian national identity in building communism. Though the speech was given in 1945, it had been an active goal of the state since the early 1930s.¹⁷ The emphasis on the international community was quickly lost in favor of a specifically Russian outlook. Because of this shift, it is possible to focus solely on Russian folk culture because starting in 1930, that was the only culture promoted by the state.

The popular traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church are also incorporated as part of folk culture because the Church occupied a very unique place in Russian culture. The Orthodox faith was established in 988 when Russia was still a very unorganized, decentralized collection of provinces. Its establishment was the first major unifying force both politically and culturally. The Orthodox Church, therefore, created the original distinctive Russian culture. It provided a basis for artistic expression and a framework for a belief that exists even today.¹⁸ The Church has been an intimate and essential part of Russianness; to ignore it as separate from folk culture is to take away the foundation of a people.

Religion was an all-permeating force within Russian society.¹⁹ Quintessentially Orthodox traditions such as the icon were very much a part of the bigger picture of Russian culture and belief. In fact, the icon corner has its roots in early pagan ritual. Before the Christianization of Russia, pagan ancestor worship involved this very crude but original concept. In Christianity it mutated into the icon corner and is, therefore, an

¹⁷ Stephen M Norris. A War of Images: Russian Popular Prints, Wartime Culture and National Identity 1812-1945. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006. 3.

¹⁸ James H Billington. The Icon and the Axe. New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc, 1966. X.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* X.

excellent example of *dvoeverie*, a term that will be described in great detail shortly. But the history of the pagan heritage of icon corners strengthens the argument for including Orthodox religious traditions in the category of folk culture.

Folk Culture and the State

The earliest years of the Soviet Union proved to be a very turbulent time for the field of folklore. In the first decade after the October Revolution, folklore research flourished. With government forces occupied with more urgent tasks, folklorists were free to pursue whatever area of study they wished. Different schools of folkloric thought were able to work side by side, and as a result some of the most significant folklore studies ever made were completed during this decade in the Soviet Union.²⁰ In literary circles, however, folklore's fate was quite different. In the early 1920's, a notion was circulating among this circle that folklore represented the ideology of the *kulaks*, the wealthy peasant landowners. Arguing that it was a bourgeois establishment, many leaders in the movement for proletarian art, the Proletcul't, called for folklore's annihilation.²¹ Although the private study of folklore flourished, this association with kulak ideology tarnished its public image.

It was the Soviet figurehead Maxim Gorky who first announced folk culture's new image in the Soviet intellectuals. During the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Gorky made a speech in which he discussed the relationship between folklore and

²⁰ Felix J Oinas. "The Political Uses and Themes of Folklore in the Soviet Union." *Folklore, Nationalism, and Politics*. Ed. Felix J Oinas. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Folklore Institute, 1972. 77

²¹ *Ibid.* 77.

labor.²² He emphasized the close connection between folklore and the conditions of concrete life and the working class. Gorky, as a figurehead of the state, understood more than most prominent figures the necessity of working within the reality of the Russian masses. Additionally, he emphasized the overwhelming optimism of folklore as a tool for looking at the world outlook of a people. Lastly, Gorky pointed out the high artistic value of folklore that could be found in the characters and archetypes it creates. This point would lead to the creation of Soviet heroes based on figures such as the *bogatyrs*. Gorky's speech announced the government's decision to embrace and manipulate Russian folk culture.²³

This change resulted in, among other things, a large-scale collection of folklore, the creation of folklore anthologies, and local folkloric centers to preserve its ethnographic understanding.²⁴ A similar collection had occurred during the middle of the 19th century under the auspices of the Slavophiles in order to emphasize the unique qualities that separated Russia from Western Europe.²⁵ Like the 19th century collection, ethnographers were looking for aspects of folk culture that would emphasize their own personal goals. Thus, Soviet collectors looked for folk pieces that emphasized the community, the common good, and other socialist ideals. From the mid 1930's until the death of Stalin in 1954, Russian folk culture was taken to an entirely different level in terms of its involvement with the state and the people. What exactly this level meant in the broader scheme of ideology and reality will be discussed later. The sheer growth of

²² Oinas. "The Political Uses and Themes of Folklore in the Soviet Union." 78.

²³ Ibid. 78.

²⁴ Ibid. 79.

²⁵ Simon Karlinsky."Stravinsky and Pre-Russian Literature. 19th-Century Music, Vol. 6, No. 3. (Spring, 1983). 233.

interest in folklore, however, along with its newly discovered use by the government was unimaginable until Gorky's revolutionary speech.

Folklore found its entrance into Soviet society in this 1934 speech, but its role was much bigger than simply its suggested uses by Gorky. Folk culture gave the government and the people a common ground. Many, though certainly not all, citizens of the Soviet Union were raised with a basic understanding of folk culture. Those who grew up with a Russian education knew the stories of Baba Yaga and Ilya Muromets, common Russian folk heroes, and the moral lessons they taught. People of the Russian Orthodox faith comprehended the basic meaning behind the coloring of an icon. The government could reach a large section of the population by reformatting Russian folk culture to fit into communist ideals. Communism itself was entirely foreign and strange to most Russian people. By putting communist ideals in a folkloric scene or within a religious context, it was more easily understood. Thus, folk culture served as a middle ground between the government and the people.

The incorporation of folk culture served the state in another very important way as well. As discussed, using folk cultural motifs helped the masses to understand a very foreign concept. But in addition to facilitating the understanding of communist ideas, folk culture brought with it a certain amount of legitimacy.²⁶ Artists strove to incorporate folk images because it made a foreign concept appear innately Russian. Thus, the masses gave more credit to the new ideas because they were presented within their context and as part of their reality. As a result of Gorky's speech, the Soviet Union started successfully working within the framework of the people through folk culture. It would prove one of

²⁶ Alison Hilton. Russian Folk Art. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995. 261.

their most successful additions. But folk culture did much to help Soviet leaders come to terms with their own takeover of power. If they could attach their radical measures to something they considered to be Russian in nature, they could legitimize their own rule.

The combination of folk culture and Bolshevik ideals in the realm of visual propaganda served many purposes for the Soviet government. Most importantly, it provided substance to an otherwise meaningless concept. It enabled a certain level of communication between state and people. The combination of visual propaganda and Russian folk culture proved to be one of the biggest strengths of the early years of Soviet reign.

Dvoeverie – Ancient and Modern

The combination of folk culture and Soviet doctrine as seen in visual propaganda was an extremely advantageous move on the part of the state. The examples of this fusion speak for themselves as to the power of folk belief and the Soviet example. To best grasp this 20th century experience, however, it is important to be able to place it in its historical context. This phenomenon very much parallels the Christianization of the Rus', which happened almost a millennium before the October Revolution. I believe it is possible, therefore, to describe the blending of Russian folk culture and Soviet ideology as a modern day *dvoeverie*. By placing a relatively current occurrence within an ancient Russian framework, the visual examples that will soon be discussed can be more clearly understood.

Dvoeverie describes the syncretism involved in all kinds of conversion practices. In the Christianization of the Rus', it is defined as a religious system in which pagan

beliefs and practices were preserved under the veneer of Orthodox Christianity.²⁷

Translated in Russian the word literally means ‘double faiths.’ The little we know about Slavic paganism suggests a very primitive religion. With no priests or temples, it lacked both the protection of social organization and a dogmatic mythological system. Upon the arrival of Christianity, the pagan religion yielded almost without a struggle.²⁸ Great gods disappeared, but the lesser spirits who dealt with nature and the home remained.²⁹

Because they were actively involved in everyday life activities, their influence proved to be more lasting with the peasants. These lesser gods were quickly adopted in folklore, ensuring their continued survival long after Christianization.

Dvoeverie is not a phenomenon unique to Russia; it occurs any time religions fuse. In the incorporation of Christianity into each nation, it undergoes an adoption or investment of the pre-Christian legacies. These beliefs embody the subconscious soul of each individual nation.³⁰ The situation of paganism within Russian Orthodoxy is different from the history of Western European Christianity, however, because Russian Orthodoxy experienced neither the Reformation nor the Counter-Reformation.³¹ It was in these two radically sweeping movements that the European peasantry was cleansed of the primitive, medieval beliefs that made up much of folk culture. Due to the absence of such movements and an extremely agrarian, serf-centered economic system, Russians were living in the Middle Ages through much of the 19th century. This allowed the pagan

²⁷ Eve Levin. “Dvoeverie and Popular Religion.” Seeking God: The Recovery of Religious Identity in Orthodox Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia. Ed. Stephen Batalden. DeKalb : Northern Illinois University Press, 1993. 31.

²⁸ G.P Fedotov. The Russian Religious Mind. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960. 3.

²⁹ Ibid. 7.

³⁰ Ibid. 3.

³¹ Ibid. 4.

elements of Orthodoxy to survive into the decade of the Revolution. Pagan elements in Russian Orthodoxy were therefore, much stronger than their European counterparts at the onset of communism.

It should not be surprising, then, that pagan folk elements as well as other religious traditions such as icons found their way into Soviet life. At the time of the Revolution, they were still very real, tangible aspects of everyday life. In understanding the reasons for their persistent existence in Russian culture, we better comprehend why the Soviet Union achieved such success through their incorporation. The visual material that is about to be examined must be viewed in this light. The highly religious overtones and the strong pagan belief system were a powerful combination in making the Soviet Union legitimate and understandable to the masses.

It would not be inaccurate to say that the Soviet state underwent its own form of *dvoeverie* in the blending of folk culture and Soviet ideals. Though folk culture remained a vehicle to advocate communism, it subtly retained many qualities that gave it, and the people it represented, power within a seemingly totalitarian state. In the visual examples, we see the two fields intermingle almost seamlessly. They are innately different, but in this modern *dvoeverie* a truly unique and telling story plays out.

The dual nature of *dvoeverie* is very striking within the context of the baptism of the Rus and the conversion to communism. There are some who would argue that duality such as this is the essential underlying characteristic of Russian culture.³² Christianity and paganism were seemingly contradictory and opposing forces that joined together; the same can almost be said of folk culture and Communist ideals. But how much can the

³² Levin. "Dvoeverie and Popular Religion." 35.

two polarities actually mesh together? What is the power dynamic of the two? Certainly in the combining of the two both lose aspects of their own individuality. It can be assumed that one would lose more than the other, but how does this come about? How is the losing party decided?

Under the control of the Soviet Union, folk culture underwent major changes. It changed thematically, linguistically, and in almost any other way change could occur. Much current academic work on folk culture focuses on this change and naturally, different interpretations abound. The fact that folk culture changed under Soviet control is not in question; it most certainly did. It is how both folk culture and the communist message are affected by this change that is most telling on a grander scheme of history.

Part II - The Interplay

In the Soviet Union during the 1920's and 30's, various forces of historic and social circumstance aligned to create a situation where folk culture and Soviet ideology combined in the name of greater progress. In this section, the reality of the interplay between these two forces will be addressed. The resulting visual propaganda is, in fact, the fine arts for the Soviet masses.

Before the Revolution, there is already a rich archive of evidence in the fine arts, which takes on aspects of folk culture in a manner similar to visual propaganda. The Cubist-Futurist style of illustration was strongly influenced by the peasant *lubok*, while Socialist Realism put a newfound stress on finding the beauty in everyday peasant life.³³

³³ Camilla Gray. The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1962. 253.

But, as Mayakovsky stressed, “We do not need a dead mausoleum of art where dead works are worshipped, but a living factory of the human spirit – in the streets, in the tramways, in the factories, workshops and workers’ home.”³⁴ Thus, the visual sources used will not be from the category of fine arts, but from that of propaganda. It is more accessible to the masses than fine arts and also serves the unique function of communication between the government and the people.

Rosta Windows

The Russian Telegraph Agency (Rosta) was the first government body to transform popular folk culture into a means of propaganda. Rosta was given the task of collecting and disseminating domestic and foreign news, as well as any other informal material the Soviet press might find necessary.³⁵ Like all literary establishments in the Soviet Union, Rosta was hindered by a poor printing industry. Thus, under the direction of Platon Kerzhentsev and Mikhail Cheremnykh, Rosta created special organizing windows that illustrated the daily state controlled news theme. As one Soviet scholar put it, these windows, “combined the functions of poster, newspaper, magazine and information bulletin.”³⁶

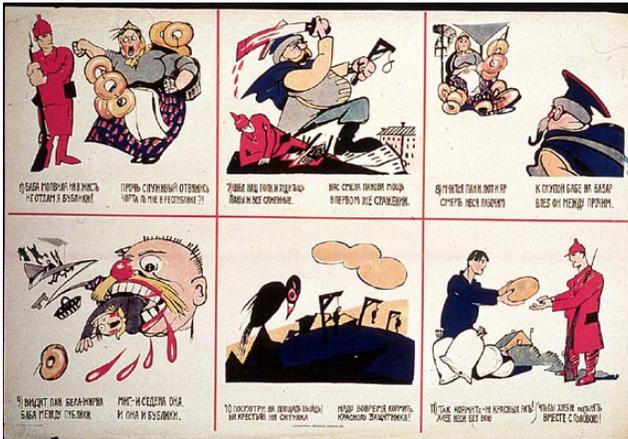
The first windows were created in the fall of 1919 and continued until January of 1922. They were placed in shop windows and other highly trafficked areas to facilitate the highest amount of visibility. Only a few months after its creation, these posters were

³⁴ Gray. The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922. 219.

³⁵ Stephen White. The Bolshevik Poster. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988. 65.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 67.

The Story of the Bread Rings



printed in quantities of as many as three hundred in two or three days.

These windows acted as a visual storyteller, informing the Soviet masses about the latest government decisions or what was happening abroad. They communicated Soviet

moral lessons as well. *The Story of the Bread Rings*, for example, tells the story of an elderly woman who refuses to share her bread rings with a Red Army soldier. The hungry, weakened soldier is then slain by a foreign force who proceeds to attack and eat the old woman and her bread rings. The last picture depicts a man sharing his bread with another Red Army soldier. The moral lesson is conveyed easily through a simple, but eye-catching, series of events.³⁷ The process was truly, “a handful of artists serving, by hand, a nation of 150 million.”³⁸

The idea behind these exceedingly popular and effective Rosta posters is, in fact, rooted in folk culture. Created in the early seventeenth century, the *lubok* was originally a peasant illustrated woodcut or broadside. They were first produced in Kiev and were influenced by both West European engravings and religious icons.³⁹ In its quintessential form, the *lubok* (plural *lubki*) was a combination of illustration and limited, nonessential text. Much like their modern Soviet counterparts, the original subject matter ranged from religion and folklore to politics and social developments.

³⁷ White. *The Bolshevik Poster*. 71.

³⁸ Allen Rosenfeld. *Defining Russian Graphic Arts 1898-1934*. Camden, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999. 134.

³⁹ White. *The Bolshevik Poster*. 2.

At their inception they were a cheaper version of icons. This allowed them to quickly spread through most households in Russia. Peter the Great broadened and secularized *lubki* themes to illustrate the government reforms, folktales, and historical events taking place.⁴⁰ The Old Believers of the Orthodox Church, who opposed state-sponsored secularization, created their own *lubki* that criticized Petrine reforms. It is through this controversy that *lubki* became known as a means to promote particular state-sponsored ideas in a manner similar to the way they would be used under Communism.

Created during the first half of the eighteenth century, the *lubok The Mice Bury the Cat* is a satirical depiction of the funeral of Peter the Great. Through the use of the almost universally folkloric cat versus mouse battle, it follows traditional *lubok* format in its use of pictures and incorporated text. Each mouse represents territories Peter conquered or reforms enacted during his reign. One mouse is depicted smoking a pipe, representing Peter's legislation, which permitted the sale of cigarettes.⁴¹ The political messages in folk *lubki* were often masked with satire or irony, a method that gave them a typically fresh, energetic appeal. Even in their most ancient forms, *lubki* were strong political tools.

Their use during the earliest year of the Soviet Union carried on this satirical yet energetic approach. Although the *lubok* in its most traditional form had all but vanished in the beginning of the twentieth century, it was a familiar historical artifact. 'The Contemporary Lubok,' a publishing house created during the First World War, was the

⁴⁰ Stephen M Norris. A War of Images: Russian Popular Prints, Wartime Culture and National Identity 1812-1945. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006. 5.

⁴¹ White. The Bolshevik Poster. 3.

first government establishment to produce *lubki* with a broadly patriotic character.⁴²

Although the technique of *lubok* incorporation was not created during the Soviet era, many of the original artists from this group were involved in designing Rosta windows under the new regime. Vladimir Mayakovsky and Dmitri Moor were the two major names associated with the Rosta windows and both had pre-Soviet experience in ‘The Contemporary Lubok.’

Under Soviet control the *lubok* was not altogether different than when it was first created three centuries before. It facilitated many of the same uses as it did under the control of the Tsarist government during WWI. The very concept of the Soviet mass production of posters came from the folk tradition of *lubki*. It also served as an excellent model because it was a plausible means given the state’s limited printing industry. Rosta windows were modeled on the folk *lubok* also because of their comfortable familiarity. Though the message became much more top-heavy and Communist, the format remained largely unchanged. It is in the *lubok* that the first adaptation of folk culture is transformed under the USSR.

The Influence of the Icon

“If Byzantium was preeminent in giving the world theology expressed in words, theology expressed in images was given preeminently by Russia.”⁴³ The icon is the quintessential symbol of the Russian Orthodox Church and in many ways of Russian cultural art. It cannot be stressed enough that the icon was *the* art form in Russia until the

⁴² White. The Bolshevik Poster. 3.

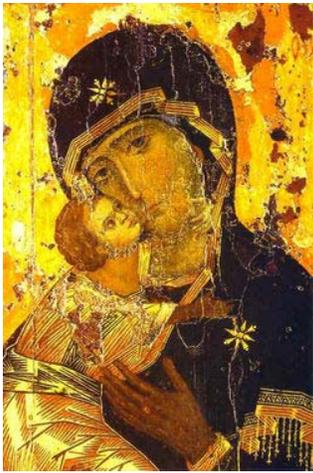
⁴³ James H Billington. The Icon and the Axe. New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc, 1966. 29.

late nineteenth century. Though Russia produced many able, talented painters in the 19th century, there existed no ‘Russian School’ comparable to those of music or literature.⁴⁴

Artists were more respected at home if they emulated Western art. Their only notable technical artistic innovation was icon painting, where they remained at the forefront.⁴⁵

The ‘Wanderers’ and the avant-garde style that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century was the first instance of a strong and independent art form other than

iconography in Russia.⁴⁶ For almost a century, the Orthodox icon was the recipient of the majority of original artistic energies in Russia.



Our Lady of Vladimir - One of the most venerated Russian Orthodox icons

Perhaps the reason for the sole adoration of the icon lies in another area that sets Russian Orthodoxy art apart from its

Protestant and Catholic counterparts. Unlike Western

Europeans, who viewed holy pictures as increasingly optional ornaments, followers of Russian Orthodoxy found an intrinsic

theological significance in every icon.⁴⁷ They were considered

to be the Gospel in paint and therefore, the mystical qualities

associated with other religious ceremonies applies to them as

well. Especially miraculous icons were said to appear as a gift from God. Russian

Orthodoxy believed in the intrinsic religious power of icons.⁴⁸ Thus, when a form of

visual propaganda is compared to an icon, the association is stronger than simply a

similarity of form, color, or composition. In all of these comparisons there exists an

⁴⁴ George Heard Hamilton. The Art and Architecture of Russia. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975. 268.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 251.

⁴⁶ Gray. The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922. 9.

⁴⁷ Billington. The Icon and the Axe. 34.

⁴⁸ Konrad Onasch. Russian Icons. New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 1977. 3.

underlying assumption of a greater power, both of the icons and the posters that imitate them.

The most famous style of Russian iconography that was developed by the Pskov, Vladimir-Suzdal, Novgorod, and Kiev schools included two- rather than three-dimensional treatment of subjects, rich ornamentation and expressive use of color.⁴⁹ Much like the easily transferable aspects of the *lubok*, the icon served as an excellent model for early Soviet posters. Throughout the 19th century, interest in icons as an integral part of Russia's rich history grew under the influence of the Slavophiles.⁵⁰ The Stroganov family was the first to begin collecting and studying the history of icon paintings in the early 1800s. Shortly thereafter, it became popular for wealthy Russian families to start their own collection of icons.⁵¹ They were cherished both as examples of a historic and traditional lifestyle and for their rare artistic qualities.⁵² In the early 20th century, Dmitri Moor had been one of the most vocal proponents of the study and imitation of icons. Though a convinced atheist since the age of fifteen, he saw icons as the most purposive and effective form of popular art available. He studied specifically its use of color, composition, and form.⁵³

In his Soviet poster *Tsarist Regiments and the Red Army*, created in 1919, this strong iconic influence on form can be seen. The poster is divided into two sides, the right side favoring the iconic form more strongly. The background of fields and sky mirrors the thick, bold lines of icons. The design is simple, almost primitive, but

⁴⁹ White. The Bolshevik Poster. 4.

⁵⁰ Hamilton. The Art and Architecture of Russia. 67.

⁵¹ Gray. The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922. 18-21.

⁵² Hamilton. The Art and Architecture of Russia. 67.

⁵³ White. The Bolshevik Poster. 43.

nonetheless very striking and eye catching. Much like religious paintings, perspectival distortions are found in the unrealistic size of the sun and abnormal layout of the fields.⁵⁴ The figures of the worker, peasant, and Red Army man also show this influence. Like the background, they are outlined in thick, solid lines that create the two dimensional effect so strongly associated with icons. Their faces are stoic but determined, with the calm outlook that is present on many iconic figures.

While this earlier poster of Moor's shows the iconic influence in form, another more famous piece reveals the influence of color and composition. Moor's most

Have You Enrolled as a Volunteer?



celebrated poster is also the one, which has become enduringly associated with the influence of the icon. *Have You Enrolled as a Volunteer?* was inspired by the desperate need for soldiers in the Civil War. The coloring of the poster is perhaps its most striking characteristic. The majority of the poster, from the soldier in the foreground to the factory in the background, is covered in a brilliant Bolshevik red. There is no other color on the poster aside from black and white, both

of which only serve to enhance the boldness of the red. While it is true that the Bolshevik party and later the Soviet Union were largely associated with the color red, it is in fact a

⁵⁴ Victoria Bonnell. *Iconography of Power*. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1997. 33.

color with a long history in Russia. Linguistically, red is closely associated with the word for beautiful. Additionally, red became associated with holiness, life, and blood through its use in icons. A typical Russian icon will include red in some prominent location, especially on the Virgin Mary or Jesus. It is, more so than any color, the color for all that is sacred.⁵⁵ Thus, its adoption by the USSR is not surprising, especially when the role of religion and the Soviet Union is more closely emphasized. Moor's use of red as the prominent color in this poster comes directly from his study of Russian iconography.

The composition of this poster is also highly iconic. The poster revolves around only a central figure. The design is simple and although it shows artistic talent, is not a visually magnificent piece. The central figure is bold but lacking in detailed. His message is clearly understood without the accompanying text and therefore, accessible to the illiterate masses. At its most basic level, the poster looks like a modern icon. The central figure is extremely large, staying true to the religious understanding that size signifies importance.⁵⁶ Though the theme of worker and factory is much different than religious figure and church, the basic composition is the same.

Dmitri Moor was not the only poster artist who incorporated icons so closely in their Soviet creations; he was simply the most vocal. Much like his incorporation of the color red in *Have You Enrolled as a Volunteer*, iconic color-coding was popularly employed in numerous different posters. Red, as the color of the sacred and holy, was always the color used to depict workers or any kind of Soviet citizen. Black was the color of the profane and therefore, reserved for capitalists and other enemies of Communism. Though this color-coding appears to have no direct link to religious symbols, the use of

⁵⁵ Bonnell. Iconography of Power. 32.

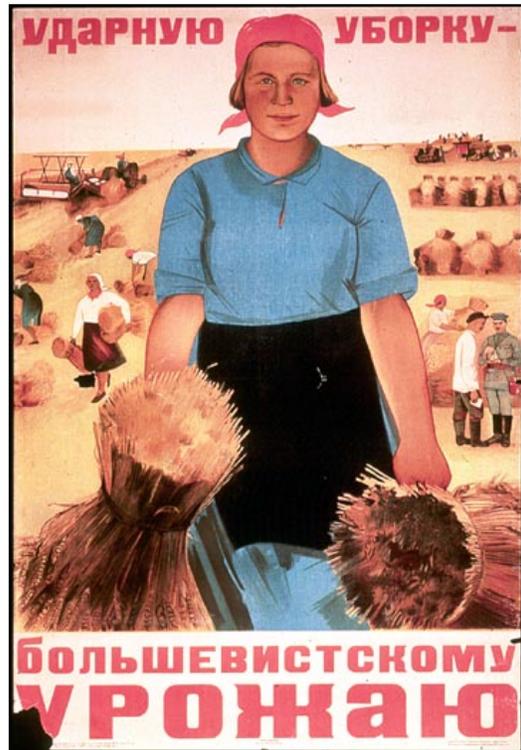
⁵⁶ Onasch. Russian Icons. 5.

standardized colors is directly taken from icon art. Another famous poster artist, Viktor Deni, employed the use of iconic color-coding in his poster *Crush Capitalism or Be Crushed by It!* In this poster, the Communist man is wearing a red peasant shirt and carrying a bright red flag. The Capitalist, on the other hand, is in a black business suit waving his own matching black flag. These are the only two colors used in the posters and their meanings are obvious to even the most uneducated viewer in a Russian cultural context. Were the viewer to understand little more than the importance of the color red, they could take away the message of the evils of capitalism.

In the poster *Give First Priority to Gathering the Bolshevik Harvest*, Maria Voron uses similar color-coding. The central figure, a female collective farmer, is dressed in blue. In religious iconography, blue is the color representing anything that has been

created by God.⁵⁷ The collective farm was very much an original creation of the Soviet government and very much at its peak in 1934 when this poster was created. The use of the color blue is a direct message from the government that the successes of collectivized farming is a result of their creation.

Additionally, it is a reference to their subtle religious status, a topic that will soon be discussed in greater detail. The farmer, of course, is wearing a red scarf to remind the



⁵⁷ Onasch. Russian Icons. 4.

viewer that she is still a Soviet citizen. The two main colors of this poster complement the overall message of the poster by showing the creation of a Soviet idea.

Thematic Manipulations

While icons may have been used as framework for the composition of Bolshevik posters, much of the thematic imagery was borrowed from folk culture as well. The use of folk themes made the message of the posters more familiar and therefore, more understandable to the general masses. Most people would probably not have comprehended a purely Marxist or Leninist message without being able to place it in a familiar context. It also, of course, made them seem more inherently Russian. This dimension that folk culture brings was essential in gaining the confidence of the masses. A poster that was able to link an extremely alien Soviet idea to a pre-existing Russian folk idea was more successful. If people understood communism to be an extension of a long growing folk belief, it was much more likely to be accepted as a good transition for Russia.

One religious theme that was used over and over again in the early days of communism was that of St. George and the dragon. St. George is one of the most beloved saints in Russian Orthodoxy. His victory over the dragon is a tale that is as dear to most Russians as the icons that depicted him. It was one of the few religious stories that would have been known on a large scale and was, therefore, a good outlet for the Soviet Union's propaganda machine. Through the creation of numerous different posters, the battle of St. George and the dragon became synonymous with the proletariat victory over the

bourgeois.⁵⁸ A poster created in 1920 by Viktor Deni shows St. George with the head of Trotsky slaying a dragon whose head has been replaced with a bourgeois in a top hat. Trotsky's shield does not bear the symbol of the cross, but instead that of the hammer and sickle. The connection is deliberate, but nonetheless powerful in its meaning.

Another more famous Soviet poster makes this connection in a much less direct way. The Dmitri Moor poster *Wrangel is still Alive!* shows a Red Army soldier dramatically swinging his sword to strike the outstretched hand of Wrangel, a commanding general for the White Army in the Civil War. Through the use of antiquated objects such as the sword, the viewer could link this drawing to the story of St. George. Wrangel is an obstacle between the Soviet Union and communism; so like the dragon, he must be slain. Using this imagery also elevates the message of the poster. By linking it to a religious message, the creator of the poster is imposing a higher purpose on the mission of the Red Army soldier to defeat Wrangel.

Another Dmitri Moor poster is a direct manipulation of an old Russian folktale. The folktale *The Turnip* tells of an increasingly large group of people that must band together to pull a turnip out of the ground.⁵⁹ In the poster *The Soviet Turnip*, Moor preserved the traditional development of the plot but added new characters.⁶⁰ In his version, Monsieur Capital tries to pull a red turnip out of the ground without anyone noticing. A group of various anti-Communist people such as 'the saboteur' and the 'counter-revolutionary' join Monsieur Capital in the effort to destroy the Soviet turnip. But when it is finally pulled out of the ground, the Soviet turnip literally blows the

⁵⁸ White. The Bolshevik Poster. 8.

⁵⁹ Aleksandr Afanas'ev. Russian Fairy Tales. New York: Pantheon Books, 1945. 26-27.

⁶⁰ Rosenfeld. Defining Russian Graphic Arts 1898-1934. 125-126.

opposition away. The poster concludes with the message “Everyone flew, crashing hard; the Soviet Turnip punished all. That’s what you get for trying to pull up a turnip.” The moral lesson is clear, and so is the direct inspiration of Russian folklore and its exploitation by the Soviets.

This poster is an excellent example of the use of folk culture to legitimize Soviet power. By this direct comparison to a well-known folk story, the Soviet government subtly tried to show itself as an innately Russian institution. Moor insightfully used this folk tale both to tell a Soviet moral tale and to slowly incorporate Soviet terminology into a pre-existing Russian framework. Though folk knowledge was strongly manipulated by the Soviet state, this poster reveals one instance of how it retains and exerts the equal power of the folk.

In the fall of 1935, a new type of hero was created with strong connections to folkloric roots. When Aleksei Stakhanov, a coal cutter from the Donbass mines, reorganized his work it resulted in a huge increase in output. He was rewarded by the highest state officials; the term ‘Stakhanovite’ was born. It referred to those workers who went above and beyond the minimum requirement and increased their productivity to overfill their quotas. This group of national heroes was likened to the folkloric *bogaty*r (plural *bogatyri*), the warrior heroes of the epic *bylina*.⁶¹ Folkloric heroes such as Ilya Muromets were famous *bogatyri*, men who were so powerful that only death itself could defeat them. The Stakhanovites served as the modern and ever-present version of these great *bogatyri*, whose actions were always in the best interest of the people they protect.

⁶¹ Bonnell. Iconography of Power. 36.

But even before the rise of the Stakhanovites, Soviet posters had already begun singing the praises of the worker-*bogaty*r hero.

*Bogaty*r-like heroes can be found in many different interpretations in Soviet posters. In *The Struggle of the Red Knight with the Dark Force* by Boris Zvorykin, the hero is dressed in the clothing of a blacksmith. He is on horseback fighting men in ancient warrior clothing. His shield displays the hammer and sickle and his weapon of choice is the hammer, while the other soldiers fight with swords and axes. The communist warrior is confident in his weaponry and in his ability to succeed. Despite his modern clothing, he is a *bogaty*r in every other fashion. His horse, his opponents, the

Your Lamp, Comrade Engineer!



entire scene seems to be ripped out of the pages of a book about the famous *bogaty*r Ilya Muromets.

A poster that came out in 1933, fourteen years after the Zvorykin poster, depicts another kind of *bogaty*r. *Your Lamp, Comrade Engineer* by Viktor Govorkov depicts a handsome young man offering a lantern to the viewer. He is not a *bogaty*r in the same obvious way as the previous poster but instead in a more personal way. This soldier is the quintessential Soviet worker - young, helpful, powerful. He is the ideal in a way that

would appeal to both women and men of the era. The hood and simple dress hint at his folk qualities, while the background scenes in the picture point to a rural existence. In subtle ways such as these, the central figure acts as a Soviet *bogaty*r.

The use of natural light in this poster also thematically links it to the Orthodox faith. The lightly colored brim of the young man's hood resembles a halo. His kind, unassuming face could easily remind a peasant of a Russian saint. In offering the lantern, the poster utilizes Christian symbolism of light as a symbol of Christ. The lantern, a symbol of socialism, brings with it the light of the world and the ability to enlighten the people. By using both folkloric and religious themes in this poster, Zvorykin strengthens the Bolshevik message through powerful and well-known associations.

Lacquer Boxes – The New Soviet Icon

The story of the artists of the small town of Palekh, Russia is part of a broader arts and crafts movement that immersed in the late nineteenth century. Palekh was a celebrated center of Russian culture long before the Revolution. It was a renowned center for folk-painters, especially those employed in the art of icon painting. Sometime during the middle of the eighteenth century, the artists of Palekh had pushed icon painting as a way to bridge the divide between the elite and the masses that was created by the reforms of Peter the Great.⁶² If Russia's distinctiveness rested in its soul, then folk art proved an excellent means of cooperation even as early as the eighteenth century.

It is clear that the business of icon making was thriving in Russia at the time of the October Revolution. Icons had a long history of both success and necessity in the lives of every Orthodox Russian. Though no law explicitly banned the painting of icons, as a result of the risk of political backlash and the collapse of the economic market that

⁶² Andrew Jenks. Russia in a Box. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005. 9.

accompanied the Soviet rejection of religion, most artists found themselves out of work.⁶³ Icon painters tried other crafts but experienced very little success. Preexisting forms of arts and crafts could not fill the void the absence of icons had left in the lives of Russia's consumer market. In order to survive, the icon artists would have to find a way to adapt their age-old tradition.

Former icon painters Ivan Golikov and Aleksandr Glazunov from the town of Palekh discovered a remedy in 1922. While at the Moscow Crafts Fair in the Kustar' Museum, they noticed a collection of lacquered papier-mâché boxes from the Fedoskino district.⁶⁴ These artists had been covering their boxes with folk images or Russian realist paintings since the nineteenth century. After being rejected as 'god-daubers' in their efforts to mirror these lacquer boxes, the two men devised their own system. After a

This lacquer box combines folk imagery and modern Soviet technology



series of experiments, Golikov found that the traditional pigments and tempera of icon painting worked much better than the oil-based paints used by the Fedoskino artists.⁶⁵ By fusing icon techniques with the folk themes of the preexisting lacquer boxes, Golikov created the Soviet version of the Russian

lacquer box.

⁶³ Jenks. Russia in a Box. 83.

⁶⁴ Alison Hilton. Russian Folk Art. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995. 266.

⁶⁵ Jenks. Russia in a Box. 84.

Palekh lacquer boxes found their initial success in the international market. Due to Central Russia's poor soil and long winters, much of their economic prosperity depended on folk arts.⁶⁶ The Soviet regime was especially dependent upon foreign currency to purchase much-needed tools and machines.⁶⁷ At a time when the Soviet Union had little to offer the international market, the folk art of Palekh lacquer boxes substantially subsidized the state budget. By the middle of the 1930's, a combination of peasant artisan entrepreneurial skills, high-level patronage, and foreign buyers had confirmed lacquer boxes' overwhelming success.⁶⁸ Once its international popularity was established, lacquer boxes established themselves as both an economic and social force.

The success of lacquer boxes, though economically beneficial, was problematic for the Soviet Union. These boxes embodied the world of the *muzhik*, the rural, backward Russian peasant. After the failure of populism at the end of the 19th century in Russia, revolutionary efforts shifted away from the rural farmer and toward the urban proletariat. It was this world of superstition and primitive belief found on so many lacquer boxes that the new ideology was trying to annihilate. The iconic overtones, especially, were yet another reminder of the backward, mystic world of the peasants.⁶⁹ Ideologically, the Soviet government should have strongly regulated the field of lacquer boxes and the message they presented. One solution, however, was to combine peasant images with modern state-building objects. The Red Army, as the most visible symbol of the government to rural peasants, was a popular theme.⁷⁰ This concept along with the foreign

⁶⁶ Jenks. Russia in a Box. 103.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 104.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 11.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 8.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 107.

income they provided allowed the art of lacquer boxes to thrive despite its anti-Communist facets.

The problematic position expressed through lacquer boxes in Soviet ideology reveals a bigger debate that existed within the state. The battle between Bolshevik ideology and the reality of life within the Soviet Union was constantly raging, especially in the earliest, most formative years. The lacquer boxes produced in Palekh provided a romantic spirit that had not yet been urbanized and depersonalized, a spirit that the people of the Soviet Union so desperately needed. Like other aspects of folk culture, lacquer boxes provided a sense of culture and identity that had not yet been provided by the state.⁷¹ The folk quality of lacquer boxes was so popular and successful simply because it was not fulfilled in other ways.

Both the international and domestic market for lacquer boxes strongly affected its relationship to the government. An absence of a clear party line created a space where things like consumer taste could shape Soviet Russian identity. It was, therefore, economic demand, not government ideology, that influenced the thematic representations on lacquer boxes. Palekh, like other aspects of folk culture, suggests the limits of Soviet power and ideology. Superficially, the Soviet Union exuded a top-heavy power that seemed to leave little room for change. The reality of transitioning into a Bolshevik state, however, proved a much less certain path. The government was torn over the role of Palekh: either it was an economic investment or an anti-Soviet movement. This uncertainty resulted in a lack of clarity from the state and, thus, the uncertainty enabled lacquer arts to create Soviet ideology rather than simply fulfill a need. In the Soviet

⁷¹ Jenks. Russia in a Box. 119.

state's attempt to control everything, they in fact lost subtle control over numerous different aspects. Folk culture's ability to reach the people when the government could not reveals an instance of bottom-up power within a seemingly totalitarian system.

Portable Folk Culture – Soviet Folklore and Traveling Folk Groups

Traveling folk groups were a popular means for the visual transmission of folk culture in both pre- and post-Revolutionary Russia. Every year in the USSR, approximately eleven thousand professional folklore collectives gave over four million performances which were attended by more than five hundred million people.⁷² Clearly, folk groups were a wildly popular way for the masses to experience their uniquely Russian culture. Much of what they saw, however, was a folk culture that was highly influenced by the Soviet state. Before the Revolution, these performers and singers were some of the mostly highly revered people in their town. The first great collection of Russian folk culture was instigated in the nineteenth century by Slavophiles interested in finding a 'spiritual greatness of Russia.'⁷³ This collection had determined the standard for Russian folklore until the rise of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet government chose to use folk culture in hopes of legitimizing their rule and making government policy understandable to the broad masses. To do this most effectively, the folklore needed to 'fit' Soviet ideology. Because of the strong emphasis in teaching Bolshevik ideology, folk performers had to be reeducated by the state. The All-Union House of Folk Art brought mastersingers and tellers to Leningrad and Moscow

⁷² Frank J Miller. Folklore for Stalin. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1990. 3.

⁷³ Ibid. 4.

to visit museums, attend lectures, concerts and performances in order to learn more about the Soviet achievements in science and technology that were taking place. Later, the House arranged conferences where folklorists were able to discuss their work and learn how to better cater to Bolshevik taste. The greatest masters were assigned professional folklore tutors who assisted them with facts and ideology.⁷⁴ Folklore as an asset of the Soviet state was no longer the local tradition it had been for centuries.

As the Slavophiles had done, the Soviet government launched a new large-scale initiative to collect folklore. Other than the obviously stated scholarly tasks, ethnographers looked at both old and new folklore and decided which forms should be cultivated to create the healthiest Soviet citizens. Often, they launched active fights against folklore that showed signs of class-hostile ideology.⁷⁵ These groups worked to filter out anti-Soviet folklore while promoting that which best mirrored state ideals. Through this process, the government actively took control of what was considered folklore.

Famous folk performer Marfa Krjukova's "The Lay of Lenin" is an excellent example of folklore that catered to a Soviet agenda. The story begins with Lenin's brother Aleksandr's attempt at the tsar's life and the resulting execution and continues on to tell the story of Lenin's rise to power. After his brother's death, Lenin tells his mother about his future:

I feel in me a great power...
I'd then turn about the whole damp mother earth!
Well am I trained in wise learning,
For I've read one magic little book [the Communist Manifesto],

⁷⁴ Felix J Oinas. "The Political Uses and Themes of Folklore in the Soviet Union." *Folklore, Nationalism, and Politics*. Ed. Felix J Oinas. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Folklore Institute, 1972. 82.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 79.

Now I know where to find the ring,
Now I know how to turn about the whole earth,
The whole earth, our whole dear Russia

This passage is full of folkloric motifs in a modern context. The ring was made famous through folk figures such as Svjatogor. In one *bylina*, Svjatogor states that if he could walk on the plains, he would fasten a ring to heaven, bind an iron chain to it, and drag the sky down to earth.⁷⁶ The search for this ideal is exactly what Lenin planned to do through communism. Thus, through a combination of folk motifs, communist propaganda, and distorted historical fact, Krjukova created a folktale that catered to the ideals of communism while retaining superficially folkloric roots. This story is one that was retold throughout the Soviet Union through public spectacle and therefore, became part of the folklore of the modern communism era.

The Piatnitskii Peasant Choir is another example of folk culture under the influence of the Soviet government. Inspired by his experiences doing ethnographic research, Mitrofan Piatnitskii had formed the folk group in 1911. By collecting village songs with wax recordings, he came into contact with folk singing groups from around Russia. In an effort to preserve the aesthetic and artistic value of this music, he combined singers from many different villages and brought them to Moscow for a concert. The concert met with mixed reviews, but the group was popular enough to continue to perform on occasion. Following the October Revolution, the group put themselves at the disposal of the Bolshevik state and was soon serenading Red Army troops as they left for

⁷⁶ Oinas. "The Political Uses and Themes of Folklore in the Soviet Union." 87.

battle.⁷⁷ An increasingly large performance schedule forced the singers, based in the countryside, to move to Moscow, removing them from their folk roots.

As time went on and as the group grew in popularity, the Piatnitskii Peasant Choir lost much of its original peasant quality. In an increasingly urban and industrial Soviet society, Muscovites felt less connected to the choir's traditional, local songs. The Choir's repertoire gradually changed in favor of popular, rustic songs more suited for a mass market.⁷⁸ In its state-sponsored evolution, the Piatnitskii Peasant Choir is an excellent example of the inherent contradictions active in socialist realism. The specific, local aspects of folk culture were lost in favor of one that appealed to all people. In trying to be all encompassing, folk culture used in Socialist Realism lost much of its local meaning. But the government, and the people as well, continued to praise the folk arts as if they had remained untouched by the state.

The Glorification of the Leaders

The Orthodox aspects of Russian folk culture were used by the Soviet state most actively and openly in the glorification of its leaders. Even in the earliest years of the Bolshevik rule, the state found ways to replace the traditions of glorification of saints and princes in the old Russian Orthodox Church with that of the cult of Lenin and Stalin. Although the Soviet government shunned the idea of religion as an anti-communist institution, it is clear that they benefited from the continuation of certain religious

⁷⁷ Susannah Lockwood Smith. "From Peasants to Professionals: The Socialist-Realist Transformation of a Russian Folk Choir." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. 3.3 Summer 2002. 394.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 393.

traditions and tendencies. The most elaborate cult of a revolutionary personality before the rise of the Soviet Union was the cult of George Washington. In the creation of the new identity of the United States government, people needed a visual example of the new system. It is in these newly created states that we find the most elaborate and influential cults of personality.

In 1921 the Soviet government made its first religiously inspired reform with the creation of the Lenin corner. Made to replace the Orthodox Red corners that had existed in almost every Russian home, these corners included sacred pictures and writings of influential Bolsheviks. Like the *dvoeverie* that created the initial religious icon from a form of pagan ancestor worship, this modern *dvoeverie* again secularizes the Orthodox icon. Three years later, Glavpolitprosvet, the main agency in charge of propaganda, issued established guidelines for the Lenin Corner. Included in the guidelines were aspects such as a list of acceptable photographs of Lenin.⁷⁹ This initial move by the government created a precedent for how the state would continually manipulate religious aspects of folk culture for their own benefit. In the effort to conform folk culture to Bolshevik ideology, the state mutated century-old traditions with little consideration for custom or ritual.

The religious similarities of the Soviet state often took form in pictorial representations of Lenin and Stalin. Most representations of Lenin have him wearing the same clothes and in standardized poses. Dressed in a plain black suit, the occasional hat, and in mid-stride pointing, Lenin looks strikingly similar in most posters. Boris Uspenskii identified a connection between Lenin and the saints of Russian icons, who,

⁷⁹ Bonnell. Iconography of Power. 148.

“except for very rare exceptions, are almost never parted from the clothing characteristic of them, just as heroes in the Russian *byliny* are under no circumstance deprived of the ‘fixed epithets’ which characterize them.”⁸⁰ Lenin is equated with a saint through these visual measures for two reasons. The first is the same reason the Orthodox Church depicted the saints in the same clothes - standardized outfits facilitated quicker recognition. Though Lenin’s face is now recognized around the world, in the earliest days of Communism the majority of Russians still probably had trouble recognizing him. Additionally, by making this similarity, the artist imparted upon him spiritually mystic powers typically reserved for religious figures.

The cult of Lenin took form mainly after his withdrawal from government in 1922 and subsequent death in 1924. It was a creation not of Lenin’s own doing, but the culmination of many separate forces in Russian history and modern society, including deliberate manipulation and use by Stalin of the Lenin cult. The myth of the *batiushka* or ‘Little Father’ that surrounded the tsar had existed for centuries. ‘The Tsar will give,’ was a common peasant formula that symbolized the trust and companionship the peasants felt with their ruler.⁸¹ Peasant proverbs and folktales reveal a belief in what historians call ‘divine monarchism.’ At its core lies the belief that through a divine connection with God, the tsar is personally bound to each individual peasant.⁸² As the heir apparent to the tsar, Lenin fit very nicely into the people’s idea of a father figure. Many of the same feelings associated with the tsar could be easily transferred onto Lenin. Thus, through

⁸⁰ Bonnell. Iconography of Power. 147.

⁸¹ Tumarkin. Lenin Lives: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia. 65.

⁸² Ibid. 7.

tsarist ideals and literary thought, Lenin rose to fulfill a long-lived spiritual need of the masses. His iconic stature in propaganda posters is a response to this phenomenon.



1870-1924 - Lenin

The posters commemorating Lenin's death illustrate the beginnings of this iconic stature. An Adolf Strakhov poster entitled *1870-1924 – Lenin* demonstrates many of the same features as an icon. The poster is simple and two-dimensional. Lenin dominates as the central figure, adorned, as usual in his suit and pointing off into the distance. Another subtle, but essential aspect that is both folk and religious in nature is the rough outline of light exuding from behind

Lenin. In religious imagery, Jesus is typically associated with the presence of light. Thus, the notion of Lenin as a source of light is combines the religious aspects of his rule with the growing electrification of the Soviet Union.⁸³ The religious parallels are restrained, but bold in their assumptions and ramifications. Folk solar imagery in Russia dates back to the period of the Sarmatians and Scythians in South Russia.⁸⁴ Light was the metaphor for that which is good or that which concerned the acquisition of knowledge.⁸⁵ The sun was at the very foundation of peasant

⁸³ Julia Bekman Chadaga. "Light in Captivity: Spectacular Glass and Soviet Power in the 1920's and 1930's." *Slavic Review*, Vol 66, No 1, Spring 2007. 86.

⁸⁴ Anthony Netting. "Images and Ideas in Russia Peasant Art." *Slavic Review*, Vol 35, No 1, March 1976. 48.

⁸⁵ Rosenfeld. *Defining Russian Graphic Arts 1898-1934*. 130.

art. It represented an ever-present force in folk life. The overwhelming and heavily primitive agricultural tendencies of most Russians, in addition to the extreme climate, gave the sun a very special place within peasant mythology.⁸⁶ Lenin's association with the sun in this poster and many others alike is a strong, meaningful one in its connection with the peasants. At the same time, this bold association strengthened the religious cult that was quickly growing around Lenin's dead body.

The events surrounding Lenin's death were religiously symbolic in nature. Even today, the Mausoleum in Red Square is a powerful and ever-present visual example of the religious imagery surrounding this Soviet leader. The decision to embalm his body was made by the Commission for the Immortalization of the Memory of V.I. Ul'ianov (Lenin).⁸⁷ The long-term preservation of Lenin's body for public viewing was both a remarkable scientific achievement and a feat that carried particularly strong Russian Orthodox connotations. According to church dogma, the bodies of saints were incorruptible and therefore, did not decay after death.⁸⁸ This connection was strong enough to be recognized by those familiar with the Orthodox faith. In the designing of the Mausoleum, state officials wanted it to surpass both Mecca and Jerusalem. It was the actions of government officials, not the spontaneity of a mass uprising, which actually started the idolization of Lenin. The permanent Mausoleum was designed by these same men to facilitate and symbolize the enduring cult of Lenin.⁸⁹ The Mausoleum and the preservation of Lenin's body are direct and intentional connections to the Orthodox faith and the new Soviet religion.

⁸⁶ Netting. "Images and Ideas in Russia Peasant Art." 53.

⁸⁷ Bonnell. Iconography of Power. 149.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 149.

⁸⁹ Tumarkin. Lenin Lives: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia. 201.

The evolution of the cult of Stalin traveled a much more direct and purposeful path than did Lenin's. The major difference between them lies in Stalin's active role in the creation and evolution of his own cult, whereas the cult of Lenin developed largely after his death. In the beginning, posters of Stalin depicted his close relationship with Lenin in order to establish a certain amount of respect. By depicting the two together, artists attempted to transfer some of Lenin's sacred aura on to Stalin.⁹⁰ Gustav Klutssis' *Under Lenin's Banner for Socialist Construction*, published in 1930, intertwines photographs of the two men's faces.



Lenin is on top looking wistfully into the distance while Stalin, only partly visible in the background, appears much more powerful, stern, and alive. This poster shows how visual propaganda helped the people make the transition between its first and second leader by showing them as similar, united forces. It also empowers Stalin's status through a close comparison to Lenin.

In October of 1931, Stalin gave a speech in response to increasing criticism of Lenin where he solidified Lenin's infallibility as leader of the Soviet. This marks the point after which, all forms of mass propaganda sang Stalin's praise. In asserting Lenin's

⁹⁰ Bonnell. *Iconography of Power*. 155-156.

infallibility, Stalin showed that as heir apparent, he too, was infallible.⁹¹ Gradually, Stalin became the central figure in posters at the expense of Lenin's image. Only two years later, another Klutskis poster depicts Stalin as substantially more important than Lenin. In *The Victory of Socialism in Our Country is Guaranteed*, the portrait of Stalin looms larger than life in front of the masses while Lenin's profile can only be seen as a tiny, barely visible, fixture among the people. This poster makes a clear assertion that it is Stalin, not Lenin, who will ensure the future of the Soviet Union. Stalin replaces Lenin as the major figure in propaganda posters from this point until his own death two decades later.

Throughout the course of the 1930's, Stalin gained the designation of *otets*, or father, in Russian.⁹² Among various other meanings, it was a term used to address an Orthodox priest. This association of communist and religious leaders is one of the most obvious incorporations of religious manipulation by the Soviet state. Lenin was already depicted as a religious figure and acquired the same power of mystic immortality through the aforementioned letter. In adopting the terminology of Orthodoxy, Stalin can no longer ignore the exploitation of Orthodox tradition by the Soviet state. In posters, he was increasingly depicted as a father figure. The poster *Stalin in the Kremlin Cares about Each One of Us* by Viktor Govorkov is an excellent example. Here, Stalin is depicted as hard at work, personally writing what appears to be a series of letters. From the window in the background, we can see Stalin is working late into the night. This aspect is trying to impress upon the viewer Stalin's tireless, selfless concern for the people of the USSR. His modest office, with the exception of the famous backdrop, does not seem entirely

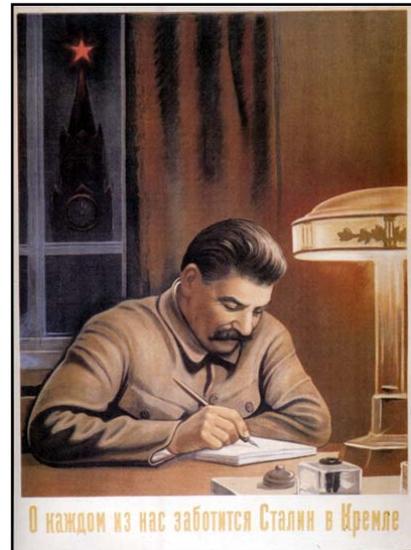
⁹¹ Bonnell. Iconography of Power. 156.

⁹² Ibid. 165.

different from the homes of those viewing the poster. The gently muted tones and soft edges present an understated, serene scene where the term ‘father’ does not seem out of place.

As we have seen before, the use of light in this poster also works to strengthen the glorification of the leader. The star atop the Kremlin is a powerful symbol both in its role as a light source and its physical height. Much like the lantern, the light emitted from the star is associated with divinity, knowledge, and truth. This, in combination with its seemingly heavenly elevation, makes it even more religious.⁹³ The lamp on Stalin’s desk is another important source of light in the poster. In fact, Stalin had been one of the biggest advocates of the connection

Stalin in the Kremlin Cares about Each One of Us



of Lenin, and by association also himself, with lamps. The combination of religious meaning as well as the growing importance of electrification as symbol of modernity and socialist progress greatly added to the glorification of Stalin.⁹⁴

Visual depictions of Lenin and Stalin very clearly manipulated Russian Orthodox imagery and tradition, as well as traditional folk motifs. They almost literally become religious icons through their depiction in posters. In almost every visual medium, their goal of transforming the spirit behind Orthodox faith into a religion of communism is evident. This direct manipulation of religious traditions is extremely similar to the

⁹³ Chadaga. “Light in Captivity: Spectacular Glass and Soviet Power in the 1920’s and 1930’s.” 102.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 90.

manipulation of folkloric themes and images that occurred. Thus, the Soviet government found a powerful tool in the use and adaptation of folk culture to achieve their ends in the establishment of communism.

Part III - The Transformation

The USSR encompassed the largest landmass of any country in the world during the 20th century. In such a vast expanse, few things could unite an entire group of people. The use of Russian folk culture, however, served as a means in uniting a large and important group of Soviet citizens. For those raised with a Russian education, folk culture was intrinsically part of their individual culture. As a result of Stalin's speech in 1930, it was also the official culture of the Soviet state. In the study of history, the story of those outside the realm of power is often forgotten. Folk culture serves as the personal narrative of the masses, a story of both their leaders and their neighbors. By studying major themes in folk culture, the values of a nation may be better understood. History that does not incorporate the story of the masses is both meaningless and misleading. It is folk culture's uniquely strong connection to the masses that makes studying it both essential and enlightening. In the case of the Soviet Union, it also provides insight into the subtle world of bottom-up power.

Numerous different examples attest to the fact that folk culture was strongly integrated into Bolshevik visual propaganda. The reasons vary and are considered important to the goals of the Communist state. The fields of both folk culture and propaganda reached new heights under the command of Lenin and Stalin. During the period of de-Stalinization following Stalin's death in 1953, a crisis emerged among those

who had participated in the continuation of Soviet folk culture. Scholars became critical of their inability to accurately define folk culture as it was emphasized by the Soviets. Others began admitting to their role in the perpetration of government controlled folk activities that were in reality artificial and misleading.⁹⁵ Whether by choice or under pressure from the state, folklorists throughout the USSR began to acknowledge the unique and troubling fate of folk culture under state control. If they were correct, what did folk culture become through its inclusion in Soviet propaganda?

The Transition in Academia

Two events facilitated the study of the connection between folk culture and propaganda in the USSR. The first and most obvious was the implosion of the USSR and the resulting access to formerly classified government documents and speeches. The years prior to the fall of the USSR saw a gradual but steady increase in the analysis of many controversial and problematic topics. A more critical and knowledgeable eye was able to thrive while increased funding resulted in new groundbreaking work. The other turning point was not a specific date, but a trend in historiography. Through the influence of anthropology and ethnography, historians have begun to take more of an interest in the history of the masses. Folk Studies departments are now well established in many major universities, facilitating an explosion of scholarly interest. The combination of these two events has created a growing school of thought in the areas of both folk culture and Soviet studies.

⁹⁵ Miller. Folklore for Stalin. 96-98.

Frank J. Miller was the first to link the two topics in his book *Folklore for Stalin*, published in 1990, the last days of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. In this work, he introduces the term ‘Pseudofolklore’ to describe “motifs of traditional folklore applied to contemporary subjects.”⁹⁶ He pointed to the thematic shift from abstract mythic-religious ideas to concrete historical reality as one of the major differences between Soviet folklore and traditional folklore. With this difference in mind, Miller came to the conclusion that folklore under Stalin was, in actuality, not folklore at all. He claimed that the guardians and transmitters of the inherited tradition were essentially lost due to the influential control of the state. Folk culture as Russia had known it was, in Miller’s opinion, extinct. Pseudofolklore was its replacement.

Other scholars do not judge the changes so harshly. Alison Hilton is one of the foremost scholars on folk art. Her book Russian Folk Art discusses the role of the *narodnoe iskusstvo*, or folk art, during the Soviet period. She opens the book discussing the complexities of folk art, while emphasizing the fact that it represents interwoven layers of the social strata.⁹⁷ Historically, despite the economic and social division of serfs and landlords, she believes there has been a shared cultural history among the people of Russia. Agreeing with Lenin’s statement that, “Art belongs to the people,” Hilton acknowledges that the explanation of folk culture during the Soviet period was full of political and philosophical statements. Her general argument on the authenticity of folk culture mirrors her understanding of the community created by folk art. Hilton argues that, “Folk art is not isolated from the realities of history, commerce, and social change; in all its variety of media, styles, and functions, folk art is a crucial link connecting the

⁹⁶ Miller. Folklore for Stalin. 4.

⁹⁷ Hilton. Russian Folk Art. XIIIV.

esthetic, social, and spiritual values of Russian culture.”⁹⁸ Quite the opposite of Miller, her interpretation is that folk art did not change in an abnormal or manipulative way as a result of its transformation during communism.

Most scholars fall on either side of this spectrum, with Miller’s interpretation taking a favored position for its anti-Communist message. But what do these two opposite labels actually tell us about the role of folk culture within propaganda? What assumptions can be made about the relationship between the government and the masses from these evaluations? Can either extreme truly explain the complex and murky world of the Bolshevik government? I believe the analysis of such a complex scenario cannot be simplified into either of these two schools of thought.

A Critique of Hilton

Hilton is correct in emphasizing the fact that art and folk culture cannot be isolated from the realities of a changing world. In fact, the substance behind content is often a result of the time in which it was created. But to simplify the fate of folk culture under Soviet rule as natural and evolutionary is both unhelpful in understanding it within a broader framework and largely incorrect. Fundamentally, much of folk culture under Bolshevik power was indicative of the folk culture that had existed for centuries in Russia. Hilton’s scope is far too broad to prove useful in understanding the role of folk culture in the earliest years of the USSR.

⁹⁸ Hilton. Russian Folk Art. XVI.

The fact that folk culture underwent a transformation during the early decades of Bolshevik rule in the USSR is indisputable. It has already been noted in posters such as *The Soviet Turnip* that the propaganda artists directly changed century-old folk tales to fit a new criteria. Traveling folk groups were forced by the state to eliminate dialects and create a more homogenized text. The Russian Orthodox religion was completely overhauled by communist ideology only to be replaced and reworked into the mythology of Bolshevik

The Soviet Turnip



power. Certainly, Bolshevik rule brought change to all different aspects of Russian culture and in this way, folk culture is no exception.

By definition, folk culture is made up of cultural constants whose form undergoes a process of evolution that closely mirrors the timer period. Aspects such as color, thematic meaning, and characters remain the same so that they may be easily recognized. The form these aspects take, however, slowly evolves. In its original context, changes would come about as a result of its highly oral nature. Until about one hundred years ago, folklore was not written down and therefore, subject to change at each performance. Though such changes were minimal, they did establish an evolutionary aspect that differentiated folklore from literature. The period of Bolshevik rule, however, was not a time of normal evolution for folk culture. Most folklorists would agree that in folk

culture, changes are slow and steady.⁹⁹ Under the control of the Soviet Union however, folk culture was directly and intentionally changed. At the highest level, folk culture was completely controlled by the state. The government even brought folk artists from across the Soviet Union to the capital to reeducate them about the glories of communism and how to incorporate these ideals into their work.

The story of the Piatnitskii Peasant Choir has already been mentioned as an example of folk culture and propaganda working together. But what is perhaps equally important to take away from this story is the change that the choir underwent. Much like other forms of folk culture, the 'folk culture' it presented quickly becomes homogenized in order to accommodate the broader audience they performed for on tour. What the government claimed to be authentic folk art was in reality a perversion of the original form. To say that the folk culture that existed during the Bolshevik reign was only of the folk is to ignore the manipulative actions of the Soviet government.

A Critique of Miller

On the other hand, the theory, which emphasizes only as 'Pseudofolklore' under Bolshevik control, is flawed because it assumes too limited a scope. To better understand folklore, it must be likened not to literature but instead to language. While Hilton takes for granted the evolutionary nature of folk culture, Miller does not even take this aspect into account. The argument of the 'Pseudofolklorists' is that folk culture was taken out of the hands of the folk and placed under the control of the party leaders. Were this the case, then certainly the nature and role of folklore should be rethought. This analysis, however,

⁹⁹ Henry Glassie. The Spirit of Folk Art. New York: Abrams, 1989.

overlooks and simplifies the role of the masses. By giving complete credit for the change in folklore to government propaganda artists, Miller renders the masses virtually powerless.

I believe, however, that even at the height of Soviet manipulation, the inclusion of folk culture was one of the few outlets for the masses to keep power. In the very act of integrating folk culture into Soviet propaganda, the Soviet state unknowingly empowered the masses. Though the government was presenting its own material to the people, folk culture forced them to present their information within the preexisting framework of folk culture. This framework dictates what can be said and how it can be presented.

When the Soviet government decided to push a new idea or concept relating to communism on the masses, propaganda facilitated this initial step. But to simply spread ideas of something such as shock workers, for example, without proper context would be highly ineffective. The government used folk culture to make these ideas more familiar to the people who needed to understand it and, therefore, worked for their own cause. But by dictating how the government communicated with them, the masses were able to control government policy in the most subtle of ways. The government could enforce the shock worker, but only through a folk association with a *bogatyr* could he become real.

It is easy to think of the Soviet Union as a completely top-down government that ruled with a totalitarian fist over millions of helpless victims. Most scholarly work to date emphasizes the power of the government over the people without much thought as to how the people survived. However, a re-occurring theme in Russian literature is the ability, if not necessity, of people to thrive within the situation they are given. It is through the outlet of folk culture that the Russian masses retained some control over the situation

they had been thrust into. ‘Pseudofolklore’ implies a folk culture that is out of the control of the masses and, therefore, does not accurately depict how folk culture proved to be a force of popular power.

Another argument presented by the proponents of Pseudofolklore is that folk culture under the Soviet Union was too involved in the top-down government power struggle and too absent from the world of the folk. Like literary authors of the same period, folklorists were responsible for knowingly distributing information that falsified reality. Folktales extolled feats of Lenin and Stalin that had never actually happened.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, folk-inspired propaganda posters told the masses about a land of plenty when in reality, starvation and food shortages ravaged the country. ‘Pseudofolklorists’ argue that folk culture became too concerned with conforming to the government and manipulating power to be concerned with actual folk life. But history tells us that folk culture has always been deeply imbedded in the doings of the government and the struggle for power, just as the Russian Orthodox Church had done. Folklore and religion are both fundamentally concerned with the concept of power. The struggle with the natural, supernatural, and political powers is thematically central in folklore.¹⁰¹ Religion was adopted by the Russian state as a political tool and was used in such a manner until the Revolution. Artists have always created their works with the intent to influence and move an audience.¹⁰² All areas of folk culture included in Soviet propaganda had a strong history of government influence and thus, ‘Pseudofolklore’ is not new or unique in this respect.

¹⁰⁰ Miller. Folklore for Stalin. 14.

¹⁰¹ Tumarkin. Lenin Lives: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia. 92.

¹⁰² Ibid. 92.

The aforementioned colloquial peasant phrase ‘the Tsar will give’ is another example of the political falsification of folk culture prior to the Soviet Union. A common element in folktales during tsarism showed how the tsar was not only sympathetic to the people, but that he lived a lifestyle very much like their own. In these stories, the tsar had problems not unlike ones facing the peasant class, such as the marriage of a son and the use of public *banyas*.¹⁰³ This naïve monarchism was an earlier and subtler form of the cult of personality that arises under Stalin’s leadership. Folk culture had been idealizing leaders and looking to manipulate power practically since its inception in Russia. Thus, this aspect of folk culture under the Soviet Union is not dramatically different enough to merit the term ‘Pseudofolklore’ for the Soviet period.

‘Bolshevik’ Folk Culture

To answer the question, “What does the fairy tale represent?” folklorist Vladimir Propp believed it must first be correctly classified.¹⁰⁴ To accurately understand the role of folk culture in the Soviet Union, the same must be true. Folk culture under the Soviet Union cannot be classified as Pseudofolklore because this definition does not take into account its evolutionary nature and the way it revealed bottom-up power. That a major manipulation of folk culture occurred, however, can also not be ignored. Clearly, the situation of folk culture under the control of the early Soviet government lies somewhere in between these two points. A more moderate, less severe definition is required in order to gain a fuller understanding of the use of folk culture in visual propaganda.

¹⁰³ Tumarkin. Lenin Lives: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia. 10.

¹⁰⁴ Propp. Morphology of a Wondertale. 4-5.

I believe the best way to understand the folk culture produced in propaganda from the Revolution until Stalin's death in 1953 is to classify it as 'Bolshevik folk culture.' The term encompasses both of the issues the more extreme schools of thought. By retaining 'folk culture,' this term emphasizes the importance of fully understanding what folk culture actually is and what it can become. But the addition of the prefix Bolshevik serves as a reminder of the unique circumstances of folk culture in this certain time period. Quite simply, it is folk culture within a broader Bolshevik context.

Both Bolshevism and folk culture are separate, independent bodies that exist without the other. In their combination, it cannot be expected that one would entirely engross the other. Both sides must surrender some ground. In its attempt to hasten socialism in the Soviet Union, the Bolshevik state utilized folk inspired propaganda. Thus, it is easy to see the Soviet state as the kind of government that could easily manipulate folk culture until it was void of its original identity. To assume this is to deprive folk culture of its overwhelming amount of power and prestige. Folk culture *is* one of the few representations of the masses and not even a body as strong as the Soviet Union can undo the traditions of so many generations.

There will always be varied interpretations of what folk culture should be. From 1917 until 1953, ideas of what it needed be differed depending on who was being asked. In the years following Stalin's death until the 1980's, the overarching goal of folk culture was the promotion of works by performers and collectives that would express the joy and optimism of Soviet life and glorify loyalty to ones country, Lenin, and communism.¹⁰⁵ With many of the most manipulative aspects of communism vanishing after 1953, such as

¹⁰⁵ Miller. Folklore for Stalin. 107.

the cult of personality, folk culture was able to take on this new role. Unlike during the period of ‘Bolshevik folk culture,’ folklorists after 1953 had much more independence of thought and publication. The Thaw proved an opportunity to reexamine what folk culture had been and start deciding what it should become. The death of Stalin and the de-Stalinization that followed was also the death of ‘Bolshevik folk culture.’

Conclusion

The inclusion of Russian folklore into Soviet visual propaganda is a unique situation within the broader context of the Soviet Union. The two fields represent very different aspects of everyday life. Soviet propaganda symbolized the controlling and absolute power of the government and a top-down path to change. Folk culture, on the other hand, was the product of the folk masses and revealed a bottom-up power source. The combination of the two was a rare instance of compromise within the Soviet state.

This compromise is so rare because of the seemingly unending reign of control the Soviet Union had over its people. Few instances reveal what some historians call ‘tiny rebellions’ by the masses.¹⁰⁶ Where do the people assert their own identity, needs, and wants? In folk culture lies the true soul of Russia. The Soviet government understood this and by employing folk culture, they too wished to find their soul. In discovering it, however, they inadvertently strengthened the heart of the masses. In this instance of modern *dvoeverie*, folk culture provided an outlet where the people could choose the language the state used with them. However subtle, this folk language altered the

¹⁰⁶ Lewis. “Hammer and Tickle.”

message of the state. Folk culture in Soviet propaganda encouraged not only the ideals of communism, but provided an outlet for the voice of the masses as well.

Though folk culture served as one of the few outlets of control for the Russian people, it is important to emphasize the modifications that each part underwent. The manipulation it experienced under state control did much to benefit the Soviet masses and the socialist cause, but what happened to folk culture? This issue is much more complicated because of the nature of folk culture and its role in society. Folk culture is the product of the evolution of a people and, therefore, change is part of its nature. On the other hand, in many ways the changes folk culture underwent were not a product of the folk. Instead, the heavy hand of the government dictated which aspects of folk culture fit into their socialist mold. The fate of folk culture in the Soviet Union is far from clear-cut. Current terminology does not facilitate an accurate understanding of the separate identities of the two fields involved. Folk culture during the reign of Lenin and Stalin is neither Pseudofolklore nor simply folk culture. The combination of unique circumstances is best explained through the term 'Bolshevik folk culture.' Much like the fate of folk culture and visual propaganda, it is a compromise that acknowledges both sides.

Certainly, there were many instances in the Soviet Union of the government turning a horse into a camel. The power amassed by this government in such a quick time was almost unheard of. In these cases, it is easy to look at the masses as little more than hopeless victims. But as the case of folk culture reveals, even the most unlikely peasant is involved in admittedly unequal relationships of power involving some types of negotiation and compromise. Thus, even in the most authoritarian of political systems, they can have some influence on their government. Collectively, these 'tiny revolutions'

form the basis for forging a future where the masses can demonstrate their collective power when the moment finally arrives, as the masters of the old Soviet Union found to their dismay in 1991.

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