

#1 - Emancipated Woman – Build Up Socialism!

Propaganda Posters in Communist Russia

In 1923, the American Journalist Albert Rhys Williams noted a ubiquitous feature of the Russian urban landscape: the poster. "The visitor to Russia," he wrote, "is struck by the multitudes of posters--in factories and barracks, on walls and rail-way cars, on telegraph poles--everywhere."

Indeed, there were over 3.2 million posters distributed in 1920 alone by Gosizdat, the state publishing house and 7.5 million during the following three years. A Russian woman living in the 1920s and 1930s would have met images of herself--or how she was supposed to be--on almost every street corner. What purpose did this mass propaganda serve? What do these posters tell us about the changing role of the Soviet woman?

When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, they needed to spread their socialist agenda and reach a broad, semi-literate audience. What better way than the political poster? The lithographic poster, however, was not a new invention. In the 1870s, innovations in printing technique had made it economically feasible to mass-produce brightly colored posters. As a result, many European city streets were turned into virtual art galleries.

At first, few Russian political posters featured women. Those that portrayed female figures did so allegorically: women were used to represent abstract ideas such as freedom or liberty. In 1918, after women were emancipated in the communist revolution, posters had more realistic representations: women depicted as workers and purveyors of socialist thought.

Communist propaganda posters also made use of vibrant colors--particularly red--which would have been instantly recognized as a powerful color in both communist and religious iconography. Women were portrayed wearing red headscarves -- tied in the back, in accordance with modern fashion. Or wearing red dresses, symbolizing their heroic stature under communism.

Political art of this time emphasizes women's productive rather than reproductive roles in the economy. Under the new Soviet constitution, women were granted the same civil, legal, and electoral rights as men--and they were expected to make equal contributions to socialism. Thus, day nurseries, kindergartens, and large-scale canteens were built to free women from domestic duties so they could work in factories and on collectivized farms.

Posters disseminated new visual scripts which liberated Soviet women were supposed to follow. Women were depicted riding tractors, for example, signifying progress. In reality, there were few women tractor drivers. But the message was clear: women were vital in the effort to modernize and collectivize agriculture.

Other posters contrasted women's lives before and after socialism. Political art beckoned women to step up and take advantage of new opportunities: to become literate, receive an education, vote, and, of course, fight the enemies of communism--capitalists and land owners. No longer did women need be confined to the home, exhausted by domestic labor.

Russian posters of the 1920s and the 1930s often portrayed women as larger-than-life figures, reflecting their new power and importance. But we must not forget that political propaganda is prescriptive as well as descriptive: it both reflects women's changing roles and provides them with a road map to a socialist future -- one that will only be successful with their contributions.



International Institute of Social History

"This is what the October Revolution has given to the working and peasant women," boasts this 1920 propaganda poster. The woman gestures toward a library, a cafeteria, a workers club, a school for adults and a "house for a mother and child." The first Soviet Constitution of 1918 proclaimed gender equality at home, in the workplace and in the society. Women were free to attend universities, work, divorce, own private property, vote and get elected for office. [View Larger >](#)



G. Shegal, 1931

"Down with kitchen slavery! Let there be new household life!" says this working mother as she forces open the door to her musty washroom and steps into the bright, new modern Russia. The signs on the buildings outside read "Club," "Industrial Cafeteria" and "Nursery." This poster was meant to motivate housewives to abandon their house chores and enter the workforce to help Russia grow. To make this possible, the Communist Party built thousands of daycare centers and kindergartens. [View Larger >](#)



Strakhov-Braslavskij A. I., 1926

Socialism and women's emancipation go hand in hand, implies this poster. It reads: "Emancipated woman -- build up socialism." In communism, political ideology matters most. Men and women must work as equals to make communism a reality. Equality is depicted here through the non-gendered appearance of the young protagonist. She wears a masculine buttoned-up shirt, and her features are harsh and androgynous. Behind her, factory chimneys billow heavy smoke, implying heavy industrial work that both men and women are expected to do, side by side. [View Larger >](#)



N. Valerianov, 1925

"Worker and peasant women -- all should go to the polls! Gather under the Red Banner along with men. We bring fear to the bourgeoisie." Marching side-by-side, women wearing traditional peasant sarafans (shapeless tunics) and worker blouses topple an overfed capitalist factory owner. This poster, which depicts larger-than-life women marching together, was intended to inspire illiterate women to vote and take part in the politics of communism. [View Larger >](#)

#2 The Limits of Liberation; The ideals and realities of early Soviet family policy February 17, 2009



1925 Poster: 'Everyone should vote; women together with men must root out the bourgeois.'

Soviet ideas of women's liberation were progressive and bold for their time. Soviet women were working side by side with men when American women were still fighting for the right to vote. The declarations of women's equality with men were a triumph in post-Revolutionary Russia, but the fundamental applications of these ideals were much more complicated. Women's liberation consisted in several parts, all of which were contingent upon one another. The 1918 Family Code, based on Marxist ideas set up a system that sought to make the family a thing of the capitalist past. The years of 1917 to 1934, have been proven by history to be an experiment that failed. The conclusion was that the family is the basic unit of society, which is why almost all of these policies were eventually reversed when they went horribly amiss.

Marx's Formula for Women's Liberation

- 1) Free union: This meant that marriages were based on love and not money and that both parties were free to leave whenever they choose.
- 2) Women entering the workforce: Only when women began to make their own money and be active in the community could they be liberated from their role as dependents.
- 3) Socialization of housework and child care: Everyone would have their own personal maid/cook/nanny—the state.
- 4) Disintegration of the family: The confines of family would wither away once women began to enter the workforce—giving up their children to be raised in communal child care.

The 1918 Family Code

After the Bolsheviks overthrew the tsarist regime, they proceeded to overthrow the institution of family as it had heretofore been known:

- 1) Marriage became a civil union: this extracted the Church from the equation.
- 2) Divorce was made accessible for both parties: before it was virtually impossible for women to get a divorce.
- 3) Illegitimate children given equal rights: No child would be denied care simply because they were born out of wedlock.
- 4) Adoption forbidden: Envisioning socialized child care, the Bolsheviks believed that the state would be raising the children and they didn't want orphans to be bought and used as slaves.
- 5) Spouses support themselves: Because both partners would be working and making their own wages, alimony and child support would become obsolete.



With the new 'free union' laws, women were no longer the property of men. This poster shows a woman leaving her oppressive husband saying, 'I'm not yours anymore...He takes me to the Soviet council to listen to Lenin'

The Family Code's progressive ideals were ahead of the rest of Europe. Russia became the first country in Europe to make abortion legal, which it did in November of 1920. Women ended up having to use abortion more and more often as the ideals that were meant to liberate them crumbled leaving them buried beneath the rubble.

Many of the above ideals are contingent upon other ideals being manifest. For example, in order for there to be no need for the family, both parties have to be able to support themselves and their children have to be taken care of by the state. Women were expected to go to work and this would be possible considering that the children were being raised elsewhere. So much is contingent upon women's former work being covered so that they can go work with the men. What happens when that doesn't happen? Soviet history 101.



This is a poster encouraging peasant women to put their children into the day care to be raised by the commune. The new family policies were especially destabilizing for the more traditional peasant families.

While Russian women were some of the first in the world to work side by side with men, own their own property and so on, they became victims of the system's fundamental flaws.

Wendy Goldman's book *Women, the State and Revolution; Soviet family policy & social life, 1917-1936* gives an in depth analysis of the statistics, studies and documents pertaining to women's issues in Bolshevik Russia. These are a few of the realities of the woman's lot in these years of supposed liberation according to the book:

Unemployment

With the civil war ended and the budget cuts of NEP, many of Soviet women's jobs were given to veterans with higher skill levels. Between 1921 and 1927 the number of unemployed women surged from 60,975 to 369,800. Furthermore, in the workplace women made only 65% of what their male counterparts made. This made women more dependent on a husband's higher wages.

Free Unions and Divorce

The new divorce laws may have seemed liberating for the women who were making decent wages. But the fact that husbands could now come, impregnate and go as they pleased left many women in poverty. Alimony was a symbol of woman's dependency on men, and was therefore looked down on. With the new lax ideals about sex and marriage men went around fathering children, and women went through hell to try and get alimony or child support.

Prostitution

Thus women were left without a job, without a husband and with a child to support they resorted to

the most ancient female profession: prostitution. Prostitution, which was subsiding in the early years after the revolution, flourished once again when women became the expendable employees under the NEP budget cuts. Most of the prostitutes were women with no education or skills, whose husbands had divorced them and who were unable to find other work. But many of these prostitutes were young girls who had grown up on the streets, who hadn't enjoyed the material security promised them under the family code.

'Stray Children' The civil war and famine of the early 1920's left the socialized kitchens and child care overwhelmed. The New Economic Policy of 1921 shut down many of these socialized institutions to help the economy recover. Women were supposed to put their children in day care to be raised communally, but the day cares didn't have enough money to feed or clothe the children. The children's homes were flooded with orphans and conditions were often so bad that the children preferred to live on the streets. This led to the problem of *bezprizornost*, which could be translated as 'stray children'. In 1922 there were an estimated 7.5 million 'starving and dying' children in Russia.



Before 1921, when abortion was legalized, women were terminating pregnancies with homemade and makeshift abortions. This poster warns that such abortions could maim and kill and that those who participate in these shady abortions would be prosecuted.

Abortion and Population Crisis

Abortion was made legal and accessible for women. With women being forced into the workplace to support themselves and no one to look after the kids, it makes sense that women utilized abortions as much as they did. In Moscow the number of abortions rose from 19 abortions per 100 births in 1921 to 271 abortions per 100

births in 1934. And this is just the statistic for *legal* abortions.

In theory, Soviet women were liberated through lofty ideology. All that the Bolsheviks had hoped for would have been liberating had it worked properly. Famine, war and economic crisis meant that there was no money left to run the socialized housework and day care that was meant to free women from the hearth. The new policies completely uprooted the peasant way of life and left the agricultural farms in a state of disarray. Work became for women, not so much a sign of their liberation, but a reinforcement of their inferior status. At the end of the day someone had to make the food, clean the house and take care of the children, which meant that women had double the burden and were enslaved all over again. Soviet women's liberation was contingent on services that the state could not provide, the result was destitution in a liberation disguise.

Wendy Goldman sums up this divide between the noble ideals about women's liberation and the realities of post-revolutionary Russia:

"Unemployment, low skills, lack of social services and terrible poverty all mitigated against women's independence from the family unit. The idea of 'free union' had tragic and unforeseen consequences for women as long as they were unable to support themselves and their children. The law, born out of the socialist-libertarian tradition, was painfully at odds with life. In Stel'makhovich's own words, "The liberation of women...without an economic base guaranteeing every worker full material independence, is a myth." (Women, the state and revolution 143)

Who is the Freak that writes this blog?



My name is Janey, I am the Freak Russophile, or Russorexic, as I call it. I am 26 year old American who loves Russia more than anyone else. My heart and life has forever been changed by the rich culture, the poor people and the omnipotent enigma that is Russia.

I went over to teach English, not knowing any Russian, thinking it would just be a nice break from school, only to have my entire world shift as Russia became my mortal center of gravity. On the first day there I fell madly in love and my life has since been made up of my struggles in Russia, or my struggles to survive while out of Russia.

I saved money and went back to study at MGU in the Philology faculty. I studied there for a year, left my stuff and heart in Moscow while I went home for a summer break in 2005. Some things fell out of place and wasn't able to go back, and have been wondering around heart and joy less since.

It has been 2 years since my return to America. I'm married now and settled and happy, but still a little empty. I am lost without Russia, this blog has been an attempt to grapple with the distance, a way of cradling what I do have of Russia, and a way of frantically scrambling for anything more to cradle. Russia has been the one pursuit in my life that has not fizzled, in fact it has only flared and flourished. It continues to give me a deep joy and purpose. In order to wake up in the morning, a bribe myself with promises of blog-writing, Russian-mongering.

To think of the impassioned arguments I've had with my husband about why he feels I will never love him the way I love Russia. And it's true. I probably won't. The relationship I have with Russia almost an abusive one, I can't live with or without her. She beats me up, tears me to shreds, rips me off, and wrings my soul dry of all its love, she doesn't even notice when I'm gone and just seems to go on living without me.

And yet the happiest moments of my life have been there, with her. I felt a depth of love that I never knew possible, living in Russia. And when I had to leave I honestly felt empty and lost and utterly disparaged. At least once a week, I drift off in to a kind of daze, wherein I pine for Russia. I pine for the times I had there, even the rough ones. I pine for all of the things I hated about the place, I pine for the cruelty and manipulation. I pine for that vulnerability that comes when you completely give your heart to something. Russia has power to bring me the highest levels of joy, and the darkest levels of despair. Just like your loved ones do.

Love gets deeper and stronger when you grow and suffer together. I grew and suffered with Russia. I know I'm suffering now, but I don't know if I'm growing any, I think Russia is growing up with out me.

I know I'll never go back to live like the way I did before. But I refuse to let this deep love and passion that I have for the place, the capacity that I have for the language and the insatiable hunger for more, go to waste. If you feel such strong love for something or someone you can't just walk away from it simple because it forces your heart to stretch.