"To Lie Like A Witness"

Civil War-Era Soviet Propaganda Posters at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores Civil War-era propaganda posters as visual sites of ideological construction, rupture, and contradiction in early Soviet Russia. Centered on an un-accessioned selection of Bolshevik and White Army posters from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the study situates these images within broader debates in and around visual rhetoric, institutional and revolutionary modernity, and class in print-media. Rather than reading these works through the oppositional binary of the Civil War, the project traces how each side's visual culture negotiated anxieties around legitimacy, futurity, and historical continuity. Through formal analysis, material context, and cultural theory, the thesis argues that the Civil War poster was not merely agitational, but a polyvalent medium in which tradition and avant-garde, sacred and profane, coalesced. By attending to both style and ideological function, the project repositions Soviet *agitprop* as a formative expression of early twentieth-century visual culture - one that reveals the instability and ambition at the heart of revolutionary art-making.

Wartime iconography was characterized by strongly polyvalent symbols which were open to many different ‘readings’; A soldier was free to choose from various possible interpretations of what was at stake in the war, and he could imagine to be part of a particular community of values - one out of many constructed by the posters.

Mark Edele, *Paper Soldiers: The World of the Soldier Hero*

The truths about me are little stories, anecdotes, incidents, verses, memorized lines I've collected over a lifetime to describe myself to others and myself. These are the memories, the scraps, the bits of clothing for the emperor who is trying to convince the people that he is fully dressed. We start the process as children, when we really don't know who we are (and don't bother to think about it), but are improvising all the while, trying out this and that, putting ourselves in fairy stories, in the pictures we attempt to draw, in everything we encounter because becoming human is the process of acquiring an identity. "Once upon a time. . . " there lived a little girl with my name and my thick braids who did all sorts of things, who became transformed into different people or animals, a fluid entity who could walk into paintings or sail like Thumbelina across the air on the back of a bird.

Kathy Perutz, *He Lies Like an Eye Witness*

My body is a flexible spring,
My passions, a furnace’s flame.
I’ve adopted the machine’s habit
Of being persistent in everything.

Vasillii Aleksandrovskii, *Zavod.*

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Acknowledgements

This project - perhaps best described as a history told from a set of disparate angles rather than from above or below - has taken as its object a wide field: military bonds, labor camps, linguistic practices, folk engravings, and, centrally, an un-accessioned collection of mystery Civil War-era propaganda posters. The source base, like the subject itself, has been diverse and eclectic. Throughout the process, I have consulted, begged, pleaded, and shared half-formed ideas and faint associations with countless individuals - each of whom has informed this work in deeply meaningful ways.

Foremost among them is Edward Saywell, without whose support I would never have stumbled upon, or gained access to, the collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. I am equally grateful to the rest of the Prints and Drawings staff at the MFA - Ben Weiss, Meghan Melvin, Patrick Murphy, and Lauren Cosio - whose encouragement, insight, and generosity of time were crucial to the making of this work.

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Most of all, I thank my mother to whom I dedicate this thesis. Raised as a young musician in the USSR, she immigrated to India with no money and no knowledge of Hindi or English. She built an extraordinary life for herself through sheer grit, a deep love for art making, and an indescribable amount of courage. I thank her for raising me in careful proximity to her own culture, and for teaching me her language.

Medford, Massachusetts, 30 March 2025

Note on Transliteration

All Russian terms, titles, and names in this thesis have been transliterated using a modified Library of Congress system, omitting diacritics for ease of reading. Where relevant, widely recognized English spellings of names (e.g., *Trotsky* rather than *Trotskii*) have been retained for consistency with common usage in English-language scholarship. Original Russian terms and publication titles are given in transliterated form, followed in select cases by Cyrillic in parentheses where clarification is necessary. All translations from the Russian are my own unless otherwise noted.

Introduction

> I've got a feeling we're going to catch up with the Russians. That would be beautiful, Europe burning at both ends.
>
> Conversation in Barcelona, 1917. From Victor Serge, *Birth of Our Power*

This thesis is an attempt to situate the varied paradigms of early Soviet propaganda directives within a theoretical framework, and to ask whether a seemingly top-down mass-media project can also be read as a document of personal and social transformation. By analyzing the representational strategies of Revolutionary and Civil War-era posters, this work proceeds from the assumption that the distinction between 'authentic' culture (i.e., "the people's" culture) and a pejorative reading of 'propaganda' (as an inauthentic expression of popular desire imposed from above) should not be based solely on assumptions drawn from the later Soviet - specifically Stalinist - experience of state-mandated ideological correctness, authoritarian will, and the top-down imposition of elite ideology on non-elite audiences. In examining a period marked by immense uncertainty and a less-than-cohesive governmental infrastructure (as is the case during the Civil War), we instead encounter a synthesis of these elements: a polyphonic discourse around ideological dissemination, the material and symbolic nature of propaganda objects, and the evolving role of culture within a novel social schema.

In the tumultuous aftermath of 1917, as Russia split itself along the jagged frontiers of civil war, the world seemed cleaved in two: the crimson of revolution, the pallor of reaction, the 'new dawn', and the 'old order'. Culture became a battle over form, a stage for a *Manichaean* drama in which every figure was either hero or villain, every image either salvation or damnation.

While propaganda invites us to see the Civil War as a confrontation of opposites, such a reading captures only a fraction of the deeper, more contradictory reality. The Bolsheviks plastered walls with fiery scenes of factory workers and peasants rising to

smite kings and capitalists; White Guard propagandists answered with stark visions of a Motherland trampled by godless hordes, calling patriots to defend faith and country. Each side spoke in absolutes and vivid antinomies. But each was also schismatic, presenting one truth to the 'enemy' and another to itself. The Bolshevik print - so confident in its depiction of the radiant proletarian future - often concealed an internal debate about the very path to that end. Likewise, the White poster, for all its appeals to unity and tradition, betrayed anxieties roiling within the anti-Bolshevik cause. Amid the White Army's holy icons and double-headed eagles, one sees the cracks of a fragmented coalition and the uneasy marriage of nostalgia for past authority with aspirations toward a vision of modernity.

Within the Bolshevik program, a profound duality often lurked beneath the image of revolutionary rupture. The Bolsheviks cast themselves as torch-bearers of a new world, yet their posters frequently drew on the symbols and myths of the old. Classical allegories, Orthodox saints' halos, the specters of past tyrannies, all appeared in hackneyed form, repurposed to serve the revolutionary cause. This was no accident, but a reflection of the young regime's internal dialogue: how to forge the future without entirely severing the past. A Bolshevik poster might denounce the bourgeoisie in savage caricature while borrowing the very aesthetic model of imperial art academies; it might exalt industrial modernity in its message while its style harkens to folk broadsides or religious iconography. Such posters are bold manifestos of progress, all the while alluding to a heritage seemingly too precious to denounce, revealing a revolution torn between iconoclasm and inheritance. On the rhetorical level, Red propaganda had to balance a utopian promise against the practical need to mobilize a war-weary populace. The result was a visual discourse rife with paradox: at once forward-looking and steeped in history, truth-telling and myth-making.

Within the White camp's imagery, no lesser of a paradox unfolded. The White coalition – a tenuous alliance of monarchists, liberals, Cossack warlords, and foreign sponsors – yearned to portray themselves as the singular embodiment of Holy Russia and national salvation. Their posters projected strength and unity through familiar motifs: the noble Orthodox cross warding off a red dragon, or a proud slavic warrior-prince rallying his people. And yet, these too often masked the Whites' ideological fissures. The White posters lionized the past – idealizing the Tsarist era or invoking Russia's ancient glory – even as the movement struggled to articulate a coherent vision of the future it promised. In their posters, we see a desperate attempt to stop time, to make mythology out of crisis: painting the Bolsheviks as alien invaders or traitors, the Whites implicitly cast themselves as guardians of a precious, 'eternal' truth. And yet, all the while, their imagery is suffused with a palpable anxiety - an unease that betrays the fragility of the very truth they claim to guard. Many White posters railed against so-called 'Bolshevik deceits' and 'red lies,' insisting on their purity, all while employing the very tools of exaggerated (perhaps, manipulative) mass-communication that the new age of industrialized propaganda afforded. This tension – between a romanticized yesterday and an uncertain tomorrow – lent White propaganda a tone of fevered contradiction, the voice of a cause that had to invoke tradition as its anchor even while it innovated (however reluctantly) in the art of persuasion.

Seen in this light, the Civil War-era poster emerges as more than a blunt instrument of political messaging; it becomes a mirror held to the revolutionary experience, reflecting not only who was friend or foe, but the conflicted identities within the friend, within the foe. The Red and White posters were lies that aspired to truth, each side's imagery carefully crafted to "lie like a witness," testifying with passionate certainty to its own narrative, often laced with ambiguities. 'To Lie Like A Witness', the title of this thesis, draws on this old Russian saying; to do so is to have been *present*, to see the

moment of action. 'To Lie Like A Witness' is to recount the story, to *narrate*, to guide the non-witness through the event, to record history. In writer Kathy Pertuz's words:

> An eye witness knows what he or she saw, but doesn't thereby know what happened. The key is in the word eye/I, the center of it all, the one who tells the story, narrates the novel, creates the history. The one to whom it happened, as The Great Gatsby happened to Nick Carraway, as Moby Dick happened to Ishmael, as my life happened to me and yours to you. Except, says the wise old saying, it didn't. Not that way, not really. Ask someone else. Your mother if you can, your brother, your best friend from first grade. It never happened at all, or if it did, if some vestige of your witnessing falls on receptive ears, then maybe it did happen, but not in the way you remember. It was winter, not summer, the ground was covered with frost, not the petals of pear blossoms, and no one ever said what you thought they said, or what you reconstructed them as saying out of your wish to make a story where there is none, to wrest meaning from the cold dry ground because such memories convince you of your own importance or relevance. [1]

In its exploration of these dueling and doubled meanings, this thesis approaches Civil War-era Soviet propaganda posters as dynamic texts alive with contestation and contrast. In the chapters that follow, my aim is not to catalogue artistic styles or list historical events, but to dwell in the play of contradictions that animated the language of Bolshevik and Counter-Revolutionary propaganda alike. Revolutionary fervor and conservative zeal, hope and fear, truth and fabrication - these opposing forces converged in the propaganda image, giving it a strangely scattered voice despite its seeming outward singular intent. By listening to that voice, by reading the posters for the poetic and political dialectics they contain, I find, one gains a deeper understanding of how, in one of history's most wrenching upheavals, art and ideology entwined to both mask and reveal the realities of a fractured nation.

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[1] Kathy Perutz, "He Lies Like an Eye Witness," *HuffPost*, November 15, 2017. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/he-lies-like-an-eye-wtness_b_5a0cf250e4b03fe7403f8301.

While the Civil War poster may have binarized Russia into revolution and its other, it also invites questions that move beyond the structurally oppositional dimensions of the conflict: How did revolutionary art reconcile the promise of utopia with the grit of daily survival? Where do we discern flickers of doubt, fatigue, or disillusionment beneath the bombast of propaganda? In what ways did cultural traditions resurface even as activists strove to 'create a new world from scratch'? Such questions frame the inquiry at hand. They shift our focus from the overt narrative of an 'us' and 'them' tragedy to the subtle fault lines that ran through the revolutionary and the reactionary project itself – fault lines often less discussed but no less crucial. The tumult of 1918–21 quickly moved beyond a contest of arms or a battle of slogans towards a unique ideological confrontation over the meaning of Russia's past and future, played out on the cultural front. And it is in the cultural arena – in art, media, and everyday ritual – that the era's revolutionary tension reveals its most poignant contradictions. This thesis thus seeks to move past the surface *Manichaeism* and explore the revolution's '*inner shadows*': the uneasy blend of rupture and continuity, of myth and reality, that defined the Civil War experience.

A look at the historical discourse around this period reveals how much remains to be said. Traditionally, historians of the Russian Civil War have dwelled on high politics and military maneuvers, treating culture as a footnote. Western scholarship long focused on generals and battles, diplomacy and decrees – understandably so, given the drama of events and the scarcity of cultural sources under early Soviet secrecy. Only in the late 20th century did this begin to change. Since the 1980s, a wave of studies has turned attention toward the social and cultural dimensions of the Civil War, illuminating how propaganda, art, and popular experience shaped the conflict's course. Scholars like Victoria Bonnel, Peter Kenez and Stephen White (among many others) have shown that the Bolsheviks' posters were not mere accessories to victory but central to their effort to "remold" society. Even so, much of this scholarship has naturally centered on the triumphant Bolsheviks. The *counterpoint* – the cultural output of the defeated Whites –

has often been sidelined or dismissed as ineffectual. Contemporary observers and later historians alike tended to view White propaganda as a failure, hampered by the Whites' own ambivalence and disunity. Indeed, White officers in exile would later lament that their movement never mustered a rousing vision to match the Reds' nearly perfect propaganda apparatus. This thesis engages with these historiographical currents but also pushes beyond them. By giving the White poster campaign its due alongside its Bolshevik counterpart, it aims to shed light on a neglected facet of the conflict's cultural history. The goal is not to rehabilitate White propaganda's efficacy – even its creators doubted that – but to understand what its themes, struggles, and silences reveal about the wider revolutionary crisis. In exploring both visual narratives in tandem, one can grasp how a society at war *with* itself sought to explain and justify that war *to* itself. Was the conflict, as often portrayed, simply a contest of two incompatible visions – or did it force each side to confront questions uncomfortably similar at their core?

The sheer breadth of posters and 'posterly discourse' produced during this period and its immediate aftermath has necessitated a more selective approach on my part in determining which visual records to explore. To that end, I have designed this project to focus exclusively on objects from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston's collection of early Soviet propaganda posters. This choice was both practical and proximate: having previously served as a Curatorial Intern in the MFA's Department of Prints and Drawings, I was already largely familiar with their holdings, and by structuring this project around those posters, I have been able to handle, observe, and study them in person. This focus has steered me away from certain prominent aspects of Civil War-era propaganda - such as Mayakovsky's ROSTA Windows series - in favor of understudied cultural programs, including White Army counter-revolutionary posters. It has allowed for a focused engagement with key oppositional dynamics, alongside a tempered, cautious comparativism that, hopefully, sheds greater light on the sheer diversity of opinion present in this unique moment.

In the chapters that follow, a conscious effort is made to weave the historiographical, ideological, and aesthetic strands of my argument together. Chapter One opens with a critical survey of existing literature and source material – a historiography of the Bolshevik Civil War-era poster. In this chapter, I explore how earlier scholars and contemporary observers understood the propaganda directive, and where gaps in the record invite fresh inquiry. This foundation sets the stage for the thesis's body. Chapter Two then moves to the White front, retracing the cultural logic of the counter-revolution. It examines a selection of White posters and proclamations in their social context, analyzing how the anti-Bolshevik cause represented itself and what internal contradictions simmered beneath its appeals. Here, the aim is to understand the Whites on their own terms – not merely as foils to the Bolsheviks, but as a self-contained ideological universe with its own aspirations and anxieties. Chapter Three shifts focus to the Red front, dissecting the Bolsheviks' visual narrative through the concept of what I've called "plakat logic" – the strategic use of posters to mobilize, educate, and mythologize. By closely reading the imagery and rhetoric of key Bolshevik posters, this chapter illuminates how revolutionary authorities attempted to "imprint" their ideals on the public mind, and how they balanced the forward thrust of revolution with the practical need to maintain unity and morale. Across these chapters, the analysis remains attentive to the cultural contradictions highlighted above: the interplay of new and old, unity and division, fantasy and reality.

In tracing this arc, *To Lie Like A Witness* ultimately argues that the posters of the Russian Civil War were far more than 'propaganda', in how this word is understood contemporarily; they were arenas of struggle in their own right, places where a fractious society grappled with its dreams and doubts. They "*lied*" with the sincerest of intentions - and in those very lies, we find invaluable truths about a society in search of itself.

All figures included in this thesis were photographed by me and are part of the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. For a complete list of images, refer to the 'Figures' section at the end of the thesis.

Chapter One

A Historiography of Civil War-Era Bolshevik Posters

"… The poster - the art of the masses,
with it the artist steps towards the people."[2]

This chapter aims to explore the varying strategies used by Soviet theorists in their attempts at tracing an artistic lineage for the military-agitational socialist poster. In centering their texts, I hope to flesh out a picture of what was at stake for these writers, and what might've been the 'prize,' as it were, of a well-canonized poster medium.

This section opens with an examination of the discursive tensions surrounding cultural continuity in Civil War-era Soviet Russia. In framing socialism as something 'radically novel,' and in it having evolved from the most violent of militant disruptions - revolution itself - the Bolsheviks found themselves having to mediate between past and future. This problem took shape on both cultural and administrative fronts; a key conflict was between proponents of radical novelty, a historically de-tethered proletarian identity invented 'from thin air' after the October Revolution, and those who sought to tap into, and revive, century-old traditions. I briefly focus on how this manifested in questions around 'representation' - both bureaucratic and artistic.

Then, I contextualize the state of publishing in Civil War-era USSR, pointing to the material and symbolic constraints inherited by the printing industry. I highlight the role of the 'trade poster' as an arbiter between reality and aspiration, between past and present. Here, I work through frameworks provided by Soviet theorists Vyacheslav

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[2] M. I. Kalinin, cited in A. Y. Nurok, Sovetskii plakat v bor'be za kommunizm (Moscow: Akademija chudožestv USSR, 1962), 6

Polonskii, Boris Butnik-Siberskii and Nikolai Tarabukin, among others, and explore how their differing views on the influence of advertising traditions on the military-revolutionary poster point to alternative sources for a novel Soviet culture.

Following this, I attempt to tease out the polyvalence of the term 'propaganda' in colloquial Soviet usage. My aim here is to highlight the extent to which propaganda (and propaganda posters) blurred the line between 'education' and 'information.' Fundamentally, I hope to signal the extent to which posters can help one place the Bolshevik ideology within its varied paradigms. I do this by exploring the symbolic imbalance in the act of teaching, the relationship between 'learner' and 'learned,' and the development of a class-based identity of the propaganda poster.

I ask: whose culture *did* the military-revolutionary poster reflect? I explore some of the stakeholders in this search. This question is integral to the definition of an ontologically distinct Soviet culture, and arguably, a distinct USSR; I flesh out the ways in which this was approached - from thinking about the illustrated broadside, the *lubok,* early instantiations of the military poster (in late Imperial Russia and through the short-lived Provisional Government) through to the Russian tradition of Icon painting, and the larger problems of cultural heritage.

Finally, I explore the problem of continuity in the cultural sphere - Why was identifying this key to the educational program of the nascent USSR? What ways of thinking does this open us up to?

My aim is to highlight the extent to which the propagandistic program of poster production in Civil War-era USSR prefaced questions broached some twenty years later -

from the role of art in a socialist system to the role of culture in producing socialism itself.

I am less interested in ascribing a 'proven' historically accurate set of cultural artifacts/symbols/visual language(s) in tracing the development of the *plakat*.[3] I will also almost solely focus on the *Bolshevik* poster in this chapter, focusing on other contemporary posters later in this work. Here, I want to center the heterogeneity of this moment in time in Soviet cultural discourse, between a past that couldn't be wholly rejected and a future that wasn't wholly apparent.

Historical Baggage: Cultural Reception in Early Soviet Thought

With that, it is important to acknowledge that Civil War-era Soviet 'culture' does, in fact, reflect a two-fold break from and strong (re-) alignment with Tsarist/Orthodox/de-centralized, pre-revolutionary Russian ideals. It was also both a move *against* and *toward* Euro-style mass-industrialized manufacturing/cultural production.

This is evident in some of the shibboleths of Bolshevik-tinged revolutionary socialism; the notion of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' for one, was quite firmly centered in this paradoxical state of reception/rejection. As a politics, it reflects theorist Gayatri Spivak's 'affirmative-sabotage' - an appropriation of the tools of a dominant discourse for critical intervention. A 'breaking of the master's house with the

[3] I will refer to the Bolshevik poster as a military-revolutionary, socialist and propagandistic poster interchangeably. I will also refer to it as a '*plakat,*' the Russian term for a political poster.

master'stools'[4]. For some, it was important to center this 'master' (as stand-in for a whole host of changing ideas - capitalism, bourgeois culture, a market economy, currency…) in their ideology, for others, the master seemingly did not exist anymore.

The state of Soviet cultural discourse around the *plakat* is important because the military-agitational poster was never, in fact, conceived by the masses.[5] It was formulated in *their* name by well-educated Bolshevik party members - elites - who were operating, at the time of the Civil War, in a similar realm of symbolic discourse as the burgeoning avant-garde, and who had, assimilated and reproduced many of the talking points of the logic of avant-gardist breaks in the USSR.

This logic of rupture - and the effort to define its operative dimensions - became central to the organization of the new administrative state. For the Bolshevik party apparatus, this reared its head in a whole set of ways - what relation would the state have with national industry, what role would a market economy play in a socialist polity, and whether a bureaucracy could viably function within a socialist system. The establishment of various commissariats within the Bolshevik Party worked through the real problem of representation. The symbolic role of the representative as having 'vested' power and the question of the bureaucrat's class was in need of much disentanglement. Even more pressing was the collective memory of Tsarist bureaucracy - seen by many, Party elites and working class alike, as structurally oppressive.

The question of bureaucracy figured in a period of immense factional struggle within the Bolshevik party. These disagreements often centered on the practice of filling

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[4]Audre Lorde first voiced the famous statement "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" as part of her remarks on "The Personal and the Political" panel at the Second Sex Conference in New York on September 29, 1979. Spivak's affirmative sabotage argues that you *can* in fact perform such a maneuver, in 'affirmative sabotage' one chips away from within. See: Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*(Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–113. For Spivak's strategy, see: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 4

[5] This discourse, in turn, was almost solely engaged in by the elite bureaucratic strata of the Bolshevik Party.

party positions by appointment (specifically by nomination from the Central Committee in Moscow) rather than by local election, and the use of 'bourgeois specialists' in the Red Army; much of this factional crisis within the Bolshevik party hinged on the question of class.

Where this debate carried on for a considerable duration of the early 1920s, the existential threat posed by the Civil War demanded a more responsive, perhaps 'realistic', strategy. The threat was two-fold: the mobilization of a volunteer army on the part of the White Guard (arguably the best-organized amongst the diverse counter-revolutionary Civil War coalitions) was, in turn, contrasted by a pressing shortage of working-class specialists for the Bolsheviks.

The crisis of 'appointmentism' and representation was quickly seized upon by the White Guard. In Figure 1, a pamphlet titled 'People's Power?' presents one such critique: "The Bolsheviks are great masters of beautiful words," it reads, "having seized power, they came up with a new name for themselves… 'the people's commissars'." It continues - "and there are many simpletons who really believed that the commissars were indeed 'people's people'… are they really?"

Within the Bolshevik Party, both the Left Communist and the Military Opposition attacked Trotsky's policy of appointing former Tsarist generals to head the Red Army. The party opinion was divided on class lines, with working-class members doubting the specialists' loyalty to the revolutionary cause. In *The Cultural Front,* historian Sheila Fitzpatrick explores this crisis within the Bolshevik Party, highlighting the extent to which the notion of *makhaevshchina* - a rejection of the intelligentsia's contribution to the revolutionary movement, drawing on the writings of Polish socialist Jan Machajski - surfaced as a front-of-mind question for the Bolshevik Party.

This tension is evident in a 1922 address by the trade union leader Mikhail Tomskii, who acknowledged growing popular resentment toward the use of specialists in revolutionary institutions:

… of course the mood of the masses - as a result of hunger, aspirations to equality at any cost - has been against the specialists. The specialists lives better, he is paid better; the specialist gives orders, makes demands; the specialist is an alien entity, the specialist did not make the October Revolution.[6]

On the cultural front, the historical relationship between Party intellectuals and workers was one of tutelage. The 'Old Party'[7] had developed their relationship with the working-class through adult education classes in factories, and positioned themselves not solely as revolutionaries, but as "enlighteners of the people."[8]

Some party-members did, in fact, realize their privileged class position (as elites, as an 'intelligentsia.') They had shared in the aristocratic-bourgeois culture that was dominant in the society that reared them, and as such, were particularly anxious to bridge the cultural gulf separating them from the very workers they claimed to represent.

In mid-1917, a number of the members of a former faction within the Bolshevik Party (the Vperedists, or the *Forwardists*) created what can only be called a 'think-tank' , for lack of better terms, aimed to bolster the development of a distinctly proletarian culture: *Proletkult* (short for *Proletarnaya Kultura,* or 'Proletarian Culture.') "The basic theoretical premise of *Proletkult* was that the working class must spontaneously develop its own culture, distinct from [that of] the formerly dominant bourgeoisie."[9]

This attempt at developing a distinctly proletarian culture proved immensely controversial. This project sparked controversy from the outset. Many critics viewed it as

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[6] XI s"ezd RKP(b), Mart-aprel' 1922 g.: Stenograficheskii otchet (Moscow, 1961), 279, cited in Sheila Fitzpatrick, Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 27

[7] This idea of the 'The Old Party' draws on the writing of Sheila Fitzpatrick and Richard Stites, both of whom speak to the pre-revolutionary dynamics of Bolshevism within late-Imperial Russia.

[8] Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front,* 19

[9] Ibid. p. 20

yet another top-down imposition, wherein intellectuals once again claimed to speak on behalf of the proletariat rather than fostering a truly autonomous workers' culture. For if the goal was the 'spontaneous development' of a proletarian culture, why exactly should the ruling elites set up and run this organization? Even graver was the fact of matter that no such readily available cultural field could be ascribed as 'proletarian' - "What was true proletarian culture, and how could it be recognized?"[10]

The role of intellectualists in *Proletkult* could never be fully justified. To be sure, there were attempts at explaining away their 'responsibility' in outlining a working-class culture; The *Proletkultist* V. Kunavin wrote that *Proletkult*, similar to the Bolsheviks in their political sphere, based itself on the proletarian vanguard, "the more cultured and advanced stratum"[11] of the working class… "Unfortunately," he continued, "as is well known, our proletariat stands on a rather low level of development in a cultural sense."[12]

The actual *development* of a 'proletarian culture' - and ascertaining what that entailed - proved almost insurmountable. "All Marxist intellectuals agreed, without even thinking about it, that proletarian culture had little or nothing to do with observable popular lower-class habits and cultural tastes."[13] "Vulgar," "tasteless," or "trivial" culture was 'obviously not proletarian';[14] and if workers engaged in such 'popular lower-class habits' they had clearly been infected with petty-bourgeois attitudes.

Evidently then, the politics of representation played an immensely disruptive role in the early Bolshevik administrative state. Class struggle and hostility toward bourgeois

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[10] Ibid. p. 20

[11] Proletarskaia kul'tura, 1920 no. 17-19, p. 74.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Fitzpatrick p. 21

[14] Jeffrey Brooks, 'Competing Modes of Popular discourse: Individualism and Class Consciousness in the Russian Print Media, 1880-1928,' in Culture et révolution, ed. Marc Ferro and Sheila Fitzpatrick, pp. 71-81 (Paris, 1989)

cultural specialists was framed *against* the vanguardist party. It was within this fractured cultural terrain that the socialist poster emerged - not simply as a vehicle for messaging, but as a performative answer to the very crisis of representation that haunted the early Soviet project.

The Trade-Poster in Pre-Revolutionary Times

Until the outbreak of the Civil War, the Russian poster was generally regarded as a relatively underdeveloped medium. The first international exhibition of 'artistic' posters, organized in Paris in 1897, for one, saw Tsarist Russia display only 28 of the 727 posters on show.[15] Most poster-prints of the late nineteenth century were non socio-political in nature - drawing mainly on the developed tradition of advertising through print-media, as seen in England and France.

Perhaps most importantly, the commercial poster existed as a frame of reference for the later revolutionary socialist lithograph, as an example of the role of art within bourgeois, capitalist economies. Vyachelsav Polonskii, editor and manager of the Red Army publishing wing of VTSIK, wrote extensively of the "deadness" of the commercial poster. For him, "the best examples of commercial posters, despite their formal merits turn[-ed] out to be dead works of art." It was in its service to capital, that the poster "[contained] insignificant literary content… a complete lack of ideas."[16] To him, no matter how the artist approached their content, the requirements of a trade poster, in its literary theme, did not go beyond prescriptive provisions - top-down requirements dictated by the needs of capital. The limited nature of this 'theme,' "made it easier to create and, at the same time, deprive it of any inspirational pathos."[17]

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[15] V. K. Okhochinskii, Plakat: Razvitie i primenenie (Leningrad, 1928) 64

[16] Vyacheslav Polonskii, *Russkii revoliutsionnyi plakat* (Moscow:Gos. izd-vo, 1925), 11

[17] Ibid. p. 12

It is interesting that these charges of 'manipulativeness' leveled at the revolutionary propagandistic poster by Western writing on Soviet propaganda, were in turn, projected on to the Western 'derivative' trade poster: "Capitalism acquired, in the artist, an incomparable servant who possessed the skill of psychological suggestion…"[18]

Needless to say, the Russian trade poster responded to its own economic and material circumstances. While the state of the Russian publishing was no where at par with the industrialized printing presses in Western Europe, the quality of paper, ink and labour available to the pre-revolutionary publishing industry was much higher than in later years. The spread of printed material in late imperial Russia was largely shaped by market demand; the commercial poster print developed in tandem with a whole slew of trade books, pamphlets and newspapers, and was equally dependent upon the economic conditions that helped facilitate this mass-market. This included a steady supply of paper, machines and trained personnel.

In addition to Western-European models, the Russian advertising print was also informed by the existence of printed announcements in the public sphere - the so-called '*affiches*' or notices: "Hand-painted signs with image and text [that] were an integral part of the Russian urban landscape until the early 1920s."[19]

While most *affiches* were simple pieces of text announcing certain products for sale, some evolved into more complex notices, with multiple images advertising a kind of life-style associated with the product. These *affiches* dotted urban Russia as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. In 1842, the writer P. Vistngoff spoke of newspapers containing these 'ornate' notices: "The *affiches* alone, printed to announce festivities, will

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[18] Ibid. p. 10

[19] Klaus Waschik and Nina Baburina, Realnost' utopii: Iskusstvo russkogo plakata XX veka (Moscow, 2004) 13

certainly arouse curiosity, and I know people from [St. Petersburg] who are impatiently awaiting the *Moskovskie Vedomosti*, just to admire its notices."[20]

These *affiches* are sometimes credited as the first publicly visible efforts in urban Russia to integrate image and text in a semi-narrative or persuasive form.[21] This project was further developed in the growing Russian book trade. The magazine *Mir Iskusstva* (or the 'World of Art') was at the forefront of an 'Art Nouveau' revivalist movement in Russia. Founded in 1898, the magazine Mir Iskusstva organized exhibitions across the empire and employed an impressive repertoire of contemporary graphic artists - a 'who's who' of early 20th century bourgeois culture, from Eugene Lanceray to Ivan Bilbin, among many others. Klaus Waschik and Nina Baburina write: "The artists of the *Mir Iskusstva* group [attributed] great importance to the arrangement of elements in the book - for example, the relationship between image and text, line and color."[22] Founding member and art critic Alexander Benois attests to this developing interest among *miriskusniki*:[23]

> It is not enough to invent… a cover, a vignette… much more important are questions of a so-called 'compositional' nature. An artist working on a book must first of all (and before any thoughts about ornamentation) turn his attention to the basic requirements of *beauty* in a book… to the development of its format, quality, the surface and color of the paper, the placement of text on a page… A book can become beautiful without a single decoration, and conversely, all the decorations can *make* a book if the basic requirements are missing.[24]

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[20] P. Vistngoff, *Essays on Muscovite Life,* 1842 - *Moscoovskie Vedmosti* was Russia's largest newspaper by circulation before it was overtaken by St. Petersburg dailies in the mid-19th century. It was established by Moscow University in 1756.

[21] See, for example, Klaus Waschik and Nina Baburina, *Realnost' utopii: Iskusstvo russkogo plakata XX vela* (Moscow, 2004).

[22] Ibid. p. 22

[23] Members of the movement were often colloquially referred to as *miriskusniki* - a term later seized upon by the avant-garde to describe all that was overly decadent and passé in contemporary Russian art.

[24] Waschik, Baburina, *Realnost Utopii,* p. 22

The impact of the book on the 'artistic poster' was hugely relevant for the *miriskusniki*, they thought of these posters as having grown "out of illustrations from predominantly textual posters."[25]

One of the most in-demand weekly magazines of pre-revolutionary Russia, the journal Niva, annually commissioned graphic artists to create a poster advertising magazine subscriptions. This included a number of eminent turn of the century book designers, illustrators and printmakers, including N. Samokish, V. Svarog, and I. Goryushkin-Sorokopudov. These posters, (as rendered in figure 2), synthesized some of the Art-Nouveau/*Mir Iskusstva* features that defined Russian graphic-arts at this moment: replete with vignettes, ornate pattern and a stylized, sinuous form.

The late nineteenth-century, (or the 'hothouse of capitalism,' as this period was referred to), created favorable conditions for the rapid formation of a larger Russian bourgeoisie. In 1894, the Russian Minister of Finance Count Witte attracted significant foreign capital to the country's rapidly developing metallurgic industries. With this, there was a boom in the publishing trade - mass-produced advertisements began dotting Russian cities for the first time. The poster appeared everywhere from exhibition stands, shopfronts, alley walls and parades. Though largely apolitical in content, these posters introduced the Russian public to a mode of mass visual persuasion that the Bolsheviks would later harness, critique, and radically reinvent. Even while the circle of potential buyers was limited to the upper-class, this poster was intended to appeal to a wider audience, as a sales-pitch to the empire's increasing cosmopolitanism.

Sometimes, these trade-posters resorted to depicting entire industrial enterprises, which soon evolved into *the* defining motif of this period. Much like in later Soviet posters, the factory setting (or the *zavod*) hinted at the image of an economically prosperous Russia, in which an abundance of goods came paired with tremendous

[25] Ibid. p. 23

purchasing power on the part of its population: “If we consider in posters, the basis of the image of technical innovation - it becomes clear that the advertising poster became, mainly a visual reflection of the industrialization of Russia at the onset of the 20th century.”[26]

This period proved short lived. Economic problems caused by the First World War were felt acutely on the publishing trade. Paper shortages reached crisis levels, exacerbated by the loss of the Baltic provinces, which had previously supplied over half the empire’s printing stock. The quantity of paper and cardboard production fell to a low of less than 10 percent of 1913 levels (392,000 tons) during 1919-21 (29,700 tons).[27]

"When the foreign-made printing machines broke down, they could not be replaced, and since spare parts were not available, they could not easily be repaired, either.”[28] The number of functioning lithography presses, in turn, fell from about 640 in 1912, by more than a hundred, to 531 in 1922.[29] The reduction in the total output of printed material led to mass unemployment among printers. The Bolsheviks, having come to power in 1917, were uninterested in nationalizing the trade - realizing that complete nationalization could mean further deterioration of printing conditions and unemployment. It is in this context that the early revolutionary government allowed private printing to continue in the first years of their government, whilst nationalizing certain shops that they saw as necessary for printing agitational materials.

In publishing, as in all other realms of Bolshevik administrative interest, there was, clearly, an inheritance of material realities that shaped their ability to act in their manner of choice. This ‘inheritance’ was also not solely material; Inarguably, the most

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[26] Ibid. p. 23

[27] Peter Kenez, “Lenin and the Freedom of the Press” in Bolshevik Culture, ed. Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 168

[28] Peter Kenez, The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 96

[29] Ibid.

important ideological hereditament of the Bolshevik state was the 'book of Marxism' and it was in the process of turning this book into 'real life', that certain breaks came into the foray. In his *Birth of the Propaganda State,* Peter Kenez explores one such ideological 'break'. For him, the Bolsheviks had come into power believing that their task was not to "search for [revolutionary] knowledge for that had already been achieved"[30] but rather to spread it. Their duty was to teach the book of Marxism. And herein lay Lenin's fundamental revision of Marxist thought - the rejection of the Marxist notion that in the process of class struggle, necessary class consciousness would develop in and of itself, thus, bringing about the revolution. In his famous pamphlet 'What is to be done?' Lenin reflected: "The history of all countries show that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness."[31]

This moment reveals a fundamental ideological contradiction: if knowledge - rather than lived experience - is the source of class consciousness, then the Party becomes the sole legitimate educator. For Kenez, agreeing with Lenin would have us "repudiate a [central] tenet of Marxism… [for a] move towards Hegel."[32] In other words, the belief was that the oppressed class had to be led, because they were incapable of understanding their own interests unaided. One can see why this came across as pejorative - the vanguardist party positioned itself as the only entity capable of leading the proletariat, almost solely on the basis of a *better* understanding of history. Kenez reflects: "it is evident that Bolshevik thought had a great deal of condescension toward the Russian people in general and toward the proletariat in particular."[33]

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[30] Ibid. p. 5

[31] Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 31.

[32] Ibid. p. 6

[33] Ibid.

A Military-Revolutionary Aesthetic Education

The early administrative structure of propaganda production keys us into the co-attribution of education with 'agitation' in the developing Bolshevik apparatus; some of the first Bolshevik agencies responsible for poster production were managed by *Glavpolitprosvet* (the Main Political and Educational Committee of the RSFSR) which in turn was under the management of *Narkompros* (the People's Commissariat of Education/ Enlightenment)[34]. To educate was to propagandize, which in turn was to 'enlighten'. The term 'propaganda' was, at this point in time, used interchangeably with *politprosvetrabota* (or - work done toward political enlightenment.) And this stance, that of wanting 'to educate' is in turn rooted quite securely in an unequal power dynamic - that of the learner and the learned. In this relationship of the 'teacher' and the 'taught', the assumptions is, as Sheila Fitzpatrick puts it, that the "teacher possesses a higher culture, which the student needs and wishes to acquire."[35] To the Bolsheviks, their role seemed quite obvious - they were proselytizing, they wielded this 'higher' culture.

This pedagogical imperative was not new to the Bolsheviks. As Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, pre-revolutionary leftist agitation in Imperial Russia already relied on a kind of 'collective self-consciousness' that "created the Russian intelligentsia in the mid-nineteenth century… [which] was, above all, consciousness of a mission to enlighten… to act as critic and conscience of the state."[36]

To me, it seems like this is where an 'outsider' collective picture of Soviet propaganda ends. It rests with its pejorativeness, its didacticism, and is comfortable

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[34] The name *Narkompros* stood for *Narodnii Komiissariat Prosvesheniya,* or the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment. It was a Soviet agency charged with the administration of public education. Until 1946, it was known as the 'Commissariat for Enlightenment,' after which it was changed into the 'Ministry of Education.'

[35]Sheila Fitzpatrick, Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 19.

[36] Ibid., p. 5

decreeing it as a wholly top-down venture. From this perspective, however, I find we lose the nuances of the very thing we term 'propaganda'. In his study of Soviet Russian and Nazi German film propaganda, Richard Taylor speaks to this semantic distinction; for him, if one were to distinguish propaganda from 'information' and 'publicity' (as I am attempting to do), one would have to "divest [it of its] pejorative connotations."[37]

It is important, also, to remember that if it was in fact the case that Bolshevik propaganda production remained content in operating from the vantage point of the teacher, it would, frankly, be very boring: "Propaganda is not effective by the mere fact that it is propaganda."[38] Bolshevik posters were able to move beyond this, or at the very least, they were able to obscure this 'power play' in very sophisticated ways.

Finally, it is also important to push the term 'propaganda' away from the word's contemporary polyvalence and re-center it within Russian colloquial usage during the early Soviet period. Then, the word 'propaganda' was not a negative term, rather, "it was the higher, more abstract form of the political activity known as 'agitation' (*agitatsiia)*."[39] Agitation, in turn, was the push to mobilize a community into action - whether to pool collective funds, volunteer, take a night course to learn to read or get vaccinated.

Lenin in 1903, expanding on a distinction made by the Marxist theorist Georgii Plekhanov, thought of agitation as presenting "a single idea to the masses."[40] Wherein propaganda, presented "many ideas… so many, indeed, that they will be widely

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[37] Richard Taylor, Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, 2nd ed. (Cinema and Society) (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 7.

[38] Mark Edele, "*Paper Soldiers: The World of the Soldier Hero According to Soviet Wartime Posters"* in Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas, 1999-01, Vol. 47 (1), p. 89-108: 91.

[39] Elizabeth A. Papazian, "*Literacy or Legibility: The Trace of Subjectivity in Soviet Socialist Realism,*" in The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies, ed. Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67–90.

[40] Taylor, Film Propaganda, 26

understood as an integral whole only by a (comparatively) few persons."[41] Indeed, a kind of world-building necessitating a birds-eye point of view.

Elizabeth Papazian considers Lenin's distinction as pointing us to a more complex "web of cultural associations that would reflect, reinforce, and in turn shape the political, social and economic system."[42] She warns us, however, that to "assert a complete identity of art and propaganda (even if claiming this identity only under conditions of the state's constraint of discourse and bodies) is to risk losing the meaning of both terms."[43] In the Soviet state, propaganda as an "attempt to influence public opinions through the transmission of ideas and values"[44] points us away from the world of art, towards social organization writ large. This tension - between persuasive rhetoric and enacted reality - recalls Hannah Arendt's distinction between propaganda and totalitarian organization. She found totalitarian movements to be those that "do not actually propagate but indoctrinate," something that is inevitably structurally "coupled with terror."[45]

For her, the totalitarian state wielded propaganda as a means to address the outsider - the non-totalitarian world - beyond its line of control. Arendt referred, instead to "totalitarian organization," which is, at its core, made "to translate the propaganda lies of the movement… into a functioning reality, to build up… a society whose members act and react according to the rules of a fictitious world."[46]

Papazian finds this distinction between 'totalitarian organization' and 'propaganda lies' as "foreground[ing] the coexistence of discursive and non discursive aspects of

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Papazian, *Literacy or Legibility*, 81

[43] Ibid.

[44] Taylor, *Film Propaganda* 31

[45] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 344.

[46] Ibid., 365

Soviet 'cultural construction' (of discourse and practice)."[47] The creation of a novel cultural realm, to her, cannot be equated with the 'pejorative' definition of propaganda in a one-to-one correlation, for "the former's aims are not merely persuasive, but transformative."[48] This is quite firmly in line with the early Soviet picture of propaganda, where a "new world, of new ideas… would look out at [people] from [the] poster every day."[49]

To me, it would seem the machinery of socialist representation - as expressed through the poster - mirrors Michel Foucault's conception of power, not simply as repressive, but as productive:

> We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors,' it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.[50]

In their having to 'produce' this reality and 'reflect' a pre-existing social system, *plakats* had to approach the popular psyche closely, in one form or another, in order to be convincing. For some, the *plakat* was able to mask its didacticism by de-centering itself from the state. For Polonskii, this project was immensely successful, so much so that it re-categorized the military-political poster as a product of 'the streets'. He wrote of the poster as "a product of the industrial city with its fever of movement, competition and the slogan of streets and squares…"[51] Formally, the poster had to veil its instructiveness by

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[47] Papazian, *Literacy or Legibility,* 84

[48] Ibid.

[49] Nikolai Tarabukin, "Lubochnyi plakat," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 3 (June 1925): 65

[50] Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 194

[51]Polonskii, *Russkii revoliutsionnyi plakat*. 3

"communicat[ing] in one go, without chewing without thinking…" it was all about the "blow - monosyllabic, but accurate."[52]

The Civil-War *plakat* had the unenviable task of communicating an ideology espoused by the Soviet elite in a manner that would "insult the exquisite tastes of the aesthete."[53] This, for Polonskii, could only be undertaken by a 'rough' medium - one that could effectively tap into the perceived material realities of the working class. Polonskii was by no means the only theorist casting the poster as a distinctly urban phenomenon; Iakov Tugenkhol'd, in his *Art of the October Era,* understood the poster as being "the art of the street, the indicator of its pulse."[54]

"What can you do? This is the street… It is rude and tough."[55]

For them, the poster captured the visceral immediacy of the revolutionary street - its urgency, noise, and flux. It was a medium of collective affect, not contemplation. Polonskii did not believe, however, that the Bolshevik Poster had materialized into this proverbial urban street from thin air. In some respects his belief was that of Ukrainian Soviet art-historian Boris Butnik-Siberskii's - that the first socialist revolutionary posters, with regard to their form and content, were a continuation of the pre-revolutionary military poster. Butnik-Siberskii offered a counterpoint to avant-garde purists who sought to locate Soviet art's origins solely in revolutionary rupture. For him, such views denied the richness of cultural continuity:

[The idea that] the Soviet political poster, being generated by the Socialist October Revolution, [was] so original and specific that its roots should be sought exclusively in the reality that caused the appearance of such a poster, and that any attempt to look for its roots in the past seem to downplay the achievement of

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[52] Ibid., 7

[53] Ibid., 16

[54] Iakov Tugendkhol'd, *Iskusstvo oktiabr'skoi pokhi* (Leningrad, 1930), 182.

[55] Polonskii, *Russkii revoliutsionnyi plakat*. 15

Soviet art… [did not] go further than an ordinary 'leftist' phrase designed to tear [our] Soviet art away from the best achievements of [our] people in the past. [56]

Here too, the tension between claiming a revolutionary novelty and sourcing nationalist (of "our people in the past") sentiment is evident. I want to explore some ways in which the early Bolshevik poster did reflect earlier instantiations of late Imperial military posters, and some ways in which it diverged from them.

Early Instantiations of the Military-Poster: the War Bond turned Freedom Loan

The Civil War was not a novel moment of militancy in twentieth-century Russia, During the final decade and a half of the old regime, a set of conflicts raged in rapid succession (the Russo-Japanese War, the 1905 Revolution, the Stolypin reforms, World War I…) It was then that the Imperial state began developing wartime posters as a means to appeal for recruits and additional funds. Early Russian wartime posters were "essentially proclamations making much use of imperial symbols."[57] A specific subset of these posters called for a '5½% short-term war bond,' with interest paid free from capital income tax. These posters were some of the first political posters addressed to the Russian public, demanding an engaged participation in war efforts.

Under the Provisional Government, The 5½% 'War Bond' (*Voenneii Zaem)* became the 'Freedom Loan' (*Zaem Svobody*). While the function of the bond remained the same - strengthening the role of domestic credit in covering military expenses abroad - its re-wording emphasized some ways in which the otherwise uninspiring notion of a credit operation, a purely fiscal matter, could be approached symbolically. In the practice

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[56] Boris Butnik-Siberskii, *Sovetskii plakat epokhi grazhdanskoi voiny* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vsesoiuznoi knizhnoi palaty, 1960), 4.

[57] Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). 14

of domestic state credit, the 'Freedom Loan' was the first to have received a pronounced political name, giving the subscription a national character.[58]

The initial proposal for the new loan was gauged against the purported successes of previous Imperial efforts. On March 27, 1917 the Provisional Government adopted a resolution on the issuance of the loan; the words 'military' and 'war' were excluded from all documents.

Speaking to this sub-genre of posters campaigning for military loans, Polonskii identified it as the moment"the politician [had] leaked into the street."[59] He was not, however, without criticism of these early military posters, noting that "the small scope of this agitation had not set wide limits to the development of the poster."[60]

Speaking to these 'Freedom Loan' posters, Butnik-Siberskii deemed them ineffective in that they "did not reach the consciousness of the masses" for "it is not so easy to make an appeal without telling people the truth."[61] To him, the characteristic feature of the Imperial poster (Figure 3) - its "excessive decorativeness and a return to Art Nouveau splendor" was in line with the faux-aspirational quality of the Provisional Government variant, in that they were both inadequately expositive.

Polonskii and Butnik-Siberskii's critiques key us into another important formal discourse surrounding the military-political poster. To the Bolsheviks, the poster had to communicate 'effectively' - but it also had to play the part of a 'people's poster'. In *The People and the Poster,* Mollie Arbuthnot thinks of this as an issue of legibility. She writes that Soviet texts of early to mid 1920s, "struggled with the contradictory aims of propaganda to be both legible (and therefor popular), and challenging (a means of

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[58] See - V V Strakhov, "*Freedom Loan" of the Provisional Government*, History Issues 2007 No. 10. 31-45

[59] Polonskii, *Russkii revoliutsionnyi plakat*. 19

[60] Ibid.

[61] Butnik-Siberskii, *Sovetskii plakat epokhi grazhdanskoi voiny*. 15

transforming, education, enlightening the viewer)."[62] The question: "to pander to mass taste or to raise it?"[63]

The War and Freedom Bond posters skewed toward legibility, deploying familiar motifs such as the two-headed eagle to appeal to established civic identities. Yet in doing so, they avoided the kind of visual or ideological rupture that might have provoked genuine reflection or transformation. It was in its "making an appeal without telling the truth," where the truth simply meant revolution, and its "small scope," what could be thought of as Lenin's 'trade-union consciousness,' that these posters 'faltered.'

This tension between accessibility and ambition reflects what Sheila Fitzpatrick accurately describes as a fundamental dilemma: the problem of crafting revolutionary identity while remaining legible to a diverse and largely unprepared public. For Fitzpatrick, this dilemma involved proletarian identity and the process of defining a proletarian culture. Fitzpatrick traces this to the very onset of the October Revolution, where the Bolsheviks, being intellectuals who believed in the working class "had no reason to believe that the working class believed in them," and had found that, for a moment, "the image corresponded with reality… the party became the standard-bearers for a workers' and soldiers' revolution."[64]

They were soon confronted with a different reality - where their commitment to the proletariat cause, proved not to be a guarantee for reciprocal commitment on the end of the proletariat class. More damningly, the "maturity of the Russian proletariat - it's

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[62] Mollie Arbuthnot, "The People and the Poster: Theorizing the Soviet Viewer, 1920–1931," *Slavic Review* 78, no. 3 (2019): 724.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Bolshevik Dilemma," in Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 59

character as an urban class was [taken] as an article of faith for the Bolsheviks."[65] This would prove immensely problematic.

The 'book of Marxism', specifically in its tools of class analysis, proved so inappropriate a project to Russian social reality of the early 1920s - with a weak class structure and an urban working class that retained deep ties to the peasantry - that it was quite impossible to define a proletariat mass-identity that was not wholly prescriptive, for at this point, the Bolsheviks did not have the means to enforce their singular class vision on to the Russian populace.

And here, Bolshevik methodologies birth a contradiction, which in effect rises out of Marxist theory: culture is not a classless phenomenon. Each class gives rise to its own cultural field and the hegemony of this culture reflects the social hegemony of the ruling class at large. Under the policy of *appointmentism*, this cultural hegemony was not merely abstract - it was institutionalized, shaping both who spoke for the revolution and what could be said.

The question of either succumbing to mass-taste or 'raising' it was resolved quite readily on one hand with the party belief that "workers were comparatively uncultured on some universal classless scale of cultural achievement."[66]

Not everyone believed in this picture of an uncultured working class. Some championed the craft-adjacent cultural modes of rural Russia. The conversation around taste, class and a 'mass-cultural heritage' led some theorists to trace the Bolshevik Poster to the illustrated broadside - the *lubok*.

The *Lubok*

The *lubok* combined illustrations with text and played a pivotal role in the transmission of folklore, often chronicling political developments of the day. There is

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[65] Ibid., 17

[66] Ibid. 20

general agreement that some of the first *lubki* were produced in Kiev, and were influenced by West European engravings, which had begun to be imported in large quantities from the early seventeenth century onwards. [67]

The *lubok,* in turn, was seen as playing the role of a "*sui genesis* encyclopedia, newspaper, satire sheet, book and entertainment."[68] It could be "a guide to polite manners and a repository of literature, poetry, folk-tales and fables," all at once.

Early *lubki* were often allegorical, depicting figures from Russian folklore - Baba-Yaga, the folk-heroes Bagatiri: "From an early stage the *lubok* served as a means of commenting upon political as well as other developments, although generally in an indirect and allegorical manner."[69] *Lubki,* due in part to their ever increasing popularity, began to be produced lithographically in the nineteenth century. The printing house of I.D. Sytin, in Moscow, printed over 50 million *lubki* annually. Critic Nikolai Tarabukin denounced this as the 'corruption' of the *lubok,* deeming it "a waste of paper…"[70] But even he was assuaged:

> Sytin printed hundreds of thousands of 'falsifications' of [the] *lubok* in his lithographic presses. And despite the loss of the distinctive artistic appearance that was inherent in many prints made as woodcuts, even this lithographic *lubok,* made by the city for the village, was somewhat warmly received by peasants.[71]

With increased distribution, *Lubki* began depicting, satirizing and commenting on most all walks of Russian life - from members of the officer class or the court, to hunting,

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[67] Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, 9

[68] Ibid. 2

[69] Ibid. 2

[70] Nikolai Tarabukin, "Lubochnyi plakat," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 3 (June 1925) 65.

[71] Ibid.

rural-life and religion. Later *lubki* spoke more outwardly of political events of the day - from the victory over Napoleon in 1812, to the opening of the Moscow-St. Petersburg railway line. The government took ever greater interest in the *lubok* and began imposing stringent censorship over them from the 1820s.[72]

As their popularity grew, lubki began attracting the attention of artists and intellectuals who recognized in them a vital, vernacular aesthetic. It was, in turn, increasingly seen as an 'effective' medium; from its form, to its proliferation, it began to influence people outside of its immediate cultural realm. The artist Vassily Kandinsky, for one, described the *lubok* as a 'marvel' and aspired to own a "print of the Last Judgement, as old as possible, primitive (with serpents, devils, high priests, etc.)"[73] The nineteenth-century artist Ilya Repin, on his part, was said to have instructed his students who wished to create 'major popular works' to seek their inspirations in "*lubok* creations, and of the most primitive character."[74]

Later in 1913, the artist Alexander Shevchenko singled out the *lubok* as *the* source for 'new' Russian art: "The simple, unsophisticated beauty of the *lubok,* the severity of the primitive… that is our password and our slogan."[75]

Ivan Bilibin, an artist associated with the *Mir Iskusstva* journal, spoke of collecting *lubki* while visiting villages in the Russian North:[76] "I first laid my eyes on Russian folk prints when on location: they were sooty and dirty, pasted up to the walls with bread. It was then that I began collecting them."[77]

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[72] V. Bakhtin and D.. Moldavsky, comps., *Russkii lubok XVII-XIX vv.* (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo izovrzatil'nogo iskusstva, 1962) 4-5.

[73] V.V. Kandinsky to N.I. Kul'bin, 12 December 1911, in *Pamyatniki kul'tury: novae otkritiya. Ezhegodnik 1980* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1981) p.407.

[74]Bakhtin and Moldavsky, R*usskii lubok,* pp 11

[75] Alla Sytova, comp., *The Lubok: Russian Folk Pictures* (Leningrad: Aurora, 1984) 45.

[76] Sergei Golynets, *Ivan Bilibins* (Leningrad: Aurora, 1981) 8

[77] Ibid., 11

For these artists, the perceived 'primitivism' of the *lubok* - in its material quality, formal simplicity and production-methods - keyed them into a certain vernacular of the sylvan countryside. They were 'of the village,' authentically Russian; they were 'popular prints,' popular with the peasantry. They represented a certain kind of proximity with the 'authentic' native of the country, and were seen as 'their' cultural production. As such, they were dealt with almost ethnographically, as objects that opened up the cultural psyche of the rural 'backwaters' of the masses.

"Let a skilled artist engrave a *lubok,*" writes Ivan Snegiryov in his 1844 *Russian People's Lubki in the Muscovite Realm*, "let him present it in the best possible way, in accordance with the dictates of 'high' art; it will hardly satisfy the whimsical taste of the common man; in his eyes, it will lose its authenticity and unique allure."[78]

It is interesting to think of the *lubok,* in its 'soot and dirt,' as being endowed with a certain proximity to 'unsophisticated' culture. Beyond form, the very material of the print seemingly represented a class of non-bourgeois cultural consumers - it sidestepped the 'clean,' 'colorful,' and industrially-produced trade poster - it was 'of the people.'

While Soviet texts about the shared affinities between the *lubok* and *plakat* usually relegate themselves to questions of form and composition, there are some striking similarities between the material reception of the *lubok* and the Civil-War era poster. As we know, the printing industry, in the immediate aftermath of the February and October Revolutions, was experiencing an all-time low shortage of lithography-presses, print personnel, ink, paper and cardboard. The worsening quality of paper is readily apparent when one handles these posters today - they are often incredibly delicate and difficult to handle. The lack of ink translated to a shortage of color - early Civil War-era posters worked with two or three tones at most. Only the most well-endowed presses produced multicolor posters.

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[78] Snegiryov quoted in Nikolai Tarabukin, *"Lubochnyi plakat,"* Sovetskoe iskusstvo, no. 3 (June 1925): p. 66

Polonskii speaks to this moment, what could only be characterized as a problem, from a radically different perspective. In contrast to pre-revolutionary market conditions, the circumstance of shortages "saved [the] poster from aestheticism [and] decorativeness… it [the poster] is rude and tough."[79]

'Rude and tough' was Polonskii's 'primitive' - it signaled a grounded identity, suffusing the poster with a distinctly populist character. It lived in the city streets much like the *lubok* did in the village.

This attempt at tracing the *plakat* to the *lubok* was shared by writers like Nikolai Tarabukin, who believed "much that was classified as a revolutionary poster was a revolutionary popular print," and V. Okhochinsky who wrote that since the beginning of the Civil war, "the revolutionary poster [had] finally and irrevocably merged with the popular print."[80]

This, in turn, was repudiated by others. Butnik-Siberskii, for one, thought of these statements as requiring a "decisive revision" since, in his belief, "they greatly exaggerate the role of the *lubok* in the formation of the Soviet poster."[81] To him, these 'exaggerations' stemmed from a 'failure to read the poster':

> When creating propaganda posters, artist often used individual techniques associated with the *lubok*. But does this indicate the disappearance of the poster, its transformation into a *lubok?* Of course not. If we talk about the *lubok,* it is necessary to emphasize that it was never something frozen between text and image… it was ever evolving, and along with that, its external appearances changed.[82]

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[79] Polonskii *Russkii revoliutsionnyi plakat,* p. 15

[80] Both Tarabukin and Okhochinsky are cited in Butnik-Siberskii, *Sovetskii plakat epokhi grazhdanskoi voiny*. 38.

[81] Ibid. 39

[82] Ibid.

He decreed this 'tendency' to associate the *plakat* with the *lubok* as a 'shallow,' 'formal mistake' in misreading the simple strategy of the division of "a narrative into successive episodes," as a '*lubok*-likeness.'

While Butnik-Siberskii's argument does not provide us with an adequate argument *against* Polonskii and Tarabukin's genealogies for the *plakat* (except, perhaps, as an argument against assigning fixed ascriptions to the terms '*lubok*' and '*plakat*'), it does key us into the general anxieties around ascribing a 'uniqueness' to the revolutionary poster.

The Icon

Another, more contentious, influence upon the Bolshevik poster was the Russian tradition of icon painting. This is often left unsaid by Soviet theorists and is strikingly missing from most Soviet art-historical texts I am working with, which is interesting in its own right.

The Icon, a distinctively Orthodox pictorial tradition, commented on theological doctrine, acted as an aid for worship, and by and large informed most Russian artistic production from the time of the conversion of Kievan Russia to Christianity in 988 through the reforms of Peter the Great.[83] Stephen White writes:

> Painters and craftsmen came to Kiev from Byzantium together with Greek priests and monks; they brought with them their alphabet (the Russian Cyrillic script originated from the ninth-century Greek missionaries Saints Cyril and Methodius), their philosophy and their pictorial traditions. [84]

A set of icon-painting schools developed across Kieven Russia between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries - from Novgorod to Pskov, Vladimir, Yaroslavl and Kiev.

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[83] Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster,* 3

[84] Ibid.

"Despite local variations, a common Russian style of icon-painting developed…"[85] This 'Russian-style' icon was characterized by a two-dimensional treatment of subjects, rich ornamentation and a coded use of color.

This latter feature, that of associating specific characters with a set of colors, is sometimes identified as a link between political posters of the post-revolutionary period and icon-painting. The Virgin, for instance, was represented with a dark red cloak, the Apostle Paul with an ochre cloak, while in Civil War-era posters, the proletarian was marked out in red, the bourgeois in black, the peasantry in green, the anti-revolutionaries in white, and so on.

Beyond this, Civil War-era posters often adapted Orthodox theological subjects to secular purposes, the most common of which was the motif of St. George, one of the most venerated saints of the Byzantine Church, and his victory over the dragon. Where this motif symbolized the victory of the Christian faith over paganism, the revolutionary-poster posited the Bolsheviks and the socialist-cause as St. George, with capital as the dragon (Figure 6). Incidentally, this poster calls for viewers to purchase their own 'Freedom Loan', pointing us to the mediated convergences of these many pre-revolutionary impulses in the early Bolshevik poster.

Religion, like the 'popular lower-class' cultural practices of the working-class, was by definition, not part of proletarian culture. The party-line, by and large, was that if workers put up icons in the house, it was "not part of their real culture but a manifestation of peasant superstition that had not yet been outlived."[86]

Unlike 'popular lower-class' cultural practices however, religion was approached with greater suspicion - it was 'the enemy,' 'anti-revolutionary,' 'hegemonic.' It is striking then, to see its influence upon the early Soviet poster be attested by some of the poster artists themselves.

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[85] Ibid.

[86] Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*. p. 21

Arguably the most prominent, artist Dmitri Moor, argued in an unpublished lecture that posters had acquired their modern form in Paris through the work of graphic-artist Jules Chéret (1836-1932).[87] He believed, however, that the 'poster form' had appeared much earlier than Chéret's work - in peasant woodcuts and "especially in the religious paintings of the vestibules of churches [and] in a certain number of icons, particularly of the fifteenth century."[88]

In his unpublished autobiography Moor remarked on the impression that a concentrated study of icons had had on his art - he considered icons to be 'the most purposive' and 'effective' forms of popular art. "All this," he later recalled, "lay at the foundations of my own work."[89] In the 1920s Moor had become involved in the anti-religious journal *Bezbozhnik* (The Godless), in which his own work was often criticized as being too 'soft' in its representation of religion and religious motifs. Moor justified this by stating that he had been doing what was necessary, in that, one "[had] to study your enemy."[90]

While one cannot comment on the extent to which Moor's sentiment on 'studying one's enemy' was truly sincere - it is interesting to see variants of the aforementioned 'affirmative sabotage' style strategies being deployed (or spoken of) within poster-production at this point. Everything from the lubok, advertising, icons, books - absolutely everything - was to be retuned, reassembled, revamped in the name of Bolshevism. Even the most seemingly benign aspects of pre-revolutionary culture were critiqued, and in turn, re-absorbed into this representational machine. The poster touched on everything, it picked up on everything, it spoke to/through/at everything… or at least it tried to.

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[87] Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster* p. 6

[88] etskii D.S. Moore o plakatnom iskusstve I ego istroii' (n. d.), TsGALI f. 1988 op. 1 ed. khr. 68 in Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, 132

[89] 'Avtobiografiya' (1934), TsGALI f. 1988 op. 2 ed. khr. 13. In White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, 132

[90] Ibid.

Whose Culture?

A foundational basis for the October revolution was the promise of a 'better world'. This would evolve on class lines, with the state acting as arbiter between an unequal past and a fair future. The most outward way this 'promise' manifested was through the in-built mechanism for social 'transformation' - social mobility.

In an 'open' social system, where one can always move *beyond* one's present circumstances, their social identities become fluid. In *In Search of the Proletariat,* French philosopher Étienne Balibar reminds us that "the term 'proletariat' only connotes the 'transitional' nature of the working class… accentuat[ing] the difficulty in holding together, without aporia or contradiction, historical materialism and the critical theory of Capital."[91] Balibar sees this transitionality as an inability "to formulate the concept of *proletarian* ideology as the ideology *of* the proletarians."[92] or, a culture of the proletariat as proletarian culture.

While the myth of an integrated working class posed profound challenges to Soviet poster production, it also allows us to think of Soviet posters of the Civil War as a complex moment of identity construction. Arbuthnot notes that while "it is tempting from a century's distance to see Soviet political posters as the monolithic visual expression of state ideology, it is striking that the majority of contemporary texts focused on the 'wrongness' of existing posters: they were of poor quality, incomprehensible, ill-suited to their purpose, or simply conveyed an incorrect message."[93]

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[91] Étienne Balibar, In Search of the Proletariat: The Intellectual Legacy of Althusser and Marx, trans. James Ingram (London: Verso, 2014) pp. 126-127

[92] Ibid. 148

[93] Mollie Arbuthnot, *The People and the Poster*, p. 723

Active criticism of posters was not limited to academic titles. In 1920, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee sponsored the publication of a new journal - the 'Bulletin of Agitation and Propaganda.' Along with articles, it included detailed reviews: "The most important aspect of these reviews was not the thorough examination or discussion of shortcomings of certain posters, but outlining instructions on how to express a particular sentiment through the poster, and how to do so better."[94]

This critique, in turn, helped define a 'correct' mode for the revolutionary poster. Often, it developed this mode (what is often referred to as the 'scope' of the poster) by outlining a set of posters that either 'overstepped' or did not go far *enough* in their affect. In tracing a posterly lineage for the propaganda print, Butnik-Siberskii spoke of World War I Tsarist and Provisional Government posters as having 'failed' in their raison d'être - they turned for help only to the 'top' of society, sidestepping the public entirely. "It is enough to name just one poster that quite frankly addressed the bourgeoise" he writes, "'*don't forget those behind whose backs you drink coffee*.'"[95] (Figure 7)

This, again, is quite in line with his criticism of the 'Freedom Loan' posters - they were too narrow, too specific, and lacked a measure of fervor… they couldn't instigate. For Burnik-Siberskii, it was a matter of class - they did not address 'the public' (or rather, the *correct* public). And, in turn, they were of a different cultural-code - they did not activate the 'right' culture. They did not mobilize the correct class.

This need to organize clearly hinged on a promise - it demonstrated a future where socialist policies would alleviate current material inequalities within the USSR. Visualizing this, then, was akin to giving shape to an idealized future - the object of the Bolshevik struggle. During the Civil War, this promise could be as simple as a future where the militant struggle resolved with the establishment of a socialist system; the steps were, then, simple enough - win the fight against the 'imperialist,' 'tsarist,' 'anti-

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[94] Butnik-Siberskii, *Sovetskii plakat epokhi grazhdanskoi voiny* p. 18

[95] Ibid. 11

revolutionary' forces. The question of what exactly a socialist system would look like, however, remained un-ascertained…

The role of most cultural production within this nascent socialist program was then identified as the space where such a promise could be visualized. Lenin, in a letter to Bukharin in a Politburo meeting discussing administrations in charge of ascribing an identity to this 'proletarian culture' wrote in October of 1920: "Proletarian culture = communism… are we in agreement on that?"[96] At an adult education congress in 1919, he further agued that "the basic task of 'proletarian culture' is proletarian organization,"[97] which sounds quite firmly in line with our understanding of Soviet-tinged 'agitation' - a mode of communal organization.

The revolutionary-poster was integral to this project. As the Bolshevik's foremost mode of visual communication en-masse, it was front of mind for many socialist theorists working towards prescribing a vision of socialist governance. Much like in the years of New Economic Policy and Five-Year Plan polity, on-the-ground realities of the Civil War were replete with what Sheila Fitzpatrick has called the "preview[s] of the coming attractions of socialism."[98] This role was taken on by the military-revolutionary-poster far earlier than Socialist Realist literature, art and theory - the poster foregrounded much of the discourse that flourished later in Stalin's epoch. Where it might not have accomplished this as surreptitiously, it established a means to refine a certain vision of socialism, a basis for future cultural production writ large.

Speaking to the role of text in the military-revolutionary poster, Butnik-Siberskii outlined a set of methods that included "sifting, mining Marxist literature and folk literary

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[96] Cited in V.V. Gorbunov, "*Bor'ba V.I. Lenina's separtistskimi ustremleniiami Proletkul't*a" *Voprosy istorii* KPSS, no. 1 (1958), 30

[97] V.I. Lenin, Polnoe sobranie sochinnii, 5th ed., 55 vols. (Moscow, 1958-65) 38: 369-369

[98] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 262

heritage for what was in tune with the tasks set by the [Bolshevik] party."[99] For him, "the ability to penetrate into the very essence of a political slogan in a timely manner and to apply it correctly in art - this alone [was] evidence of the political maturity of the poster artist."[100] He continued: "where there is no correspondence between the text and the drawing, there is no poster… Such gaps could only be observed in the posters of 'formalist' artists, who with their 'searches' and 'constructions' made the slogan meaningless."[101]

Deriding 'constructivists' and 'abstraction' writ large, he goes on to crown 'realists' as the 'politically mature poster artist' that 'resolves a complete correspondence' between the text and image of the poster. He did believe this to be a complicated task, one that couldn't find fulfillment in a simple one-to-one "dead, naturalistic reproduction of the text in the drawing," but one in which there had to be an "understanding of the unity of the two … If the artist translates the speech from the future tense to the present, if he supplements the call of the party with a demonstration of what will happen when workers respond to this call… [that is] when the 'special' feature of the creativity of the Soviet poster artist is revealed."[102]

Key here is this translation 'from future tense to the present,' Fitzpatrick's 'previews,' what Jeffrey Brooks outlines as the core function of the Soviet press, namely: the creation of a "stylized, ritualistic, and intentionally consistent public culture that became its own reality."[103]

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[99] Butnik-Siberskii, *Sovetskii plakat epokhi grazhdanskoi voiny,* 35

[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid,

[102] Ibid. 37

[103] Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) p. 318

We find this in Viktor Pertsov's *Writer at the Factory,* where he characterizes the 'proletarian's artist' as "a practitioner not only in his special area, but also as a real participant in the process of producing material life. His art is the product of this participation, thus it is simply impossible without this participation."[104] Where this text was written in 1931, it puts into words some of the ways in which artists were mobilized for the revolutionary cause almost a decade earlier.

In a particularly scathing article, the cultural-theorist P. Riabinkin attacked the state of academic discourse around the 'methodologies' of the proletarian poster. He found most writing on the poster to be incompatible with Marxist-Leninist critique, and declared Polonskii's framing of the poster as an urban phenomenon as being "copied from mediocre western European poster scholars."[105]

Riabinkin rejected the idea that the socialist poster was informed, in any way, by trade poster metrics. He cites Polonskii - "What informed the poster in the city? The brightness of colors and its unusual composition…"[106] and rebuts him:

> Polonskii asserts that in Soviet posters the most important thing was the brightness of its colors… it is clear that this has nothing in common with the theory of the party poster. It is also clear that the main criterion of the political poster is not formal originality, nor the 'unusualness' of its composition, but above all its Bolshevik ideological content.[107]

Above all Riabinkin takes offense at Polonskii's notion that the Soviet poster had to 'compete' for attention: "Polonskii is trying to impose on us a certain theory of poster competition. He declares that the poster should not be based on its predecessors, it should

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[104] Viktor Pertsov, *Pisatel' na proizvodstve,* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979) pp. 65-66

[105] P. Riabinkin, "*Protiv chuzhdykh teorii o plakate*," Za proletarskoe iskusstvo, no. 5 (1932): 2–4

[106] Polonskii, *Russkii revoliutsionnyi plakat*, p. 7

[107] P. Riabinkin, *Protiv chuzhdykh teorii o plakate*, p. 2

always be new and original."[108] He writes, "this theory is entirely borrowed by Polonskii from commodity based competition within capitalist advertising… It is easy to understand that in Soviet reality, political concerns cannot compete with one another. Is it possible, for example, to oppose the problem of livestock farming to the problem of eliminating illiteracy? Polonskii's writings are the exact opposite of the theory of the proletarian poster."[109]

In a way, Riabinkin points us to a reality where viewers are able to hold the varied 'political concerns' of the USSR together, as being equally important and impactful - everything, all at once. His ideological critique, foregrounded in the distinctly economic metaphors of 'competition' and 'attention' relate to a developing picture of the future that was beginning to evolve through the course of the Civil War. The most elaborate of these existed in Nikolai Bukharin and Evgeny Preobrazhensky's 1919 pamphlet *The ABC of Communism*. The gloss on the party program sold over a million copies in the few months after it first appeared and millions more through the 1920s - only to disappear completely from print from the late 1920s.[110] The text spoke to a Marxist critique of recent European social and economic history - emphasizing the crisis of capitalism, imperialism and worlds war - codifying the Bolshevik experience in revolution as surfacing directly from the Marxist text. The pages dealing with the future promised that 'full' Communism was only a few years away. In Russia "within a few decades there will be quite a new world, with new people and new customs."[111] Bukharin and Preobrazhensky's text centers on two particular motifs: order and mechanics. The discourse on order "seems bathed in deep Russian traditions of phobia toward anarchy,

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[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 47

[111] Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii, *The ABC of Communism*, intro. S. Heitman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966) 75

chaos, disorder, and panic."[112] What is distinct here, is the identification of capitalism with a looming sense of unfairness, mired in discourse around the unpredictability of capitalism.

One has to point out that Riabinkin's critique does not do justice to some of the key distinctions offered by Polonskii. For one, Polonskii approached the 'brightness' and 'unusual composition' of effective posters as characteristics that suggest a 'living quality' to the *plakat*. He centered his work around the 'blow' (the *udar*) of the poster - "the poster is not decoration for the living room… it is the blow of a bell through pictorial means."[113] The poster is conceived as a weapon in the fight against middle-class consumerism, against Lenin's 'trade-union consciousness' - the characteristics Riabinkin associated with theories of the capitalist 'trade-poster', were, to Polonskii, clearly re-appropriated against 'capital'.

This re-appropriation surfaces as a key feature of Soviet theorization around a 'mass-art' that divorces itself from its 'object-hood' - against the vein of elitism associated with the framed image: "The 'rare' easel painting is too 'aristocratic,' precisely as a form, regardless of its subject, to fully satisfy the demands of our time." [114]

"Even engravings, printed by a print-maker on a hand press, counts on satisfying the aesthetic needs of a small group of auteurs. Only presses with their rotary mechanisms [are] able to supply the necessary number of prints to a wide audience, through whom the public art of modernity wills to speak."[115]

Clearly, there existed a certain semantic and ideological slippage between the notion of 'revolution' and 'industrialization'. In positing industrial production as

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[112] Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams,* p. 47

[113] Polonskii, *Russkii revoliutsionnyi plakat* p. 16

[114] Tarabukin, *Lubochnyi plakat* p. 65

[115] Ibid

'modernity' - and in effect, as an evolutionary outcome - there is also, an attribution of 'evolution' with 'revolution'. This was paramount to the aesthetic project of a socialist revolution. In it positing a break from all previous instantiations of capitalist society, it had to image a reality that had to be created from the ground up - it had to 'evolve'.

In *Political Economy of Socialist Realism,* Evgenii Dobrenko dwells on an article - Stalin's last 'historical work' *Economic Problems of Socialism in the Ussr.* In it, Stalin speaks to a set of events that he characterized as an 'economic phenomenon' - under socialism, a set of entities (commodities, money, banks) had been re-appropriated - they had lost their earlier functions, preserving their form:

> In our socialist system, economic development occurs not through upheaval but through gradual changes, when the old is not abolished outright but changes its own nature in conformity to the new, preserving only its form, and the new does not simply annihilate the old but permeates it, changes its nature and functions without destroying its form, and using this form for the development of the new. [116]

Dobrenko thinks of this article as a unique 'paean of evolution,' asking, "for if nature and functions change, why should the forms survive?"[117]

Conclusion

My attempt with this chapter was to try and traverse the complexities of the Civil War-era Soviet poster, revealing it as a multifaceted cultural artifact that served as a battleground for ideological, artistic, and representational debates. The Bolshevik leadership, grappling with the tensions between continuity and rupture, sought to forge a novel socialist culture that mediated between the radical novelty of revolution and the

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[116] Joseph Stalin, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1952)

[117] Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007) p. 21

inherited structures of the past. This duality operated in both practical and symbolic realms, from the usage of limited printing resources to the ideological incorporation of pre-revolutionary cultural practices such as *lubok* engravings and the Orthodox icon.

The Bolsheviks' emphasis on propaganda as both an educational and mobilizing tool underscores the didactic function of the poster. Yet, this effort was far from monolithic; internal debates, as seen through theorists like Polonskii and Butnik-Siberskii, reflect a struggle to define the poster's role and aesthetics within the broader project of socialist transformation. Whether critiquing the poster's ties to bourgeois advertising or affirming its populist appeal through its "roughness" and immediacy, these discussions illuminate the dynamic process of cultural production and the definition of a socialist cultural sphere.

Ultimately, the Soviet poster emerged as both a reflection of and an intervention in the cultural and political upheavals of the era. It bridged the gap between the elite and the masses, the past and the future, the material and the aspirational. By doing so, it laid the groundwork for the broader cultural discourses that would shape Soviet art and ideology in the decades to follow. The poster's legacy lies not just in its aesthetic innovations but in its embodiment of a revolutionary vision, at once a product of its time and a harbinger of the socialist vision it sought to inspire

Chapter Two
Tracing the White Front: The *Plakat* At War

"For Russia with its centuries-long history of attraction to the 'European house' - nay, its ambitions to become teacher to its landlords - the Revolution truly opened the gate onto European, and hence world, history."

Evgeny Dobrenko, From *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*

The turbulent aftermath of the Russian Revolution finds one of its most revealing cultural battlegrounds in the poster. This chapter interrogates the so-called 'poster front' of the Civil War, exploring how propaganda posters not only documented the shifting power dynamics between Bolshevik and counter-revolutionary forces but also constituted a critical site of meaning-making amid crisis. In these vignettes, the ideological takes form: revolution, transformed into civil war, is rendered through contested iconographies and a language that oscillates between the outsized and the mundane.

At the heart of this analysis is the duality inherent in the propagandistic imaginations of the era. On one side, Bolshevik posters advanced a vision of international proletarian solidarity - an idealized, almost utopian, coalition in which revolutionary fervor was embodied in both collective struggle and urbanist aesthetics. On the other, White propaganda employed equally potent visual strategies to delineate a narrative of national betrayal. These posters mobilized deeply racialized and religious tropes, replacing images of a ravaged peasantry with icons of an embattled Orthodox Church and, at times, the Christian God, threatened by foreign "Internationalist" agents. This contrast is not merely aesthetic but emblematic of the broader cultural contestation at play - a struggle to define what Russia was and what it ought to become.

This chapter situates these narratives within the complex temporal and ideological boundaries that have long animated debates over the end of the revolutionary period and the onset of civil war. Here, I situate the White Guard and its comparatively under-studied propaganda output, aiming to highlight the extent to which Bolshevik discourse surrounding novelty and tradition informed anti-Bolshevik coalitions. The poster, in its insistence on definitive visual narratives, seeks to "fix" a moment of crisis - a moment when the chaos of revolution was reinterpreted as a contest between clearly delineated enemies. In doing so, it both simplifies and amplifies the political realities of its time, offering viewers a visual shorthand for understanding an otherwise fluid and multifaceted conflict.

The 'poster front' subsumes broader discourse around class, legacy and policy. The differences between "pre-reform" and "post-reform" orthographic practices, for instance, becomes a proxy for deeper cultural and political divides. Anti-Bolshevik posters, with their deliberate adherence to an older, more conservative orthography, underscore a resistance not only to political change but also to a perceived cultural rupture with Russia's past. This linguistic choice is far from trivial - it reflects a broader skepticism toward the revolutionary break with tradition, a skepticism that is central to the counter-revolutionary critique of Bolshevik modernity. By contrast, the Bolshevik embrace of a modernized script reinforces their claim to a new, forward-looking future, one that is inseparable from their revolutionary praxis.

The institutional contexts within which these posters were produced provide an additional layer of analysis. The Bolsheviks' decentralized approach to propaganda-rooted in a network of nearly five hundred institutions across numerous towns and cities - stands in stark contrast to the Whites' more centralized, albeit less effective, apparatus. This divergence is not simply a matter of bureaucratic efficiency; it is emblematic of the differing self-conceptions of the two sides. The Bolsheviks, emerging from an underground movement accustomed to the vagaries of censorship and political

repression, cultivated a propagandistic style that was at once agile and pervasive. The Whites, by contrast, relied on a more traditional, state-centered model of communication that, while proving inadequate for capturing the dynamism of revolutionary change, framed a riveting discourse surrounding preservation, an administrative longing for an ordered society, and a vision of a future that draws more from its past than it does from something 'novel'.

While this chapter is firmly focused on White propaganda output through the course of the Civil War, I will highlight relevant Bolshevik counterparts to point to a seeming dialectic that evolves through the course of the conflict. Chapter Three will develop on the Bolshevik program to build out this picture differently. Interwoven through these chapters is a broader reflection on the nature of historical memory and the construction of national identity. The posters, with their depictions of both heroic mobilization and catastrophic loss, offer a counterpoint to the historiographical debates that have long sought to demarcate the revolutionary from the civil war period. In the visual realm, the chaotic interplay of images mirrors the complexity of a nation caught between the legacies of its past and the uncertain promises of its future. They speak to a dual legacy: the promise of a radical new order on one hand, and the weight of cultural, ethnic, and religious continuity on the other.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that the poster front of the Civil War is a site of both visual and ideological synthesis - a space where the multiplicity of historical experiences is rendered into a singular, albeit contested, narrative, revealing a layered and paradoxical portrait of a society in transition.

When *was* the Civil War?

On the Pulkovo Heights, within sight of revolutionary Petrograd, the Red Army fought 'the Whites' for the first time on the morning of Monday, October 30th, 1918. The

confrontation "sowed new seeds of hatred" whose "bitter harvest Russians were destined to reap for four long years."[118] "Oh God, we haven't seen the end of it!" wrote symbolist poet Zinaida Gippius, as the men she'd dubbed Lenin's 'pack of scoundrels' began tightening their hold over the conflict.

"This one-time lioness of Petrograd's avant-garde salons," writes W. Bruce Lincoln in his *Red Victory: a History of the Russian War*, "stared into a 'nocturnal void filled with black, clotting blood'[119] to learn the shape of Russia's future." She concluded: "Civil War, without end and without limits!"[120]

Some time before the events at the Pulkovo Heights, Gippius paints a more subdued picture of this period. Writing in the midst of Petrograd's record shortages of food, fuel, goods and public services at the start of 1918, a moment described by literary critic Viktor Shklovskii as "life after an explosion, when it's all over, when everything's blown up,"[121] Gippius points us to a banality that takes over life in the capital of the new Russia, declaring "life in Bolshevik Petrograd to be boring above all else."[122] "What I am going to say at this moment is very strange, but it is *boring* for me to write. Yes, even… among these loathsome and unprecedented horrors… it is boring."[123]

The 'boring' Civil War, the 'nocturnal void' of 'black, clotting blood'; Gippius' diary entries underscore the profound cultural and political transformation underway - that of a shift from the rhythms of revolution to those of civil war. Historian Rex Wade's

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[118] W. Bruce Lincoln, Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 44

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Viktor Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917–1922*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970), 144.

[122] Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 53.

[123] Zinaida Gippius, *Sinai kniga. Peterburskii dnevnik, 1914-1918* (Belgrade, 1929), 232

text on the Russian Revolution and its 'end'[124] concerns itself with just this: Russia's 'metamorphosis' from a state of revolution to one of civil war. Wade attempts to ascertain a definitive chronology of the Russian Revolution, first, by reviewing some of the periodizations used by scholars, and later, by identifying a specific event - the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918, as marking the end of the Russian Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War(s).[125] Here, Wade's analysis is contested - Jonathan Smele's *The 'Russian' Civil Wars, 1916-1926*, critiques Wade's dating of this 'mutation' from revolution to civil war to around 5-6 January, 1918 (the closure of the Constituent Assembly) as "problematic".[126] Smele points to a similar sense of 'boredom' - or perhaps indifference - in the immediate public response to this closure; "On the ground, in Petrograd and the other urban centers of Russia at the time," he writes, "the closure of the Constituent Assembly passed without much comment - or, still less, widespread protest, or even a period of mourning."[127] He goes on to trace the 'quotidian mood' of the period in one of the most celebrated Russian poems of the time, Alexander Blok's 'The Twelve,' which depicted "the petrified streets of post-October Petrograd"[128]:

> From building to building
> Stretches a cable
> On the cable's a placard:
> "All Power to the Constituent Assembly!"
> An old woman kneels and weeps beneath it.

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[124] Rex A. Wade, "The October Revolution, the Constituent Assembly, and the End of the Russian Revolution," in *Reinterpreting Revolutionary Russia: Essays in Honor of James D. White*, ed. Ian D. Thatcher (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 72–85.

[125] Ibid.. 73

[126] Jonathan D. Smele, The "Russian" Civil Wars, 1916–1926: Ten Years That Shook the World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 32.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid.

She just can't understand what it means.
Why such a huge scrap of cloth
For such a placard?
It would make so many foot wraps for the boys,
So many are without clothes or shoes…[129]

Historian Orlando Figes further reflected on the public response to what Wade had portrayed as a 'catalytic' moment :

> There was no mass reaction to the closure of the Constituent Assembly… The SR [Socialist Revolutionaries] intelligentsia had always been mistaken in their belief that the peasants shared their veneration for the Constituent Assembly… [T]o the mass of the peasants… it was only a distant thing in the city, dominated by the 'chiefs' of the various parties, which they did not understand…[130]

There is, then, clearly an uncertainty around fixed, distinct and temporally delineated conceptions of 'revolution' and 'civil war'. When does the revolutionary period end and the Civil War commence? Some authors use 'the Russian Revolution' to specifically reflect the period from February to October (1917). Wade thinks of this as the most basic, and most narrow, definition - hinging on the overthrow of the monarchy in February and the Bolshevik seizure of power in October as historical turning points. To him, this colloquialism "suggests that the Bolshevik seizure of power in the October Revolution marked a distinct boundary between the old Russian and new Soviet eras." He continues to acknowledge "[that] implicit, perhaps, is an assumption that everything that followed in the Soviet/Communist era flowed exactly from that event."[131]

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[129] Aleksandr Blok, "The Twelve," trans. Maria Carlson, accessed April 13, 2025, https://russiangreatwar.org/docs/twelve_notes.pdf.

[130] Orlando Figes, A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924 (London: Pimlico, 1997), 518–19.

[131] Wade, *The October Revolution*, 73

Perhaps, the latest date for the end of the revolution is in the second edition of Sheila Fitzpatrick's *The Russian Revolution*, which extends it to the Stalinist terror of 1937-8.[132] Wade contends: "authors of these [later] dates seem to be focusing on something that might be the 'Bolshevik Revolution', ie., the Bolshevik project to use their… power and ideology to transform fundamentally [both] Russia and the world. Sometimes 'Russian Revolution' and 'Bolshevik Revolution' are used interchangeably, but these probably are quite different concepts."[133]

For the sake of this work, I sense it is important to ascertain exactly which 'revolution' one refers to in the context of the military-agitational poster. Unfortunately for me, the Bolshevik poster addresses both 'variants' of the term: at the risk of a certain kind of generalization, I would contend that posters like the May Day *plakats,* or those celebrating the Anniversary of the October Revolution, are speaking from a distinct vantage point of a 'Russian Revolution', ie., the events of October 25, 1917 (Julian Calendar). On the other hand, Bolshevik agitational *plakats* writ large, tend to speak the language of the 'Bolshevik Revolution' - an on-going event that (as in the case of Fitzpatrick's analysis) could, in fact, carry us through the end of the '30s.

This specific 'dualism' in the citing/representation of the 'revolution' is touched on, albeit slightly indirectly, by historian Robert Russell in his *The Arts and the Russian Civil War.* In this article, Russell remarks that the propagandistic *essence* of the artistic output of the Civil War period gives "the impression of striking homogeneity… imparting an apparent monolithic quality to much of the artistic output of the Civil War years."[134] He continues to identify at least two distinct 'stylistic trends' within this 'homogenous

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[132] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[133] Wade, *The October Revolution*, 74

[134] Robert Russell, "The Arts and the Russian Civil War," *Journal of European Studies* 20, no. 3 (1990): 221

artistic output', namely "monumental" and "satirical" propaganda. He finds this 'dualistic representation of the Revolution and its aftermath' as either 'monumental' or 'satirical' as "stem[-ming] from the ambivalent nature of the Revolution itself."[135] Quoting the first Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharskii, he asks: "did the October Revolution mark the onset of 'socialism triumphant' or was it a stage in the process of 'socialism in struggle'?[136] Was the artist's role that of celebrating the victory of socialism by raising a monument to it, or was it that of contributing to the continuing struggle by satirizing the still powerful enemies of socialism?"[137] Wade's distinction between a Bolshevik and a Russian Revolution mirrors Russel's analysis of there being these two distinct 'styles' in Civil War-era artistic output. The monumental poster (or play, film, book, article) exists in the *plakat* drawing on the *Russian* Revolution [as in Figure 1, Alexander Apsit's poster celebrating the first full year of 'proletarian dictatorship']; the satirical in the *Bolshevik,* in so far as this 'satirical' style questioned, probed, agitated, and instigated the anti-Bolshevik axis - Russel's 'still powerful enemies of socialism'.

The White Guard poster tends to paint a more diminutive picture of the revolution. Here, the revolution is often 'the Russian Revolution' and is very much enclosed within the events of October 1917. What comes after, namely the Bolsheviks' contention with their adversaries, is not 'revolution' but simply 'Bolshevik atrocity' and 'anti-Bolshevik counter-revolution'.

Operating from different revolutionary timelines, the warring factions of the Civil War further drew from a seemingly inexhaustible set of 'subterranean' mentalities and geo-political realities that migrated down the generations; its participants operating from

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[135] Ibid.

[136] A. V. Lunacharskii, "Kultura sotsializma torzhuiushchego i sotsializma boriushchegosia," *Novoia Zhizn'*, 21 June (4 July) 1917, 4.

[137] Russel, *The Arts and the Russian Civil War* , 222

a complexity of fissiparous loyalties and unfixed enmities… When was the Revolution? As we have explored, the answer is a matter of who one asks.

When was the Civil War, then? Here, there is further disagreement. Fundamentally, it would seem the question is predicated on whether the conflict itself can be defined as an eschatological moment in the Russian[138] experience, or whether it exists as but one stage in a continuum of crises, wars and revolutions[139] as part of "successive waves of war, revolution, and socioeconomic collapse, accompanied by convulsions in settlement, mass psychology, and cultural norms that… sanctified violence and habitualized quotidian upheavals."[140]

The military-agitational poster gives us one answer: the Civil War was, in fact, a definable, temporally locatable conflict. This will be seen through the course of these next two chapters - specifically, in the changing tone of both the Bolshevik and the counter-revolutionary poster. This poster-based ascription of a 'definable' Civil War event hinges first on the fact that the 'Civil War' - as any multi-party conflict - engaged numerous entities. One such set of entities, the anti-Bolshevik coalition, first started producing posters in *response* to the Bolsheviks. Surely, one can draw art-historical and stylistic through-lines between their posters and those of Imperial Russia (as we have done for the Bolshevik *plakat*), but the positioning of one's identity as antithetical to another's, as is the case in any oppositional conflict, paints a picture of a certain kind of self-modeling - and perhaps, acceptance - of defined (albeit, loosely) belief-systems. Moreover, the further one seems to move from the events of October 1917, the more myopic one finds the content of the military-agitational poster becoming. To be fair, Bolshevik and anti-

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[138] Russian as in *rossisski,* describing things relating to the wider Russian/Soviet empire/state, and not *ruskii,* meaning things relating to the history, culture and language of things ethnically Russian (derived from the ancient Kievan Rus').

[139] This term is borrowed from Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[140] Smele, *The "Russian" Civil Wars, 1916-1926*, 41

Bolshevik posters alike, did continue engaging in the larger representational project of propagandistic 'world-building' ie., broader critiques, monumentalized events, new 'heroes', new 'villains'… It is evident, however, that much like the specificity of propagandistic work made during the First World War, posters made during and after 1918 took on a more 'events-based' approach;

> The association between art and war, or art and its social context more generally, is obviously a complex and indirect one: but the greatest achievements, at least in Soviet poster art, do seem to be clearly associated with times of transcendent national need. The themes of economic and social reconstruction, of public health and the formation of cooperatives, worthy though they were, could hardly hope to call up a popular resonance comparable with that of *la patria en danger*…[141]

Further complicating this project of ascribing specific periods to the Civil War, is the matter of fact that the 'Civil War' as such was by no means a two-sided conflict with a neatly defined set of actors. In fact, it can and has been argued that the Civil 'War' in turn, hosted a series of 'civil wars' within itself: "the struggle was multifaceted, involving not only the Bolshevik 'Reds' against the conservative and militaristic 'Whites'… but layer upon layer of internecine conflicts and wars within wars."[142] Socialists fought each other and simultaneously warred against anarchists and left-liberals competing for the same constituency. White officers sought to contain right-liberal and progressive (anti-socialist) forces in the anti-Bolshevik struggle: "These, then, were wars in which Russians fought Russians, Russians fought non-Russians, non-Russians fought non-Russians, republicans fought monarchists, socialists fought socialists… towns fought the countryside, family fought family, and brother fought brother."[143]

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[141] Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 130

[142] Smele, *The "Russian" Civil Wars, 1916-1926*, 40

[143] Ibid.

The Civil War poster (both Bolshevik and counter-revolutionary) attempts to allay this fluid essence of the conflict. The 'world according to poster' *had* to be, by nature of its primary propagandistic function, a world of clearly defined identities. This, in effect, was the fundamental task of the Civil War-era poster, it served as a set of signposts for its varied coalitions, in their attempts at ascertaining their own identities and prescribing those of their rivals. This was by no means a simple task. The poster, now more than ever before, had to balance policy details, ideology, militant morale, political/social/economic critique, world-building, agitation, education, falsehood, communication… The 'world according to poster' had to build said world, a fable of sorts, with its own set of victors and losers: "The enemy, in the Bolshevik poster, functioned not only within a 'set of doctrines with presence of predictive power that could be presented as a self-contained whole'[144] but also as a self-referential tool that reinforced the Bolsheviks' own self-identity."[145]

In the end, the world of the Civil War poster - meticulously crafted to impose order on chaos - reveals not only the stark divisions between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces but also the subtle, persistent cadence of everyday life. Amid the revolutionary fervor and ideological extremes, there lurked a seemingly dissonant boredom - a measured, almost apathetic tempo that belied the violent, rapid shifts in power. As Gippius' weary confession and Blok's pensive verses remind us, the tumult of history was experienced not only in explosive moments of conflict but also in the slow, methodical pulse of ordinary existence. It is in this interplay - the dramatic apposition of relentless propaganda and the quiet, mundane rhythms of daily life - that the true

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[144] Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7

[145] Vladimir Dobrenko, "The Image of the Enemy: The Evolution of the 'Other' in Bolshevik Political Posters from the October Revolution and the Civil War," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 87, no. 3–4 (2009): 685–704, 686.

character of the Russian transformation is revealed. Like a refrain that echoes back to its opening note, the poster becomes a chronicle of both explosive change and the enduring, if unremarkable, beat of a people caught between the clamor of revolution and the steady hum of time.

Incoherence, Contradictions, Distrust: White Propaganda as 'status-quo'

"A comparative analysis of the propaganda poster arts of the Bolsheviks and the White Guards show that the White movement lost to the Red in propaganda work," writes Anvar Mamadaliev: [146]

> The Bolsheviks were able to clearly identify those universal principles for which they fought… these goals of the struggle were clear to the majority of the population… The White Guards had a different audience - the intellegentsia, nobility and clergy, therefore they appealed more to values such as patriotism, Orthodoxy, etc.; these values were not interesting to the bulk of the population at that time.[147]

Is Mamadaliev's analysis fair? *Did* the Whites lose to the Bolsheviks on the 'propaganda front'? As we explore this premise, we find a considerable body of literature making just this point; Peter Kenez diagnoses the Whites' with a 'weakness as propagandists', arguing that they "did not understand the significance of ideas in the political struggle… [and] never felt the need for clearly articulated goals [since] they were basically comfortable in Imperial Russia."[148] Christopher Lazarski traces the 'failure' of White propaganda in it being "a half-hearted, badly organized effort which lacked elementary human and technical resources… further weakened by inner

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[146] Anvar Mamadaliev, "Military Propaganda of the White Movement by Means of Information Posters in the Russian Civil War," *Propaganda in the World and Local Conflicts* 10, no. 1 (2023): 3–24, 3, published by *East European Historical Society*.

[147]Mamadaliev, "*Military Propaganda of the White Movement*", 3

[148] Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 64

contradictions within the anti-Bolshevik movement, by the absence of appealing ideology, and by a gap between words and deeds."[149] Geoffrey Swain writes:

> The White forces were so derisory, and attracted such half-hearted support… because their social foundation was the property-owning minority, a small group of narrow conservative nationalists, who disliked popular politics and the very idea of motivating popular support for their regime by developing a progressive social program.[150]

Evan Mawdsley concluded, "The Whites feared the people."[151]

It was argued by the Whites *themselves* that their movement was preemptively restricted by its approach to ideological promulgation. In 1919, the Kharkov bureau set up an 'agitation school' that trained twenty-six propagandists for work in villages. The impact of the work was negligible. The report of the bureau mournfully concluded: "Our propaganda tried to copy the Bolsheviks, but we did not learn from them what was most important: the ability to go to the masses."[152] A.S Dobrovolsky, a procurator in the White administration briefly established at Archangel, in the Far North of Russia, complained in an emigre journal, that the Whites' posters were of modest size and for the most part simply consisted of text; the Bolsheviks' posters were much bigger in format and illustrated with large drawings. In the end, Dobrovolsky concluded, the Whites had not known how to 'lower themselves' to the level of understanding of ordinary people in the

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[149] Christopher Lazarski, "Alekseev–Denikin Period," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 70, no. 4 (October 1992): 688–707, 688.

[150] Geoffrey Swain, *The Origins of the Russian Civil War* (London: Longman, 1996), 3.

[151] Ibid.

[152] "Intelligence Report, Oct. 28, 1919 (O.S.)," Wrangel Military Archives, file 146, pp. 58–61, quoted in Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 65

way that their opponents had been able to do.[153] The Whites had known what they were doing, Polonskii concluded, in painting over Bolshevik posters wherever they could and punishing those who distributed them; in the end the Bolsheviks' posters had been "more powerful than cannon and bullets."[154]

Source after source, be it a comparative study of propagandistic infrastructure[155] or a survey on counter-intelligence methodologies in Civil War Russia[156], seems to echo this sentiment: The White movement was too schismatic, in its ideological content and administrative capacity, to effectively capitalize on the political tumult of the time. They were either too haughty, in their pursuit (or lack thereof) of a populist platform; too anachronistic, in not having understood the developing role of mass-media - and mass psychology - in twentieth century warfare; too elitist, in their right-wing conservatism trickling down-stream from a pre-revolutionary Imperialist 'mentality'; or simply too 'boring', in their 'contained' counter-revolutionary ideology - a far cry from the 'exciting' tenor of revolutionary rupture. All this, while true for the most part, paints a rather simplistic picture of counter-revolutionary ideolog(ies) of the time. It seems, to me, that most historical analysis of the anti-Bolshevik, counter-revolutionary propaganda program flows from the postscript of their eventual loss; that this matter-of-fact foregrounds all else. This seeming need for an assessment on the grounds of the 'efficacy' of certain brands of propagandistic work, while important in its own right, masks the rather complex (and often, confusing) world-view established by the anti-Bolshevik coalitions. At its heart was an upper-strata intellectual's disdain for, what could only be described as,

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[153] S. Dobrovolsky, "Bor'ba za vozrozhdenie Rossii v severnoi oblasti," *Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii* 3 (1921): 5–146, at 78.

[154] Polonskii, *Russkii revolyutsionnyi plakat,* 76

[155] As in Peter Kenez *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929*

[156] As in Viktor Bortnevski, "White Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence during the Russian Civil War," *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 1108 (1995): 1–56.

an overcharged - and naive - revolutionary mentality. “Where does salvation come in times like these?” White General Lukomskii once asked. “Certainly not from any great deeds on the part of the masses, which are always gray, colorless, and small-minded,” he decreed, “but from the heroic deeds of the best and chosen men.” “People, not the masses,” Lukomskii concluded, “make history.”[157]

In a way, one can describe the ideological core of the White Program - perhaps slightly reductively - from this very positionality; that of a smug sanctimony masking an otherwise reactionary set of orthodox belief-systems. Vasilii Vitalievich Shulgin, a right-wing ‘White-Guard’ backing Denikin’s Volunteer Army in the South, voiced this in an article titled *The Revolution has hopelessly failed* (revolyutsiia beznadezhdno provalilias). In it, he recounts a speech delivered by General Denikin in Rostov-on-Don:

> So, “the revolution has failed” But what is a revolution? What exactly failed?
>
> We think that by a revolution we should understand a certain mental state of mind. In revolutionary times, people despise everything created by centuries of efforts in the past. They believe only in themselves, in their reason, in their ability to arrange the world on some new and perfect principles.
>
> The leaders of revolutions are, for the most part, either madmen or scoundrels. It would be absurd to assert that all one hundred and seventy million Russians turned into a bunch of scum during the revolution. However, it would be very close to the truth to say that the whole mass of the population in this troubled time was subject to some kind of mental collapse. People, as they say, lost their minds.
>
> The grace of the forbidden disappeared; consciousness and conscience were freed from all restrains; there was no authority, no laws, no traditions, no religion, no shame… Everything became permissible.
>
> But the true attitude towards the ‘old regime’, ie., towards the entire past of this great nation, has failed. People where beaten over the head with sticks by the ‘new regime’ for two years have

[157] Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 49

> finally begun to understand that not everything old was bad, and not everything new was good. The most absurd slogan that mankind has ever created has failed: 'Renounce the old world'…[158]

It is not difficult to read Denikin's assessment of there being a certain lack of 'shame' or 'respect' on the part of the revolutionary movement as a conservative critique transmitting status-quo oriented, institutionalist values. His closing lines in defense of the 'old' certainly allows for this prescription. Kenez centers this in his analysis of White propaganda: "The men hired to carry out propaganda could not provide the movement with an ideology and goals… They had a great deal of trouble in stating what the Whites were fighting for, and they fell back on a narrow, patriotic position: the goal of the movement was to restore the glory of Russia."[159] In his *Civil War in South Russia,* Kenez prescribes White 'orthodoxy' as the cause of their ultimately flat messaging: "The leaders of the [White Guard] had no clearly articulated goals, the work of the propaganda agency merely reflected the confusion and disagreements within the movement. When Denikin was asked what his army was fighting for, he could do no better than answer, 'For Russia.' This was hardly inspiring."[160] Kenez's characterization of the Whites as finding it "hard… to accept that they were living in an age where the Russian people could not altogether be excluded from the decisions affecting the future of the country"[161] is altogether correct. This is not to say, however, that they did not try.

It would be an oversimplification, in fact, to characterize the White political platform as purely establishmentarian just as it would be to label the Bolsheviks' as solely

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[158] V. V. Shulgin, *1920 God* (Belgrade: Russian Thought Publishing, 1921), 78

[159] Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 64

[160]Peter Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1919–1920: The Defeat of the Whites* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 77.

[161] Ibid.

defiant and anti-institutional. As we have seen, the Bolsheviks were, at times, more responsive to the 'old' than they were the 'new' - this is perhaps most visible in later Socialist Realism as a return to bourgeois-style object reverence. Much like the Bolsheviks, the counter-revolution (and the Whites in their capacity as the 'primary' anti-Bolshevik contingent), struggled with their relationship to history. Like the Bolsheviks, they too were interested in framing their movement by ways of a technological progressivism. In late autumn of 1918, for one, the White contingency in the South asked Allied forces of the First World War to dispatch at least a token military force as a show of friendship. This, they said, would have had a profound propagandistic effect on the morale of the Southern populations. Some politicians also expected the Allies to issue a proclamation condemning Bolshevism and declaring its leaders outlaws. They envisaged that this proclamation would be printed in "billions of copies" and disseminated by airplanes throughout Russia.[162] Lazarski reflects: "Airplanes used for propaganda purposes, not surprisingly excited the White Guard."[163] Likewise, Kenez mentions a November 1919 White Guard propaganda directive outlining a huge sum of money for the construction of a large radio transmitter: "Of course, the Russian peasants had no radios, and the transmitter did not turn out to be powerful enough to reach Western Europe."[164]

Similarly, a popular chapter in Bolshevik Civil War-era propaganda grew out of their unconventional employment of trains (*agit-poezda* or agitational trains) in extending their cause to the country-side. The idea of 'agit-trains', according to contemporary sources, originated in the publishing arm of VTSIK (the All-Russian Central Executive

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[162] M.M. Fedorov, a member of the Special Council and a chairman of the National Center made this proposition in the Winter of 1918-19: Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Wrangel Military Archives (hereafter cited as WMA), file 129, Azbuka Report, *natsionalnii tsentr*

[163] cf. Hoover Institution, Wrangel Private Archives (hereafter WPA), file 1, *Zhurnal Osobago soveshchaniia,* no. 21, 130-31

[164] K. N . Sokolov, *Pravlenie generala Denikina* (Sofia, 1921), 107

Committee), when the department despatched compartments full of political literature to various parts of Bolshevik-controlled territories on ordinary passenger trains. It soon occurred to them that an entire train could be filled with pamphlets, journals and books of this kind, and that the sides of the carriages could be "decorated with agitational pictures and slogans [because] ordinary posters were torn off by the wind or washed away by rain."[165] The first 'agit-train' of this kind, the 'Mobile Military Front-line Literary Train Named after V.I. Lenin' was despatched from Moscow to Kazan in August 1918 for a two-week visit to a part of the country that was then controlled by anti-Bolshevik forces. This was deemed a success, and arrangements for further trains of this kind were entrusted to a commission headed by Vyacheslav Karpinsky.[166] These new *agit-trains* distributed literature at all points along their route, and published their own newspapers on-board, in up to 15,000 copies; "All had bookshops and other services and some had traveling cinemas with seats for up to 150 people. Their sides were highly decorated by poster artists in a style suitable to the territory through which they were to travel."[167] Later, VTsIK developed the *Red Star* agitational ship, which toured the Volga and Kama rivers after the defeat of White General Kolchak in the summers of 1919 and 1920.[168]

When one looks beyond the immediate 'efficacy' of White agitational efforts, it becomes apparent that, like the Bolsheviks, the White's propaganda apparatus engaged, quite readily, with the cosmetics of a new-media approach to culture. Both the call for Allied fly-bys, as well as the directive for the construction of a large radio transmitter, key us in to this desire to channel a certain 'Western' tech-aided administration. In turn, this attempt was characterized as a move beyond Bolshevik propaganda methods, and

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[165] V.A. Karpinsky, ed., *Agitparpoezda VTsIK. Ike istoriya, apparat, metody i formy rabaty. Sbornik statei* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1920), 5

[166] White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, 22

[167] Polonskii, *Russkii revolyutsionnyi plakat* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1925), 59-60

[168] L. Vinogradova, 'Khudozhniki agitpoezdov', *Khudozhnik,* no. 11, (1959), 39-40

one toward, as the author of a proposition put it, 'American methods'.[169] On the other hand, it was Americans who were rather amused by the Russians' 'great belief in propaganda', as evidenced from the Wrangel period in the Civil War.[170]

The question of a relationship to history, of framing oneself either for or in opposition to a picture of the past, was as important to the White Guard as it was to the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks inherited the populist legacy of nineteenth century Russian intelligentsia; a European socialist utopianism, *a là* Fourierism, which drew up a spectacular pathos and grandeur of a vision for the future that so appealed to the Russian radical intelligentsia. The utopia of Fourier - communal life in phalansteries of about 1600 people, communal meals, work, and play - linked up with latent notions of community among peasants and with upper class pangs of shame at the backwardness that was so apparent in *fin-de-siècle* Russia. The attitudes of the White Guard - specifically Denikin's Volunteer Army in the South and Kolchak's troops in Siberia - arguably, arose from what Richard Stite's calls an 'administrative utopia'. As former Tsarist military generals, officers and courtiers, this mentality, in Stite's words, was "a peculiar kind of dreaming by those holding power."[171] It draws on a Foucaldian militarization of the body, as an object and target of power; a desired order, an extreme rationalism and an outlet for the constructive imagination of organizers who wished to build environments and 'design' a spatial symmetric and a socially subjugate populace.

In all its expressions - 'beautiful autocracy' and 'well-ordered police state,' the militarization of estates… panegyric ritual, utopian town planning, and the fanciful hope of regimentalizing all of Russia - the aim

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[169] M.S. Margulies, an activist of the State Council Unity called for such methods: WMA, file, 164, Otdel propagandy, intelligence report no. 38, 8 February 1919.

[170] American Red Cross. *American Red Cross Photographs of Counter-Revolutionary ("Volunteer Army"), Cossack and Other Officials in Russia and Siberia during 1919–21*. 1919–1921. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. LOT 2918 (F).

[171] Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 19

and the mode were alien to the deepest dreams of peasant utopianism. That aim was to bestow order and welfare upon an unwilling population, to dress them, dragoon them, use them, and sometimes even to reify them… The mode was military order and discipline, Western reason, geometric shapes and lines to contain and channel people - all in the context of an elaborate and graphic hierarchy of rank, privilege, appearance, and personal style.[172]

This dissonance is at the heart of the propaganda programs of either faction of the Civil War. The rigid social structure of Imperial Russia, and the alienation felt by its educated elites who "loved not the state and [knew] not the people"[173] fed dreams of reintegration and community on the end of a burgeoning populism circa early twentieth-century Russia. As we have seen, for the Bolsheviks, this dream of 'radical difference' was not necessarily a desire for 'novelty' - at least, not on a formal level. For the Slavophile, this meant peering backward into the 'mists' of Slavic tradition; for the left, it meant looking outward to the land, and forward to progress and 'socialism'. Stites diagnoses the intelligentsia with a lack of a meaningful function, which, when paired with their 'over-education' and 'feeling of superfluousness' led to a certain alienation - a sociological loneliness - that lay the beadwork for a social daydreaming of a 'maximalist variety'. "It was precisely the psychology of maximalism and the emotional drive to escape the odious reality of their Russia that prompted so many among the intelligentsia to organize," he writes, "dreams of a perfect society, warm-hearted visions of a lovely land, denuded of the oppressive state, graced by justice and prosperity."[174]

Prior to the First World War, this sentiment was at the heart of a host of written utopias - novels and stories - flourishing in Russia from bout the mid 1700s to the early 1900s. From Sumarokov's *The Dream: a Happy Society* (1759) to Sologub's *Tarantas*

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[172] Ibid.

[173] Stites, *Revolutionary* Dream, 24

[174] Ibid.

(1848), it manifested in the most 'conservative' ways; non-radical, panegyric exaltations of official Russia, Slavophile dreams or apolitical moral diatribes. Preponderantly anti-modern, anti-European and anti-urban, the nationalist and paternalist genre contained doses of rationalism and technological fantasy in line with later anti-Bolshevik Civil War-era strategies. In the same manner, elements of what's been called an 'administrative utopia' on the part of the Generals leading legions of anti-Bolshevik contingents, captured the thinking of endowed elites, mingling with socialist ideology and popular aspirations, accounting for the utter complexity and richness of revolutionary behavior, thought and output in the first decade of Soviet Power.

Both the administrative ideals and the intelligentsia's populist utopianism was informed, in many ways, by a core imperative - that of willing their aspirations into existence. Both visions of the future developed from specific social and psychological bases. For the Tsarist administrative elite, a particular Western self-consciousness - drawing on the image of an enlightened ruler with unlimited personal power to transform their world - emerged in ways that bordered a certain 'formalistic' fetishism. This ideal concerned itself, particularly at the time of the Civil War, with a return to normalcy - verbalized most clearly in Denikin's speech in Rostov-on-Don - and a controlled image of structured society, in line with Western Europe. For the Bolsheviks, the fight over form emerged in Stalin's aforementioned dictum - where iconoclasm was but one element channeling a refusal to bow to idols (and ideals) of the establishment. The other end of this formal/historical struggle manifested in the propagandistic imperative to create new idols - icons for reverence in the new socialist system. In having to redirect socio-cultural output, on the anti-Bolshevik end, and in having to conjure up a 'new' cultural mode, for the Bolsheviks, both factions grounded their aspirations, and helped 'create' them, as it were, by ways of an administrative structure. We have explored some ways in which the Bolshevik's approach to 're-routing' bureaucracy - as in *Proletkult*, or in the structuring

of the Red Army - were met with criticism on both ends of the political spectrum. On the poster front, however, a bureaucratic approach was both necessary, and at the same time, logistically impossible to develop. The posters of the Civil War sprung up from, and were primarily supported by, institutions. This is common to both the Reds and the Whites.

The Need for Institutionalized Propaganda

After the October *coup d'état,* the Bolsheviks managed to claim authority over a great portion of the Russian country. The new regime, however, was quickly met with retaliation, particularly on its peripheries, from a host of local governments. In the South, in 1917-18, at least a dozen local bodies resisted Soviet power, each representing a varied range of political, social and national interests. One such local 'body' - albeit by no means the most important alternative to Bolshevik authority at the time - was the Volunteer Army of General Alekseev. This army had "clear all-national goals and claimed to be the only heir to legitimate all-Russian authority."[175] This, though not unique among the ideologies of various counter-Bolshevik contingents, was, still, rather dissimilar from the more local and self-rule oriented factions in the South, namely the Don Cossacks and the Ukrainians. "[The White Guard] opposed not only separatism, but even regional particularism in the South."[176] This all-national aspiration lent the Volunteer Army with some political credence, especially when it came to commenting on, and critiquing from, their perspectives on a national governance strategy for Russia. With this approach, the Volunteer Army fiercely opposed the continuation of war with the Germans, framing it as a task of equal importance to the fight against Bolshevism. Through the conflict, the

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[175] Lazarski, "*Alekseev–Denikin Period*," 689

[176] Ibid.

regime became more rigid in this respect, increasingly alienating the very Cossacks who composed the majority of the Army. Lazarksi writes:

> The Volunteer Army rejected any definite 'pre-orientation' of the social, economic and political order of a future Russia. This meant that the movement could neither deliver the peace and land that the people (narod) wanted, nor unequivocally guarantee the democracy and freedom from the educated society (obshchestvo) desired.[177]

It is often argued that this weariness towards a committed ideological outlook severely handicapped anti-Bolshevik propaganda work and offered "excellent material for Red agitation."[178] As we have noted, however, it would be more appropriate to characterize this opinion as stemming from a certain historical hindsight that privileged the Bolsheviks' eventual victory, while overlooking the analogous difficulties confronting Bolshevik propaganda. To remind us of this, Lazarski points to War Communism as an ideology, grounding us in the fact-of-matter that, mass terror as such, did not possess popular appeal.

Alekseev's Volunteer Army was but one of many anti-Bolshevik forces in the Russian South, and could only claim the mantle of being the dominant counter-revolutionary force in the winter of 1918-19. In the summer of 1918, the pro-German governments of Ukraine and the Don, both separatist, monarchist and conservative, established themselves as the eminent anti-Bolshevik centers of the Civil War. Their goals, such as an independent Ukraine or a decentralized Russia were squarely at odds with those of General Alekseev's. The multiplicity of socio-political ideologies at play in Civil War Russia, particularly among the pluralist anti-Bolshevik coalitions, cannot be overstated. At the onset of the conflict, effective anti-Bolshevik propaganda wasn't

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[177] Ibid.

[178] N. E. Paramonov, "Doklad," Azbuka Report, 4 January 1919, Wrangel Military Archives, file 130, Otdel Propagandy, Hoover Institution, Stanford University

necessarily hindered by the 'broad' and 'incoherent' political doctrine of the White Guard per se, but the decentralized state of affairs within the anti-Bolshevik movement, where, for a few long months, no actor could claim sole authority to shape the ideological tint of their propagandistic output. In turn, early anti-Bolshevik posters were quite stinted in their political program, often relegating themselves to narrow call to arms, over a championing of a distinct, developed doctrine.

This is evident in posters like the one in Figure 2, where a somewhat 'candid' and rather unsentimental text reads: Why are you not on the front? Published by the Kharkiv Department for Propaganda, the poster is vague, giving one little reason to participate on the front in the first place. Of course, this must be thought of in the context of the otherwise all-encompassing rhythms of the Civil War, where civilians were inadvertently in-the-know of, if not frontline minutia, then, at least, the larger combat at play. It is important to note that this poster, like many of its contemporaries, uses black ink on beige paper - it is hardly a vivid, 'rich' picture of the conflict.

This is not to position the relative simplicity of this poster against some radically different Bolshevik variant. As we have explored, the Bolsheviks, on their end, produced similar work, responding to similar material constraints, and employed similar brevity in their 'call to arms' posters. In Figure 3, for instance, a similarly uninformative Bolshevik poster reads: Comrade! Rush to the Revolutionary Front! Both posters frame the interrogating soldier within respective - perhaps aspirational - images of the ensuing conflict. The Bolsheviks push their soldier to the foreground, hanging partly from the doors off a moving train, decorated with a red silk rosette, raising the ubiquitous Bolshevik cap, framed by a plume of smoke. It hints at a certain dynamic motion, an industrialized move towards this 'revolutionary' front. Figure 2, on the other hand, frames the soldier against the backdrop of a regimented, organized platoon. The rhythmically arranged silhouettes of the anti-Bolshevik contingency, armed with spikes,

grounds one in the purported order of the anti-Bolshevik movement. The Bolshevik *plakat* is evidently more colorful than the anti-Bolshevik variant, working with four tones, over the simple black on white of the former. While they speak the same concise phrase, with a 'revolutionary' amendment on the part of the Bolshevik poster, they do speak in different scripts of the Russian language.

As part of their revolutionary program, the Bolsheviks modified the Russian script in pursuit of their vision of a 'modern' and 'standardized' Russian script. In 1918, they introduced spelling reforms that eliminated several letters and altered some spelling rules.[179] This is exemplified in many posters of the period, where the White and anti-Bolshevik factions continued employing the 'pre-reform' orthography, as in Figure 2, where the word 'Front' is spelled with a 'yat' (the letter 'Ѣ' - as in фронтѢ), while Bolsheviks worked through the 're-structured' 'Soviet' variant, (in Figure 3, the 'yat' is forsaken for a 'фронт'). The Ѣ (Yat') distinction was one of the most significant spelling changes in the 1918 Bolshevik orthographic reforms. Before this, both 'E' and 'Ѣ' represents similar 'ye' sounds in different words, but their usage was determined by historical etymology rather than pronounciation.[180] The Yat' had originally represented a distinct vowel sound in Old East Slavic, but by the 18th-19th century, it was pronounced identically to E in most Russian dialects. Despite, this, it remained in use due to traditional grammatical training, creating a situation where people would have to memorize which words used which spelling. The old spelling was used in propaganda materials, since it had been officially restored in the "white" territories. The opposition of the two spelling norms had not only a historical and cultural, but also a religious meaning: the reform of Russian spelling carried out by the Bolsheviks was perceived by

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[179] Bernard Comrie, Gerald Stone, and Maria Polinsky, *The Russian Language in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed., rev. and exp. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 28–33.

[180] Linna Liberchuk, "On Language, Political Power and the Regulation of Russian Orthography," *International Relations and Diplomacy* 6, no. 1 (2018): 24–30

supporters of the 'White' movement with a clearly expressed anti-Orthodox subtext. The White Army and various anti-Bolshevik factions also resisted the Soviet reform for clear political reasons. For them, it was the ultimate symbol of the Bolsheviks anti-institutional break from tradition; this afforded the Whites with another avenue of symbolic defiance.

The brevity of the anti-Bolshevik poster is, interestingly, one of many opposing critiques leveled against White propaganda efforts. This is reminiscent of Kenez's critique of Denikin's 'uninspiring' "For Russia!" pointing us to an 'empty' core to the ideological undertones of White resistance. This, again, is an unfair criticism of anti-Bolshevik propaganda, where other posters explicitly 'spell out' the ideological program of the counter-revolution. And yet, this too was criticized. Both White Guard, and later historical, texts level disparaging critiques against the 'verbose' - and, in turn, 'confusing' - propagandistic program of the anti-Bolshevik contingency. One counter-revolutionary 'call-to-arms' poster that verbalizes the 'goals' of White resistance (in Figure 4) reads:

> Here is what we, volunteers, fight for:
>
> For a National Assembly, on the basis of Universal Suffrage.
>
> For Civil Freedom and Freedom of Religion
>
> For the Allotment of Land to the Working People
>
> For Securing the working class from exploitation
>
> For bread for the Hungry
>
> To reinstate Peace and Order

It is not difficult to read this poster as perhaps parroting some quintessential Bolshevik talking-points, albeit without the uniquely anti-institutional tinge of Soviet propaganda. This institutionalism is apparent in the closing line - a reinstating of 'peace'

and ‘order’. While, effectively, this poster could read as a ‘copy’ of a typical Bolshevik pamphlet, it is important to center these remarks within the relatively coalitional nature of early anti-Bolshevik contingencies. Beyond the regionalist forces in the Kuban and the Cossacks, there were also the ideological deviations of armed socialist factions within the anti-Bolshevik contingency. One such faction, the Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries (PSR - or the *Narod* group) - primarily, a populist party with a strong agrarian focus - countenanced armed struggle against the Soviet regime in the summer of 1918, in what came to be known as the ‘democratic counter-revolution’. Some members of the PSR would later cross the front lines in the closing months of 1918, deserting the anti-Bolshevik camp as it became dominated by the often reactionary Whites, to offer conditional support to the Bolsheviks. In all White-held areas, tensions became increasingly acute between the Russian leadership of the movement and their Cossack allies, who were variously accused of banditry (Ataman G.M. Semenov of the Transbaikal Cossack Host) and separatism (Ataman A.P. Filiminov of the Kuban Cossack Host.)[181] Concurrently, Bolshevik-occupied regions experienced their own set of revolts - specifically peasant uprisings - which were often paired with internal struggle, as in the revolt of the Kronstadt sailors and the Workers’ Opposition, which set up strikes across Petrograd.[182]

The terms outlined in Figure 4 are curious; although the Volunteer Army, first under Alekseev and later Denikin, was not a monarchist organization, both Commanders-in-Chief did not unequivocally support the principles of popular sovereignty. The call for

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[181] Likewise, the influential Kuban Cossack politician A.I. Kulabukov was arrested and publicly executed by the White leaders General Denikin in November 1919, when he returned from the Paris Peace Conference, where he had signed an agreement with the Mountain Republic of the Peoples of the North Caucasus that spoke of “the full political independence of the Kuban.” Kulabukob’s ‘treachery’ to the White cause was but one feature of a campaign of anti-Russianism that had swept through the Kuban since mid-1919: Jonathan Smele, *The “Russian” Civil Wars, 1916-1926,* p. 281; Peter Kenez*, Civil War in South Russia, 1919-1920,* p. 119

[182] Smele, *The “Russian” Civil Wars, 1916-1926*, 51

a ‘National Assembly based on Universal Suffrage’ is striking because it came right at the heals of the closure of the aforementioned Constituent Assembly. The attitude of the Army’s leadership toward the Constituent Assembly underwent considerable change. In the early days of the counter-revolution, before the results of the Assembly election were announced, Alekseev, and presumably, Denikin were in favor of allowing the ‘people’ to express their will. As late as February 5, 1919, L.G. Kornilov, a high ranking member of both the Provisional Government as well as the southern theatre of the counter-revolution, called for the re-convening of the Assembly, which had, then, been dispersed by the Bolsheviks. Soon after the results of the election were announced, which saw the Socialist Revolutionaries (SR) win decisively, the Whites’ official position changed radically. Now, they maintained that the Constituent Assembly had been “irrevocably destroyed by the Bolsheviks” and that “new elections would have to be held to reflect the current attitudes of the people.”[183] Kenez writes of this issue as “[having] become one of the chief points of disagreement between the [White] generals and the socialists, who were well satisfied with the election results.”[184]

While the necessity of new elections was disputed, the desirability of a Constitutent Assembly - or a similarly elected body - came to be taken for granted by both officers and socialists alike. Kenez attests: “In the first half of 1918, every political manifesto of the Volunteer Army restated a commitment to this institution.”[185] It is striking, then, that the poster in Figure 4 does away with the ‘Constituent Assembly’ for a ‘National’ variant. Kenez writes that the “official stance of the army became increasingly vague. The army was still fighting to ‘let the Russian people express its will,’ but Denikin now declined to specify how this could be done. In the fall of 1918, the

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[183] A. I. Denikin, *Ocherki russkoi smuty*, vol. 4 (Berlin: Slovo, 1925), 202.

[184] Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1919–1920: The Defeat of the Whites,* 47.

[185] Ibid.

proclamations of the army mention not a Constituent Assembly but a 'National Assembly', without describing how such a body would be elected and what the limits of its competence would be."[186] Talk about 'legal continuity' and the 'rebirth of the Russian state' - as in the call to 'reinstate Peace and Order' - further complicated their stance. Kenez reflects: "Implicitly, at least, the leaders of the Volunteer Army now rejected the notion of universal suffrage; its hard to understand how the Russian people could express its will if the army did not plan to call a Constituent Assembly after its anticipated victory."[187]

In calling for 'Peace and Order', the White poster often posed an economic critique that, both formally and ideologically, mined the reservoir of a *lubok*-style, sardonic anti-administrative voice. This is perhaps best exemplified by a set of narrative 'then and now' posters, through which, the anti-Bolshevik coalition attempted to transmit a temporal, economic (and symbolic) critique of what they were positioning themselves against. White posters, such as those depicted in Figures 5 and 6, present a 'take-down' of the perceived fiscal realities of middle-class life under Bolshevik rule. Figure 5 presents a columnar narrative, criticizing the excessive issuance of paper money by various Russian governments during the revolutionary and Civil War periods. The triptych compares three governments - Tsarist (1916), Provisional (1917), and Bolshevik (1918) - by illustrating how each printed increasingly vast amounts of paper money leading to inflationary market-conditions. The numbers on each poster escalate from 290 million rubles under the Tsar, through 832 million under the Provisional Government, to 1,000 million, under the Bolsheviks. The bank-setting, too, changes - from a seemingly orderly cashier to an outdoor market stall, enacting a 'before; worse; worst' logic. This poster's three-part sequence exemplifies how the Whites weaponized seemingly banal (in contrast to the

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[186]Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1919–1920: The Defeat of the Whites*, 48

[187] Ibid.

larger '*la patria en danger'* perspective to other anti-Bolshevik posters) fiscal critiques, enabling a sort of aspirational 'transformational and negational' historical vision.

A different poster - in Figure 6 - develops on this hyper-inflationary vision of Bolshevik rule. This poster is divided into four panels, each associated with a different year (1914, 1917, 1918, and 1919), building out an argument on the changing cost of consumer goods - in particular, the price and availability of men's shoes - beginning from relatively stable market-conditions with affordable shoes to an unsustainable economic climate, with a single pair costing upwards of hundreds of rubles. Here, the Whites invert Bolshevik claims of striving for a 'fair' new world, by narrativizing the post-revolutionary financial experience of an abstracted 'common folk', and implying that a 'return' to pre-revolutionary bureaucratic management (and, in turn, a bourgeois ruling class) could help reverse the seemingly all-encompassing fiscal crisis of the day. Stites notes that revolutionary propaganda often conjured up images of a glorious future or a dark, archaic past to mobilize utopian energy. Here, the White poster uses a distinctly negative utopian approach: it constructs the Bolshevik present as a dystopia, worse than anything that preceded it. It is a form of 'exhibit' in Stites' sense: a public display that invites the viewer to foster nostalgia for pre-revolutionary market-conditions. This second poster continues the same 'transformative and negational' strategy seen in much Civil War-era propaganda. By contrasting 1914 with 1919, it performs a 'then and now' rhetorical move that dramatizes the Bolshevik present as a catastrophic inversion of a stabler past.

The ever-changing stances, priorities, and policy-directives of the anti-Bolshevik coalition - as was the case with the Bolsheviks - necessitated an effort to construct a more articulate, and internally cohesive, propaganda program. This was approached somewhat differently by either faction. What they had in common, however, was an

acknowledgement of the need for a developed institutional framework that could help materially, ideologically and logistically facilitate their propagandistic program.

The Whites and the Bolsheviks institutionalized their propaganda directives in markedly different ways. As we have explored, the Bolsheviks developed a distinctive structural nuance in their relationship to institutions - a nuance that, in turn, generated significant confusion. This is perhaps most evident on the cultural front, manifesting in publications, media, and propaganda.

In Tsarist Russia, the press played a decisively important role in spreading political ideology. Before 1917, partisans within the imperial framework - liberals and conservatives alike - vied for the influential bully-pulpit. Kenez argues that this Bolshevik 'schooling' within the Tsarist press system instilled in them the need to operate as journalists.[188] He links their experiences with manufacturing consent, disseminating doctrine, and simultaneously evading censorship to the development of what he calls "propaganda skills." "Undoubtedly," he writes, "their journalistic work was one of their formative experiences: They learned the use of Aesopian language and learned that censorship was a part of the political struggle."[189]

In contrast, the White leadership was more accustomed to wielding power. The earlier imperial ambition to foster a Western European model of 'enlightened despotism'- most vividly embodied by Catherine the Great and Alexander I - served as the moral underpinning for the general class's proximity to militaristic power. Moreover, this distinct form of Russian bureaucratic enlightened despotism found formal expression in the military's structured, symmetrical, and hierarchical system. This is not to say that the White leadership was unaware of the challenges of grappling with power or that they

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[188]Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 21

[189] Ibid.

were mistaken in assuming that "real authority"- at least during the Civil War - lay solely with them. As previously noted, the Whites were deeply anxious about the legitimacy of their claim to power, a somewhat new experience that arose amid this 'unexpected' moment. Meanwhile, by the time of the Civil War, the Bolsheviks were accustomed to operating as an 'underground' force. Consequently, some of their greatest struggles emerged from the need to institutionalize their traditionally anti-institutional, left-field, outsider status, as seen during later NEP years. Addressing this distinction - and centering it on what he perceives as the failure of the Whites' propaganda apparatus - Kenez observes:

> In the earliest stages of the conflict, at a time when the anti-Bolshevik officers were operating under very difficult circumstances, they had only limited means to reach the people. At this time, the public statements of the [White] leading generals were largely confined to appeals for patriotism. In their mind, it was clear that Bolsheviks were traitors, bent on destroying 'Russia,' and they simply could not understand that reasonable and honest people could see matters differently.[190]

I argue that the very project of institutionalizing propaganda - whether for the Bolsheviks or the Whites - stems from their distinct genesis narratives. The Bolsheviks, for instance, conceived of their propaganda "departments" as atomistic entities embedded within a broader network of institutions. This decentralized, almost journalistic approach allowed them to proliferate their message with remarkable efficiency. In fact, during the Civil War years between 1918 and 1921, Bolshevik propaganda departments operated out of 453 different institutions, and posters were published in at least seventy-six towns and cities across Bolshevik-controlled territory.[191] As critic Boris Zemenkov recalled: "It was hard in those [Civil War] years to find an institution that did not want to publish posters.

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[190] Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 63

[191] White, *The Bolshevik Poster,* 110.

All the RSFSR was gripped by poster fever."[192] Polonkii, on his end, suggested that something akin to 'poster-mania' had taken hold of the nation, with posters being produced by "virtually every institution with an agitational or educational function… The literary and publishing sections of the armed forces [had] thrown out as many posters as they were able."[193]

In stark contrast, the Whites maintained just a single propaganda department. - Osvag (from *Osvedomitel'noe-agitatsionnoe otdelenie*, or informational-agitational department). Kenez remarks that having a dedicated propaganda organization for the Whites was "more a sign of weakness than of strength."[194] While the Bolsheviks 'seamlessly' combined administration and agitation - most notably within their party apparatus - the Whites' limited approach underscored a fundamentally different attitude toward propaganda and public mobilization.

Ultimately, the divergence isn't solely a matter of numerical output - the Bolsheviks would easily outpace the Whites in sheer volume of publishing activity - but of an overarching approach to propaganda, administration, and rallying public support. Osvag, bogged down by bureaucratic hurdles, reflects an officer corps' particular understanding of institutions, one that contrasts sharply with the otherwise dynamic, multi-pronged strategy of the Bolshevik press.

Osvag and the White Poster: Nature, Machine and the Outsider

When Alekseev's Volunteer Army set up a 'Special Council' in mid-1918, it established an agitation/information council within its department of foreign affairs. This

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[192] B. Zemenkov, "Karikatura v sovetskoi obshchestvennosti," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 6 (September 1925): 66–70, 66

[193] Polonskii, *Russkii revolyutsionnyi plakat*, 61

[194] Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 63

section came to be referred to as Osvag, and was first headed by S.S. Chakhotin, a well-educated bureaucrat that was, otherwise, "totally unsuited for his new position."[195] Soon, thereafter, Osvag was given over to N.E. Paramonov, a Kadet of the Don Voisko and one of the chief members of the opposition to the Cossack leader Ataman Krasnov's conservative policies. Paramonov, unlike Chakhotin, had broader 'editorial' experience, and set up Osvag's offices in Rostov-on-Don, away from the Volunteer Army's military center in Ekaterinodar. This was largely a matter of practicality. Rostov, a much larger city, was better endowed with technical publishing facilities - both presses and personnel - and seemed better positioned to facilitate the Volunteer Army's propaganda directives. This wasn't without its own challenges however. Being away from Ekaterinodar, Osvag suffered from a peripheral relationship to the White contingency's center of power. Moreover, it was plagued with political interference from the varied members of the anti-Bolshevik coalition, weakening its administrative capacities as well as its core messaging. Paramonov seemingly understood that no amount of bureaucratic re-shuffling could help the Osvag function 'like' the Bolshevik propaganda directives, unless the army itself was prepared to change its policies. On assuming his job as director, Paramonov wrote to General Romanovskii, the Chief of Staff of the Volunteer Army. This report, Kenez writes, can be "read as an analysis of the causes of the ultimate failure of the White movement."[196] Paramonov's letter primarily recommended a leftist program for the Volunteer Army. He implored the Volunteer Army to stand for universal suffrage, and asked General Denikin to "dissociate himself completely from the tsarist regime"[197] a rejection of pre-revolutionary Russia which the Commander-in-Chief was not ready to make. In the middle of March, after only six weeks in office, he was forced to resign.

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[195] Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1919–1920: The Defeat of the Whites*, 71

[196] Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1919–1920: The Defeat of the Whites*, 72

[197] Ibid.. 73

Osvag's early association with the Volunteer Army's Department of Foreign Affairs is telling in its own right. While this pairing only lasted through Chakhotin's time as the propaganda agency's lead, it gives insight into the White Army's instinctive association of propaganda as something that was largely outward-focused - vying for a global recognition on the part of the international community. Kenez asserts that the attachment of Osvag to the Department of Foreign Affairs shows the thinking of the White leadership for whom propaganda "was not to influence domestic public opinion but to attract foreign aid."[198]

Lazarski, on his end, contests this assertion, writing that, since the arrangement had lasted only a few weeks (through Chakhotin's short tenure), the marriage of Osvag to the Department of Foreign Affairs speaks more to the "precarious position of the Volunteer Army in Kuban than about the 'curious thinking' of its leaders."[199] Lazarski writes that since the Department of Foreign Affairs was in charge of relations with all former Russian provinces, "its control over Osvag was natural," and that, "as soon as the Department was relieved from maintaining such relations, Osvag ceased to be part of it."[200]

Chakhotin's (and later, Paramanov's) Osvag became a large institution plagued by bureaucratic routine. It initially comprised of two divisions: the Press Bureau and the Information agency.[201] It also developed local offices which were under the mantle of the Military-Political Department of the Volunteer Army.[202] Lazarski writes: "During

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[198] Ibid. 209

[199] Lazarski, "*Alekseev–Denikin Period*," 696

[200] Ibid.

[201] A. I. Denikin, *Ocherki russkoi smuty*, vol. 4 (Berlin: Slovo, 1925), 232.

[202] Wrangel Military Archives (WMA), file 167, "Prikaz Verkhovnogo rukovoditelia Dobrovol'cheskoi Armii," Ekaterinodar, 10 September 1918; quoted in Boris Sokolov, *Pravlenie*

Chakhotin's tenure, Osvag gained a reputation as a haven for the undereducated."[203] It seems that the constant complaints about the quality of Osvag's personnel forced the institution to begin using 'rigorous' criteria in its employment policy.[204] This is at least suggested in a military report from Kharkov that provides information on Osvag's hiring standards, albeit condemning them, at the same time. It states that out of a larger pool of participants in an agitation-course, fifty-four candidates were admitted to the final examination, only thirty-four of whom passed, from which twenty-six were hired. Ten of them had not completed high school.[205] Lazarski finds the organization as having lacked talented agitators able to deal with multiple audiences at once.[206] Sokolov, who later took over the reigns of Osvag from Paramonov, writes, "We had to work without socialists and Jews. People who know the racial and party composition of that segment of our intelligentsia which was able to speak and write to the people, will understand what this policy meant in practice."[207]

Beyond administrative critique, Sokolov's statement points us to a core feature of White propaganda - its anti-semitic tenor. It would be more than accurate to paint the White propaganda apparatus as a racist, anti-semitic, proto-fascist program. Sokolov, upon taking over Osvag, began his work by removing most of Paramonov's associates, and in particular all Jewish and socialist members of the department. In his memoirs, he maintained that he was not guided by anti-Semitism, but believed it was necessary to make a 'concession' to the 'prevailing mood' of the officers and of the Russian people in

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[203] Lazarski, "*Alekseev–Denikin Period*," 698

[204] Wrangel Military Archives (WMA), file 146, Razvedyvatel'nyi otdel, intelligence report no. 153, Kharkov, 28 October 1919, p. 5.

[205] Ibid.

[206] Lazarski, "*Alekseev–Denikin Period*,"

[207] K. N. Sokolov, *Pravlenie Generala Denikina: Iz Vospominanii* (Sofia: Rossiisko-Bolgarskoe Knigoizdatel'stvo, 1921), 103.

general. It is curious that Sokolov's purge of Jews from Osvag did not satisfy the anti-semites, who continued to believe that the agency was dominated by Jews.[208] Kenez writes:

> [The Whites] managed to harm both Jews and Communists by maintaining that they had an unholy alliance against 'Russia.' The majority of the officers genuinely believed that the destruction of their country was the result of the subversion of 'aliens,' that is, Jews. Their vocabulary was the same as [that of] twentieth century anti-Semites elsewhere. They spoke of Jews as microbes who brought infection to the healthy body politic of Russia. They expressed a desire to cleanse the country of this unclean element. White posters and pamphlets depicted Communist leaders as Jewish, and commanding officers legitimized the peasant's anti-semitism by not preventing or stopping pogroms.[209]

The anti-semitic depiction of Bolsheviks was leveled at some of the most prominent members of the Bolshevik cast. A poster - depicted in Figure 7 - centers a caricature of Trotsky, rendered as a red, monstrous figure perched atop a bridge. The color is used both to link Trotsky to 'Red' Bolshevism and to replicate typical anti-semitic tropes. Beneath Trotsky, a mass of human skulls seem to represent the death and misery that, in the White view, Bolshevism would bring to Russia. This is a stark, visceral divide - indicting the Bolsheviks (and especially Jewish Bolsheviks), via exaggerated or, often, inverted real atrocities, for 'Red Terror'. White propaganda routinely singled out Leon Trotsky as a representative of a 'Jewish menace' leading the Bolsheviks. The poster's anti-semitism is part of a broader conflation of socialism with Judaism.

It was, in turn, an alliance with the Orthodox Church, a wholly anti-Bolshevik institution at the time of the Civil War, that bolstered the Whites' anti-semitic rhetoric as part of a nationalist, Christian, conservative program. The greatest help the Church provided was not through the Whites' motion to appeal to uninterested foreign audiences,

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[208] Sokolov, *Pravlenie*, 104

[209] Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 65

but through its vast proximity to the Russian people. Its network of village priests covered the countryside, and in Kenez's words, were "incomparably more effective as anti-Bolshevik agitators than Osvag representatives."[210] They denounced the atheistic Bolsheviks, and often led White partisan movements. "Looking back," Kenez reflects, "there is no doubt that the Bolshevik attacks on religion backfired badly. The accounts of peasant risings almost invariably mention some crude attack on the Church as a motivating force."[211] The church, on its end, lent its prestige to authenticating such 'miracles' as a report from Yalta that claimed a Jewish commissar was killed by a bullet that he himself fired at an icon.[212]

The White poster speaks to a broader conflation of Judaism with urbanism, and reflects an anti-urbanism that was hugely prevalent among conservative thinkers in turn-of-century Russia. Before 1905, a genre of geopolitical novels appeared in Russia with visions of catastrophe and an ensuing Pan-Slavic victory. Perhaps the most prominent of these was A. I . Krasnitsky's *Behind the Raised Curtain: a Fantastic Tale of Future things - the 20th Century*. These 'future things' included submarines, a European holocaust and war, a rebellion in the colonial world, a foiled attempt to create a Jewish State on the site of a ruined Austria in order "to extend Jewish power throughout the world,"[213] and the emergence of a regenerated religious, patriotic, monarchic Russia, with its capital renamed Petrograd, ruled by a Russian God of Truth (*Pravda*), Good, and Love, and heading a Pan-Slavic political union.[214]

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[210] Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1919–1920: The Defeat of the Whites*, 79

[211] Ibid.

[212] Wrangel Military Archives (WMA), file 183, Azbuka report, Crimea, 27 June 1919 (O.S.), pp. 263–264

[213] Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 34

[214] A. I. Kransnitskii, *Za pripodnyatoyu zavesoi: fantasticheskaya povest' o delakh budushchago (XX vek)* (St. Petersburg: Trei, 1900)

"Throughout this period," writes Richard Stites, "some conservatives were longing for what one historian has called a 'reactionary utopia'; they identified cities with industry and with Jews, 'urban outsiders in an agrarian society,' and they lamented the 'destructive influence of the city.'[215]"[216] In turn, an impulse to draft 'dystopian' conservative texts in the years preceding the revolution of 1917, from Nikolai Fëdorov's *An Evening in the Year 2217* to Valery Bryusov's *Republic of the Southern Cross*, uncover a great rift between conservative and leftist thought in late Imperial Russia; mainly, in the growing sentiment that all progressive processes associated with the words modern, urban, industrial, rational, harmonious, socially just, equal, and fair were coalescing into a vision of future conformity and repression.[217]

Indeed, nature - positioned in opposition to technology - became a symbolic staging ground where geographically defined Civil War factions launched aggressive assaults against one another. A major image in revolutionary science-fiction, and Bolshevik propaganda directives, was that of a 'world-city' with "urban minds beaming out reason and wisdom into the primeval darkness and city built machines shaping the tangle of nature into symmetrical forms."[218] The dominant Bolshevik view of the city as the locus of power and reason as antithetical to the lethargic and somnolent countryside

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[215] Heinz-Dietrich Löwe, *Antisemitismus und reaktionäre Utopie: Russischer Konservatismus im Kampf gegen den Wandel von Staat und Gesellschaft, 1890–1917* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1978), 17–23, 30–39, 56–57, 125, and passim.

[216] Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 34

[217] Ibid. 35

[218] Ibid. 52

set the grounds for a conflict between "machines and wolves."[219] "After electricity," wrote Mayakovsky, "I lost interest in nature. Too backward."[220]

The revolutions of 1917 were paired with major agrarian uprisings across the empire; in its seizure of landlords' estates, peasant hostility was also embodied in a massive withdrawal from the state and the expulsion of 'other' entities (urban intruders, intellectuals, outside laborers) from village life. Stites reminds us however, that this anti-urban sentiment was not wholly directed at the Bolsheviks. While it was augmented by the fact that pro-Bolshevik elements in villages tended to migrate to the city or serve in the army, the peasants equally "hated and feared the Whites, who, they believed, wanted to take back [their] land."[221] Indeed, these de-centered rural uprisings often opposed both White and Red rule, in favor of small-scale social reorganization 'from below'. The so-called 'green' uprisings erupted all across White and Red controlled-territories - often in the form of regional separatist states, resulting in a two-part rejection of both White and Red authority. Indeed, it was fundamentally a variant of local self-governance, as an ideology, that bolstered revolts such as that on the Kronstadt island naval base in the Gulf of Finland. While their rejection of Bolshevik authority was not explicitly agrarian in nature, Stites reminds us of a unique anti-authoritarianism born out of their naval experience that "taught them to hate shipboard discipline."[222] The White attempt to weaponize anti-urbanist rhetoric against the Bolsheviks, thus, can not solely be gauged on the merit of their program alone. It existed largely as a borrowed framework, or a pre-

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[219] Peter Albjerg Jensen, *Nature as Code: the Achievement of Boris Pilnjak* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1979) *passim*.

[220] Edward J. Brown, *Mayakovsky: Poet in the Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 28, 88–89

[221] Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 53

[222] Ibid. 55

existing and prevalent school of thought, that was conveniently tapped into and brought into the fold of White-tinged counter-revolution.

As we have explored, much of Osvag's anti-urbanist messaging came paired with the borrowed authority of another institution in Russian society - the Orthodox Church. Often, this propagandistic program depicted a Slavic Orthodox state, representative of Denikin's "old order," as being fundamentally at odds with a heterogeneous, racially diverse, and atheistic socialist future, a message frequently targeted at the so-called "Internationalists" - a name applied to individuals and groups who fought on the side of the Red Army but who had been born outside of the Russian Empire. There were some five million foreigners on Russian soil in 1917 (almost half of them were prisoners of war and many others were displaced) and some tens of thousands of them were recruited to Soviet forces in the course of the civil war, many of whom were from the pool of POWs who were released from labor camps upon the conclusion of the First World War. A chief target of White propaganda, amongst these so-called Internationalists, were an unspecified, heavily racialized, group of Chinese and Korean laborers, who were part of groups of Bolshevik detachments. Among them, were the 450-strong Chinese Battalion of Tiraspol', the Red Chinese (Zen Fu-Chen) Detachment, and the Chinese Platoon of the Kiev Military District. A contemporary Soviet source claimed that the number of Chinese soldiers in the Red Army was between 2000 and 3000 in 1919.[223] Smele reminds us that the role of Internationalists in the Red Army has proven to be one of the most difficult aspects of the Civil War to evaluate, as both Soviet Historians and émigrés (mostly White 'dissidents') tended (for very different reasons) to exaggerate their importance. "For the former," he writes, "the Internationalists - the subject of no less than 600 books published in Soviet Russia to the mid-1980s… symbolized the international proletarian revolution; for the latter, although their observations tended to appear more in the form of

[223] Smele, *The "Russian" Civil Wars,* 38

pejorative asides than heavy tomes of documents and memoirs, they symbolized the illegitimacy and alien nature of Bolshevik rule in Russia."[224]

This is seen, quite readily, in both Bolshevik and White posters of the Civil War. Both sides tended to represent this 'internationalist' coalition within the Bolshevik contingency in rather varied ways. For the Bolsheviks, this was often a vision of a broad global, multi-cultural 'togetherness' - the 'International' Civil War. This, as seen in the poster in Figure 8, is visualized in rather Utopian ways - often in the form of a radial formation around the planet itself, an armed contingency, triumphant and united. This motif evolves into a standard vision of the later USSR's place in the world. Posters, like the May-Day *plakat* in Figure 9, printed a few years after the closing days of the Civil War, develop on this image of a coalitional, multi-ethnic, socialist vision. Both Figures 8 and 9, center Russia as the guiding force in this 'International' movement. Both posters ground the Red flag of Bolshevism (albeit the poster in Figure 9 plants it, quite literally, in Moscow) at the heart of this 'Global' proletarian revolution.

As we have noted, the "poster medium," as it evolved throughout the Civil War, was employed as a rather blunt instrument. This choice precluded the kind of nuanced depth that more intricate representations might offer in conveying the conflict's opposing visions. Labeling these broad depictions of multi-ethnic Bolshevik consolidation as merely 'vague' or 'utopian' risks overlooking their intended function. In contrast, White posters targeting the so-called 'Internationalists' eschewed this broadness in favor of overtly racialized caricatures - depicting Jews, as well as Chinese and Korean Bolsheviks - in ways that stripped these figures of distinct identities.

White propaganda - exemplified by the poster in Figure 10 - foregrounds anti-urban anxieties to provoke a racist reaction against what was perceived as a socialist

[224] Ibid. 271

assault on the ‘simplicity’ of sylvan life. These images channel deep-seated antipathy toward both the socialist state and the bureaucratic apparatus of the state church, presenting a ’native’ peasantry as vulnerable to the destructive actions of callous outsiders. In Figure 10, the visibly rural backdrop, marked by fences, huts, and open fields, evokes an idealized pastoral Russian landscape, thereby reinforcing an image of authentic ‘Russianness’ in stark contrast to the crudely caricatured Chinese Bolshevik soldiers depicted as foreign invaders. The poster’s text explicitly states: “Bolshevik punitive detachments of Latvians and Chinese forcibly take away bread, destroy villages, and shoot peasants.” In this manner, the poster constructs a narrative of national victimhood, suggesting that Bolshevik power ultimately relies on the coercive strength of non-Russian elements.

Frequently, imagery depicting a ravaged peasantry was supplanted by representations of the Orthodox Church and, at times, the Christian God himself, portrayed as being under imminent threat by ‘Internationalist’ contingencies of the Bolshevik Army. This visual strategy dovetails with a broader pattern in White propaganda, wherein the depiction of rural devastation increasingly gives way to imagery of an imperiled Orthodox Church, thereby heightening the moral urgency of resisting Bolshevik forces.

A White poster, as presented in Figure 11, depicts a visceral dramatization of this perceived threat to the Orthodox Church. Here, the image is explicitly narrative: the priest, clad in traditional ecclesiastical vestments and clutching a cross - a potent emblem of enduring Orthodox authority - is depicted as the ‘ultimate’ martyr. The accompanying text reads: 'Even the sailors - those desperate hooligans and brigands - were terrified by the honest and life-giving Cross of the Lord; consequently, the commissars summoned the Chinese, and they, without a tremor, executed the priest This took place in Moscow.’ This is a particularly striking propagandistic framing of national - and arguably

theological - victimhood, recounting how even the 'lowliest' - the "desperate hooligans and brigands" of the navy - could not face the 'transcendent' power of the cross. The invocation of the Chinese as the agents of execution underscores a profoundly racist - and rather ahistorical - portrayal of the enemy, reinforcing the White construction of Bolshevik power as inextricably linked to foreign, subversive forces operating against and outside the 'natural order' of Russian society. It extends the logic of White propaganda by transforming the act of violence into a narrative of national rupture - a key, and arguably effective - motif in White posters writ large.

Another White poster - depicted in Figure 12 - develops this narrative, portraying a group of Bolshevik forces looting a church. The desecrated church became a rather successful visual shorthand for the broader counter-revolutionary narrative. In this poster, simply titled 'Disgraceful Bolsheviks in the Church', a rather stark picture of moral collapse unfolds: the interior of a sanctuary - with its icon stands, reliquaries, and once ornate woodwork - lies in disarray, with scattered liturgical objects and torn vestments strewn across the floor. Bolshevik soldiers, depicted in a state of frenzied ransack, occupy various focal points: one pries open a cabinet of vessels, another seizes what appears to be an Orthodox icon, and yet another overturns a candle stand. Perhaps most strikingly, the corpse of a priest - suspended from a noose - emerges from behind the shadows of a column - recasting this scene as an existential moment, and as the 'result' of Bolshevik militant atheism. As with the other examples of White visual rhetoric, the brutality on display here - manifest in the physical violation of holy objects and the palpable disregard for clerical authority - intensifies the moral urgency of counter-revolutionary resistance. This poster captures a distinct flavor of 'successful' White Propaganda motifs - namely, its deliberate attempt to shock the viewer by contrasting the vulnerability of a weak, beleaguered peasantry or the sanctity of an innocent church with the ruthless barbarity of a brutal, and often racially 'othered', enemy. In pursuing a racist, anti-semitic

propagandistic program, Osvag's propaganda directive reveals perhaps the most 'effective' strategy in its campaign of 'shocking' the audience - that of documenting, both real and imagined, Bolshevik 'atrocities' aimed at an otherwise moral, 'pure', and above all *decent*, world order.

Perhaps the single most striking poster in this collection speaks to this White strategy; In Figure 13, a Poster titled 'Animalistic Bolsheviks', showcasing the so-called 'Horrors of the Kharkiv Cheka' represents a striking departure from the more stylized, illustrative approach of earlier White propaganda posters. Instead, this is a display of multiple photographs - arrayed in a grid - purporting to document, with chilling realism, the corpses of hostages tortured and killed by Bolshevik forces. By adopting a seemingly objective, 'evidence-based' approach, the poster underscores its own claim to veracity: rather than an 'imagined' illustrated scene, one is presented with a gallery of graphic 'proofs', with captioned images guiding the viewer through their horror.

These images are staged as a sequence of 'exhibits'; several photographs show groups of bodies laid out on the ground, with captions labelling these victims as 'hostages' - a loaded term suggesting that these corpses were, in fact, innocent civilians. Another recurring term is *zamychennie* - a word that could mean both tortured and tormented. These labels sit below depictions of wounds, contusions and bound limbs - one caption reads 'skin flayed from a hand on a windowsill.' This pairing - the 'docu-realist' photo image with a matter-of-fact caption - cultivates a veneer of reportage, a repertorial snapshot into the real impact of Bolshevik rule over Russia. The decision to employ photographs suggests that Osvag, and the White movement's leaders, understood the potential of photojournalism as a tool to reach broader segments of the population. In terms of resource allocation, photographs still required substantial logistics in 1920s Russia - with cameras, film rolls, and developing facilities - one can infer the perceived importance of this representational strategy solely from the regime's recognition of

presenting 'evidence' in as 'realistic' a manner as possible. The photo-image itself was not brand-new in Russia; there had been professional photographers and studios since the late 19th century, and photo-illustrated periodicals were in broad circulation prior to the First World War. However, its use in the context of large-scale, mass-printed posters was still relatively novel and logistically challenging, particularly in the volatile and resource-scarce conditions of White-controlled regions in the Russian South.

In terms of its claim to authenticity, the poster does speak to historical accounts of the Cheka, the Bolshevik's secret police, and its repression of counter-revolutionary forces. The Bolsheviks, who had long suffered at the hands of the Tsarist political police, the *Okhrana* (literally, 'The Guards'), fastidiously created their own political police, the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Struggle against Counterrevolution, Sabotage, and Speculation, known simply as the Cheka.[225] Kharkiv, a major industrial and cultural center in Ukraine, was one particularly affected by Cheka's brutal wave of mass arrests, executions and forced labor. During the Civil War, it was a focal point of the conflict in the South. George Legett's detailed study of the Cheka's organizational methods, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police,* speaks to the force's presence in Kharkiv: "The Cheka resorted to a wide variety of ingenious tortures vying with the methods of the Spanish Inquisition. Certain Chekas specialized in particular lines of torments: the Kharkiv Cheka went in for scalping and hand-flaying… The Cheka also resorted to mass executions when its prisons were about to be overrun by White forces, as happened in Kharkiv, Kiev and Odessa in the summer of 1919."[226] On 8 June 1919, over the course of two to three hours, a three-man commission presided over 350 cases in the Cheka prison in Kharkiv, and immediately proceeded to execute 79 detainees;[227] that same night a mass

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[225] Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 33

[226] George Leggett, The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 197-199

[227] Ibid. 200

execution took place independently in the Cheka concentration camp in the city.[228] This poster likely documents this exact event upon the White Army's June 27, 1919 re-capture of the city, with its composition serving as a meticulously arranged 'visual dossier' of 'Bolshevik atrocity'. Where it deviates from the language of 'foreign invaders', the poster decries Bolshevik action as fundamentally outside the bounds of Russian morality; it transforms acts of violence into a sweeping narrative of national-betrayal - depicting Bolsheviks as alien interlopers whose brutality imperils a time-honored way of life.

It is worth noting that the Whites also employed photography on a different register: to capture and legitimize the White leadership itself. In contrast to the devastating imagery of mass-executions, these photographs seek to convey an air of administrative order and moral uprightness, framing prominent figures - like General Denikin - as both heroic and available to the broader public. In Figure 15, a poster detailing General Denikin's arrival to Rostov-on Don does just this; by presenting the General in seemingly candid, documentarian images, the movement taps into the photo-images inherent claim to a certain proximity, and arguably, to a kind of 'realer' truth. There is, in a sense, a claim to authenticity here - here is the man, the leader on the ground, captured, not created, by the lens.

I find this poster - and others like it - to encapsulate the Whites' distinctly 'general class' administrative mentality. Steeped in the traditions of Imperial military hierarchy, the White leadership symbolically approached propaganda as a top-down, institutional effort. The imagery in Figure 15 is more than a depiction of routine military activity; it mobilizes a reportorial approach that reinforces an order meant to appear self-evidently rational. In this context, the camera is imbued not only with proximity but with an institutional voice, grounding the conflict in the concentrated vision of the general class.

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[228] Ibid.

Photography, as noted, had then been known in Russia for over eighty years. In the early 1840s, Sergei Levitskii, the 'grand old man' of Russian photography, embarked on a career that lasted several decades. In 1882, the 'Pan-Russian Exhibition' held at Moscow became the first Russian show, in which photography was featured extensively; the first dedicated photo-exhibition was held in St. Petersburg in 1888. In both shows, the relation between photography and technological progress was stressed: in 1882, the specified range of exhibits included everything "concern[ing] the dissemination of education and knowledge: the printing industry, musical instruments… lithography, chromolithography, typography, and finally photography, which represent a direct connection with printing."[229] In short, by *fin-de-siècle* Russia, photography had already come to be associated with playing a vital role in the creation of everything from writerly personae (in the angular portraits of Dostoevsky in his fifties)[230] to the popularity of vaudeville and cinema stars, whose "portraits, alongside topographical shots, challenged the place of the traditional *lubok* (Engravings and etchings) and of the lithograph…"[231] The 'objective eye' of the camera had already become contested, revealing the dual documentary and ritualistic impulses of photography. This is evident in numerous working-class and peasant Russian portraits, where individuals posed stiffly in seldom-worn finery before painted, fantastical backdrops,[232] having become a widely-sensed feature of this 'new' medium.

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[229] Yelena Barchatova, introduction to *A Portrait of Tsarist Russia: Unknown Photographs from the Soviet Archives*, by Yelena Barchatova and Galina Mirolubova (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 16.

[230] Louise McReynolds and Cathy Popkin, "The Objective Eye and the Common Good," in *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881–1940*, ed. Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 57–99, 93

[231] Ibid.

[232] R. H. Allshouse, "Introduction," in *Photographs for the Tsar: The Pioneering Color Photography of Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii, Commissioned by Tsar Nicholas II,* ed. R. H. Allshouse (New York: Dial Press, 1980), ix–xxiii

The weaponization of Denikin's image here is a strategic maneuver that underscores the inherent credibility of his authority within the framework of military discipline. Denikin represents the transformative potential of organized leadership as the Whites envisioned it: virtuous, present, and central. The poster's encoded symmetry resonates with the orderly "reality" of Imperial bureaucracy - the very essence of the administrative mentality the Whites sought to convey. This piece is one among many "odes to the leadership" issued by Osvag; during just three months in the summer of 1919, nearly four million such images of White leaders were printed.[233] Among the most prevalent of these were the hundreds of illustrated portraits of White leadership, printed en masse through the course of the Civil War. Mamadaliev finds these posters to be the "most peculiar of the political poster art of [the era]"[234] in the sheer reverence of their tone. One such poster - as portrayed in Figure 16 - demonstrates both the parallels and marked contrasts with the symbolic function of the photo-based propaganda poster. On the one hand, both posters serve the same broader function: to exalt the White command structure and solidify the general class' standing as the rightful authority. Yet they differ significantly in their visual strategies. Whereas the photo-image 'exhibit' style poster reinforces a sense of grounded, administrative authority, these illustrated representations channel the stylistic flourishes of an earlier, more aristocratic tradition, evoking a sense of imperial grandeur and a kind of remove from present-day, on-the-ground proximity.

Interestingly, these commemorative posters, whilst printed lithographically, tend to employ a cross-hatched technique, rendering the image as though it were a woodcut or an etching, suggesting both a permanence and a sense of aesthetic novelty unlike that of mass-printed typo-lithographical posters of the time. Much like our previous discussion

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[233]Wrangel Military Archives (WMA), file 146, Razvedyvatel'nyi otdel, intelligence report no. 153, Kharkov, 28 October 1919, p. 3; cited in Christopher Lazarski, "White Propaganda Efforts in the South during the Russian Civil War, 1918–19 (The Alekseev–Denikin Period)," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 70, no. 4 (October 1992): 703

[234] Mamadaliev, "*Military Propaganda,*" 3

on the *lubok* and its influence on Bolshevik military-agitational posters, it seems to me, that these posters, parading as etchings, are port of a broader ideological project that attempts to link the White project to a pre-revolutionary order that - though momentarily dislodged - remains fundamentally intact, both morally and symbolically. They also employ an art-nouveau sensibility, most evident in the accompanying elements - laurel wreathes, delicate flourishes and a symmetrical ordering of the image - that seem to position them in direct aesthetic contrast to the Bolshevik modus. In turn, Osvag frequently collaborated with members of the famous *mir-iskusstvo* movement in Russian graphic arts - something so terribly shunned by Bolshevik critics - like the aforementioned I. Ya. Bilibin and E. E. Lansere. This approach invokes a specifically 'European' marker of cultural legacy and continuity, a nod to pre-revolutionary aristocratic culture and a certain kind of bourgeois sophistication, presenting the Whites as the natural custodians of a Russia that had once existed, and that could, with the general-class at its helm, exist again. Together, the visual strategies of these commemorative posters present an image of the general class that aligns them not only with the traditional icons of Russian imperial authority but also with an idealized, refined aesthetic reminiscent of aristocratic portraits or classical Roman statuary.

An interesting counterpoint to the White's 'naturalistic' adoption of photography exists in Soviet art historian Nikolai Tarabukin's *The Art of the Day*, in which he argues, among other matters, for the 'de-naturalization' of the 'realism' with which photography was conventionally associated. The guiding principle of his call for a photographic reform was the notion of 'deformation' (*deformatsiia)* - a "cardinal concept of the Russian formalists"[235] - which functioned to approximate reality in 'accordance' with contemporary modalities of vision. He argued that, since photography - as a mechanistic reproductive medium - formed within the larger European project of naturalistic

[235] Nikolai Tarabukin, "The Art of the Day," trans. Rosamund Bartlett, with introduction by Maria Gough, *October*, no. 93 (Summer 2000): 57–77, 58

reproduction, one could not "know what the visual apparatus of the camera would have been like if it had been invented before naturalism gained hegemony in the arts."[236] In his view, the photo-images' project of capturing verisimilitude was fundamentally an inadequate function - drawing on a by-gone, and arguably counter-revolutionary, methodology. In speaking to the photo-image and the advertising poster (functioning, effectively, in the same modus as White propaganda) he maintains that the "dryly naturalistic photograph [was] too bland for advertising [agitational] purposes."[237]

In reflecting a common historiographic sentiment, one is left wondering if these art-nouveau style portraits and photographic depictions of White leadership were truly propagandistically effective, or whether they were read as 'boring' - perhaps even 'snobbish' - and disconnected from their stately, almost timeless style and the urgent, life-or-death struggle the Whites were evidently waging. By evoking both a 'naturalism' (in the case of the photographic poster) and an 'art-nouveau aesthetic' (in the case of the commemorative posters of individual White Generals) these images may have resonated with officers and 'elites' who already identified with the White cause. Yet, for the broader populace - peasants and workers fatigued by war and wary of the 'old social order' - this style could have felt out of touch; the 'classicizing' effect clearly functioning, at least formally, to a different end.

It is worth acknowledging, however, that this perception of these portraits as 'boring' or 'ineffective' might come colored by the ultimate outcome of the Civil War. Had the Whites emerged victorious, these dignified portraits might have been retrospectively cast as emblems of stability and dignified, legitimate authority. Moreover, as we have seen, these were just one part of the Whites' more expansive propaganda program that - between the documentarian-style Kharkiv poster, and those framing the

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[236] Ibid. 66

[237] Ibid. 76

Church and peasantry at odds with 'cruel' Internationalist atheistic Bolsheviks - did, in fact, speak the Bolshevik language of loud, angular and attention-grabbing messaging.

Taken together, Osvag and its posters encapsulate the White leadership's dual aspiration: to project an image of a dignified, orderly regime that is both accessible and timeless, and to assert its claim as the rightful heir to Russia's imperial legacy. The strategic use of both photography and an 'old-style' visual language reveals an administrative mentality steeped in the symbolic imperative of Imperial militarized hierarchy. Yet this very form also betrays its limitations. While the carefully orchestrated visual dossiers and etched portraits served to legitimize the general class and its authority, they often spoke a language that resonated primarily with an elite audience. On reflecting a historiographic sentiment that casts these representations as either emblematic of a lost order or as inherently stifled by bureaucratic rigidity, one cannot help but see in Osvag's output both the ambition and the inherent constraints of the White propaganda apparatus. This tension - between the promise of a restored, orderly past and the exigencies of a rapidly transforming present - speaks to the Bolshevik experience, where a similar debate around form took center-stage.

Conclusion

At its core, there is no one definable 'poster front' through the course of the Civil War. There aren't discernible 'clusters' where disparate ideas and diverging aspirations could be 'put to the test', as it were, in the court of public opinion. Instead, the 'poster front' existed as a porous cultural membrane, absorbing, refining and accepting certain cultural, formal and symbolic strategies, whilst rejecting others. On one hand, the Bolshevik apparatus mobilized visual rhetoric that was discernibly modern, drawing upon a language of bold imagery and reformed orthography that signaled (and effectuated) a

break with the past. Their posters, imbued with the rhythms of a forward-looking narrative, were not simply calls to arms but also manifestos of cultural renewal. They encapsulated an ethos of 'revolutionary praxis' where every brushstroke and typographic decision was loaded with political significance. The modernized script itself - eschewing elements of the language's orthographic past - served as a symbol of a new, dynamic social order, one that was unencumbered by the legacies of imperial autocracy and the inertia of the old regime.

In contrast, the counter-revolutionary propaganda apparatus engaged in a counter-discourse that was deeply rooted in a nostalgic reverence for the past. The Whites' use of pre-reform orthography, their invocation of religious iconography, and their appeal to a supposed national continuity were not accidental but deliberate political moves. These visual strategies constructed an image of a Russia that was betrayed by its revolutionary break - a Russia where the sanctity of cultural, ethnic, and religious traditions was at stake. In this framework, the poster served as a reminder of what was perceived to be lost in aspiring for modernity: the deep-seated, historical narratives that had long defined Russian identity. The White poster, in its measured simplicity and its reliance on established symbolic forms, asserted that change for the sake of novelty was dangerous, if not outright destructive.

What exists here is an intriguing dialectic: the poster, whether deployed by Bolshevik or White forces, is caught in a tension between the desire to project a coherent, mobilizing narrative and the reality of a society that was experiencing fragmentation and crisis. This tension is at the heart of the chapter's argument. Posters, by their very nature, attempted to impose order on a world marked by chaos. They create a set of signifiers that viewers could absorb as explanations for the rapid, often disjointed, political tumult swirling around them. The act of poster-making, itself, is fraught with contradictions. The very attempt to encapsulate a fluid, multifaceted historical moment within a fixed image

necessarily results in oversimplification and a suppression of opposing perspectives. In doing so, the poster reveals as much about the aspirations and anxieties of its creators as it does about the society it seeks to represent.

Yet, the dissonance between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary poster art is only one aspect of a significantly more complex dynamic. The chapter has attempted to show how these visual texts functioned as a kind of cultural shorthand - a means by which disparate groups within Russian society could negotiate their identities in the midst of crisis. Whether through the hyperbolic declarations of Bolshevik posters or the more understated appeals of White *plakats*, these images served as points of reference, offering citizens a way to make sense of the rapidly changing political landscape. They operated on multiple levels: as tools of mass mobilization, as reflections of elite ideological contestation, and as everyday markers of a society in flux.

In this project, the poster participated in the very process of constructing collective memory. It captured moments of historical rupture and reconstitution, providing a visual record that both shaped and was shaped by the ongoing struggle over national identity. Moreover, the evolution of the poster through the course of the Civil War reflects a broader transformation in the nature of political discourse. The intense focus on visual propaganda during this period signifies a shift towards an aesthetics of immediacy - a form of communication that prioritized impact over deliberation. This visual culture, characterized by bold imagery and succinct messaging, marked a departure from the more textually oriented forms of political expression that had dominated earlier eras. It signified an adaptation to the realities of modern warfare, where the rapid pace of events demanded equally rapid methods of persuasion. The poster, in this sense, becomes emblematic of the broader changes in how political power was exercised and contested in twentieth-century Russia.

In piecing this image, the chapter has posited that the poster existed as far more than a tool of political persuasion. It was an active participant in its historical process, a medium that reflected and shaped the trajectory of revolution and its other. Engaging with the poster as a site of both visual and ideological synthesis underscores its dual role as an instrument of statecraft and a repository of collective memory. It encapsulates the dynamism of a society undergoing profound transformation - capturing the hopes, fears, and contradictions that defined the Civil War era.

In re-articulating the debates that have long polarized interpretations of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary practices, I have hoped to point towards a picture of this period that challenges a simplistic binary. The poster demonstrates that the visual rhetoric of the period, regardless of its political affiliation, was inherently multifaceted - imbued with layers of meaning that extended beyond the immediate imperatives of propaganda. The posters served as a nexus for competing discourses, a confluence where the narratives of progress and conservatism, of modernity and tradition, were continuously renegotiated.

Ultimately, this chapter has tried to reframe a certain understanding of the Russian Civil War as a monolithic event defined solely by military and political outcomes, by pointing to its multifarious expressions. It invites us to consider how images, imbued with both revolutionary zeal and counter-revolutionary caution, can serve as conduits for collective memory. In reflecting on this interplay, one is reminded that the aesthetics of revolution are never wholly separable from the politics that drive them. The visual language of the Civil War poster is marked by an oscillation between hope and despair, between the promise of radical renewal and the weight of entrenched tradition. It is this very oscillation that encapsulates the paradoxical experience of a society seemingly caught between opposing intuitions.

Chapter Three

Tracing the Red Front: *Plakat* Logic

"Those who took utopia down from the light blue skies of Russian fantasy into living experimentalism enriched the revolutionary process. The practitioners viewed these experiments not as the 'impossible dream,' the well-known Quixotic leaning of the Russian intelligentsia, but as the only antidote to the impossible reality. The irony of their effort and their fate has brought sarcastic smiles and disapproving shrugs from commentators ever since. Yet what they deserve is emphatic laughter, sympathetic tears and an occasional burst of applause for their courageous, outlandish, and at the same time hardheaded view of reality and their determination to affirm what is best in the human condition."

Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams* (1989)

Towards the latter end of the Civil War, the role of the poster was once again undergoing a transformation. What began as a makeshift urban 'weapon' – a sheet of urgent imagery plastered on a factory gate or train car, meant to stir action *in situ*– was gradually becoming something else. As the war neared its end and Soviet power took hold, the agitational poster edged its way indoor. Prints that had weathered rain and the smoke of battle were now carried into workers' clubs and offices, hung in homes, taking on the status of a kind of interior décor. The shift from public thoroughfare to intimate space did not come without consequences. A Soviet critic would soon note that a poster designed for the street and one intended for a room were ontologically distinct – a recognition that raises the question of what happens when revolution domesticates itself. Does the poster lose its incendiary force when it hangs in a parlor, or do its ideas quietly seep into the fabric of everyday life?

This chapter unfolds as a meditation on the competing logics that shaped the Bolshevik poster. I begin by examining how a binary worldview - rooted in oppositions between the revolutionary and the routine - structured Bolshevik visual culture. I ask how

a revolutionary society sought to reimagine the everyday without entirely escaping it. Central to this inquiry is the Bolshevik social imaginary, in which utopia could only be articulated through negation: always in opposition to the 'commonplace.' I explore how the *plakat*, as a socialist medium, both exploited and sustained this stance - mobilizing against routine while helping construct a new everyday.

This emerging canon, exemplified by the increasingly centralized oversight of institutions like VTsIK and Litizdat, marks yet another frontier of the Bolshevik struggle against 'everydayness.' Within it, artists as formally distinct as Alexander Apsit and El Lissitzky found themselves subject to uniform censure, their divergent aesthetics caught in the same ideological crosshairs.

Finally, I trace the poster's journey from frontlines to the interiors of domestic life, attending to the formal and ideological transformations it underwent in the process. As shifting socio-economic conditions reshaped post–Civil War Russia, the *plakat* itself was recontextualized - internalized into the private sphere, where it became a fixture of a new 'everyday.' I analyze these demographic shifts alongside the Party's evolving response, highlighting the uncanny ways in which the trajectory of the poster mirrored the changing dimensions of Soviet society. Ultimately, this chapter maps the contours of a key aspect of this '*plakat logic*': the understanding that, amid revolutionary upheaval, anxieties surrounding class and the vanguard role of the Party translated extra-cultural tensions into cultural form - and, in turn, made cultural production a site of political resolution. The poster's liminal existence - straddling the realms of culture and bureaucracy - enabled it to embody and reflect these dynamics in particularly compelling ways.

Binary Logic in the Civil War-era Poster

In a striking semiotic reading of Russian cultural history, Yury Lotman and Boris Uspensky have stressed its dual or 'binary' element; the absence in Eastern Orthodoxy of purgatory, the dualities of Heaven or Hell, Right or Left, black or white, orthodox or heretical which have made the dynamics of Russian growth not 'developmental' but 'transformative and negational' - "a process of turning [the old] inside out" and the "radical exchange of 'top' and 'bottom.'"[238] Rendering the past in the negative and painting it as a dark frame to highlight and dramatize the oppositional brightness of the New World. Richard Stites reminds us that "the role of utopianism was to summon up archaic memories and ancient dreams, construct new projects, and put on display an 'exhibit' about social and spiritual innovation."[239] In tracing the poster through the course of the Civil War, one risks conjuring an overly binary picture of visual propaganda in the early 1920s. In building out the historical stakes, and the historicizing projects, of counter-revolutionary agitational directives, one might come away with a binary opposition between a will to evolve a 'newness' and that of a desire to 'return' to an old order - of revolution and its other. James Clifford points us to a trend in modern ethnographic histories as being "condemned to oscillate between two meta-narratives; one of homogenization, the other of emergence, one of loss, the other of invention."[240] I believe that, through the course of Chapters 1 and 2, we have settled on a discernibly broader picture of Civil War-era military-agitational visual culture; a world where factions contend with the symbolic strengths (and weaknesses) of a radical novelty at odds with a 'conservative' retreat. I hope to stay with this multiplicity.

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[238] Lotman and Uspensky, 'Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture' in *Semiotics of Russian cultural History*, 31-34, 52-53

[239] Ibid.

[240] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, 1988), 17.

In *Common Places*, Svetlana Boym thinks through the place of cliché in Soviet life, pointing us to the world of the commonplace as an arena wherein "clichés protect us from facing the catastrophe, the unbearable, the ineffable… In social situations we often blush and recite cliché excuses, cliché formalities, or no less cliché informalities"[241]

The term referring originally to print technology, a typographic plate that allowed multiple printings of a page, the French cliché is inherently tied to mechanical reproduction, to printmaking, and to flooding the visual-sphere en masse. In the Soviet context, the cliché takes on a second life; in the chromo-lithographic poster, it does not emerge through the printmaking act. While printing presses used plates, the cliché - as a historical component - is not part of the process-specific elements of the rotarized printing press but is instead, in my view, a basis underpinning the logic of mechanized printmaking. Indeed, the cliché wholly embodies its colloquial meaning in the Soviet rotarized printing press.

In her seminal text *On Longing*, poet and critic Susan Stewart speaks to the transformation of the 'printed' word from the 'written' word on the basis of changing labor-conditions. The 'labor' in the written manuscript (and, in our case, the carved *lubok*) was, to Stewart, "the labor of the hand [and] of the body", guiding us, in its uniqueness, as a "stay against repetition and inauthenticity."[242] In writing, description serves the function of context. Stewart reminds us that the "locus of speech and action must be 'filled in' for the reader, who suffers from the exteriority of print."[243] The only way to 'remedy' this alienation on the part of the reader of the printed word (and its exteriority) is by bridging them "by description, [and] the use of a field of familiar

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[241] Svetlana Boym, Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 15

[242] Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 39

[243] Ibid., 44

signs…"[244] Stewarts' analysis is striking; it points to the heart of the Bolshevik's Civil War-era propaganda directive - the socialist cultural membrane grew ever larger, and canonized ever broader aspects of pre-revolutionary culture, constantly developing a new 'field of familiar signs'.

Boym identifies the *unbearable* and the *ineffable* in Soviet (and pre-Soviet) life as flowing from a generational reckoning with the notion of *byt,* everyday existence. Here, *byt* (the 'banal') and *bytie* (spiritual being) is addressed from the perspective of a 'uniquely' Russian experience, drawing on linguist Roman Jakobson's claim that this term - *byt* - remains "culturally untranslatable into Western languages."[245] According to Jakobson, only Russians among the European public were capable of fighting "the fortress of *byt*" and of conceptualizing a radical alterity to the everyday (*byt*)[246] "Russian, and later Soviet, cultural identity depended," claimed Boym, "on heroic opposition to everyday life."[247] This much seems to hold true - in charting out the often antagonistic discourse around the Bolshevik military-agitational poster, we have centered an anxiety around pre-revolutionary culture as 'lacking' in its ideological/formal significance to the socialist project of revolutionary re-alignment. Everything opposed to this project - from advertising, *affiches*, Riabinkin's critique around an imposition of "a theory of poster competition… entirely borrowed from commodity based competition"[248] - was read as either 'foreign' (ie. not socialist) or 'neutered' (Lenin's notion of a 'trade-union consciousness') and, in turn, as anti-revolutionary, and as 'banal'. The fight against *byt* was, in Boym's words, not about 'physical survival' but "sacrifice", not preservation of a

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[244] Ibid.

[245] Ibid.. 3

[246] Roman Jakobson, "On the Generation That Squandered Its Poets," in *The Language in Literature,* ed. Krystina Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, 1987)

[247] Boym, *Common Places*, 3

[248] P. Riabinkin, "*Protiv chuzhdykh teorii o plakate*," Za proletarskoe iskusstvo, no. 5 (1932), 2

certain 'way of life' but its "complete transcendence", not the 'fragile', atomistic existence of individuals in a collective world but "collective happiness in the other world."[249] The Russian theologian Nikolai Berdyaev identified a 'distinctive' Russian identity as resting on a self-perception of its "extra-ordinary, messianic foundations."[250] Russians, in his view, were the "chosen people" and also 'a People of the End.' "Such a people," writes Boym, "need not be concerned about the process of everyday living and common survival, which is often more difficult than imagining some kind of 'future perfect'"[251]; "In a culture in which the eschatological and the apocalyptic are closely linked to the conception of national identity, there can be very little patience for the ordinary, transient, and everyday."[252] For the creators of Bolshevik posters, this meant that 'ordinary' bourgeois life had to be lampooned and rejected in the *plakat*.

A somewhat anecdotal - and yet, quite novel - example of this critique of 'everydayness' exists in the ideological and formal make-up of posters such as the one depicted in Figure 1, from the MFA Boston's collection, titled 'European Kitchen'. The poster's satirical, caricaturized critique of Western intervention in the Bolshevik Revolution and Civil War is executed through the image of a somewhat unusual set of characters; the phrase 'European Kitchen' seems to suggest a Europe that 'cooks up' anti-revolutionary plots, personified by anthropomorphized food items that seem to embody nation-states. The overflowing boiling pot labelled 'Russia' occupies the left-most pictorial plane (potentially referencing colloquial right/left political binarization) accompanied by a sausage wearing a Prussian-style *pickelhaube* helmet (representing Germany) near a smoking, bubbling cauldron - perhaps referencing Germany's brewing

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[249] Boym, *Common Places*, 31

[250] Ibid.

[251] Ibid.

[252] Ibid.

political and economic troubles post World War I. Behind them are a roast bird with a naval hat (representing Britain), a black eagle clutching an American flag and an olive branch, suggesting a pretense of peace (potentially invoking prevalent Bolshevik critiques of U.S. interventionism in the Civil War), and a champagne bottle (representing France) all in somewhat of a disconnected relationship to the larger scene at play, and arguably embodying a veneer of opulence, at least in opposition to the visibly agitated, overflowing boiling pot. A humorous set of verses (titled 'Second Menu') list out different 'dishes', likely symbolizing actions taken by these foreign powers and describing European geopolitics as an imperialist policy of 'consumption'. The topic is fairly routine in Civil War-era Bolshevik posters, and yet, it operates on a somewhat distinct plane, bordering a kind of absurdist 'food as metaphor' critique of consumption, class and a routine Arendt-tinted banality of evil.[253] It is also intriguing in its relatively obscure (for the broader non-urban public) referencing of a distinctly middle-class set of food-items - roast chicken, champagne - pointing us to a *byt* that was notably associated with a kind of 'schooled' affluence.

Boym wrote of the everyday - the commonplace - as a distinctly modern concept, taking form in tandem with a secularized worldview and the emergence of a middle class. She drew a relationship between the commonplace, the cliché, the kitsch and the banal, where these signifiers incorporated a "framing and detachment into [a] machine of dailiness and to domesticate…irony."[254] After the revolution of 1917, a war on petit-bourgeois consumerism - a kitschy, middle-class *byt* - began a new phase with the Soviet 'New *Byt*' - operating, essentially, as a complete restructuring of both time and space. The Soviet poet Nikolai Zabolotsky presents a picture of this 'New *Byt'*:

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[253] In line with Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking Press, 1963.

[254] Boym, *Common Places*, 20

The sun rises over Moscow
Old women are running in awe
Where could they go now?
The New Byt is at the door.
The baby is big and well groomed
…..
The baby becomes strong and virile.
He walks across the table
And jumps right into the Komsomol.[255]

Boym reminds us that this poem was written only three years before the institutionalization of this move towards a 'new *byt'* - the "perestroika of byt" - by the Central Committee of the Communist Party.[256] This project - a state-mandated re-imagining of public life itself - points us to a central paradox of early-Soviet cultural discourse; in line with Andrei Sinyavsky's perspective, this conception of a "Soviet way of life," or a 'New *Byt*', was "an oxymoron, a marriage of mutually exclusive concepts"[257]; in that "a way of life" suggests something enduring and stable, drawing from habit, tradition and generational approaches, and, therefore, cannot be compatible with 'newness' or 'revolution'.[258] Sinyavsky mirrors Lotman and Uspensky's notion of a core 'binary logic' underpinning the broader Soviet program defining it, in effect, by "two antithetical tendencies: destruction and creation. Or negation and conservation."[259]

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[255] Nikolai Zabolotsky, 'Novyi Byt,' in *Stolbtsy, stikhotvoreniia, poemy* (Leningrad; Lenizdat, 1990), 28.

[256] TsK VKP(b), "Postanovlenie o perestroike byta," May 16, 1930.

[257] Andrei Sinyavsky, *Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History*, trans. Joanne Turnbull (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), 153

[258] Ibid.

[259] Ibid.

Pointing us to its innate incongruousness, he writes that "any 'new way of life' might as well be called the 'new old stuff'[260]

This is precisely how we should read later statements by Soviet literary critics claiming that "the revolutionary transformative role of art [had] become clearer."[261] What becomes clearer is the dynamics of a culture's self-consciousness, which to varying degrees explains societal change through normative positions; a culture's need for self-description, coupled with the necessity, at the early stages of revolution and Civil War, for a unified structuring of its values, in turn, had a profound impact on the culture being described/created. "In creating its own model for itself, a culture has an active effect on the process of self-organization; it organizes itself hierarchically, canonizing some texts and excluding others… Eventually, this model becomes a fact in the culture's history, and, as a rule, influences the ideas of posterity and the conception of historians."[262] Soviet culture's self-organization exists in the vein of writer Fedor Gladkov's personification of Soviet art as an 'inspector' of a 'transformed reality' that it had itself helped reshape: "Inextricably tied to life, our [art] portrays how Soviet people build the new in their everyday work, and checks to see how *communist* this new is."[263] The new, in turn, does not rise out of a seemingly 'untapped' reserve, but is, instead, a product of the transformation of the 'old', where a set of repeated transformations can, in turn, "lead to the *regeneration* of archaic forms."[264] Here, culture infiltrates its old-genres, so that when one believes they are engaging with an image, a poster, or an object, one is actually engaging with something completely different in its nature, reflective of Stalin's aforementioned statement decreeing a social sphere where the "old is not abolished

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[260] Ibid.

[261] Pisarevskii, '*Stalinskii printsip sotsialisticheskogo realizma*,' p. 42

[262] Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspensky, *Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture*, 31

[263] Fedor Gladkov, '*O samom zavetnom*,' 56

[264] Lotman, Uspensky, *Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture*, 33

outright but changes its own nature in comformity to the new, preserving only its form…"[265] Stalin, of course, speaks *beyond* immediate cultural phenomena; he centers social forms - banks, market-places and paper-money - and highlights their two-fold potential (one, in their affect, their role in capitalist systems; the second, in their form, as discernible structures that could *preface* and *survive* capitalist systems entirely). In turn, the possibility of 'progress' (of paramount importance to the Bolsheviks), as a forward-facing movement, is rooted in the potential for the development of a new perspective. It isn't social-restructuring *outside* so much as it is social-restructuring *within*. Lotman and Uspensky write:

> Among the oppositions that structured Russian culture…. One of the most stable has been the opposition between 'the old' and 'the new.' The activity and the significance of this opposition is so great that from the subjective position of the 'native speaker' of the culture, it has at various stages included or subsumed other singularly important contrasts.[266]

These contrasts, within poster-discourse, seem rather apparent to us now: the 'old and new' is also the 'urban and rural', the 'bourgeois and proletarian', the 'individual and collective' and the 'internal and external.' Notably, these oppositions are not merely contrasting categories but exist as wholly interdependent dynamics. Here, propaganda begins in earnest; its tasks, its function, and its path forward, clarified. One finds that the binary logics and transformative aesthetics described by Lotman and Uspensky are not confined solely to broad cultural interplay but are palpably inscribed into the visual and institutional practices of the Bolshevik program. The cultural dualisms - between the old and the new, the banal and the sublime - find a material manifestation in the design and reception of the revolutionary poster image. In these prints, the interplay of negation and conservation, as discussed in the context of Soviet self-organization, sets the stage for a

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[265] Gladkov, '*O samom zavetnom*', 56

[266] Lotman, Uspensky, *Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture*, 33

visual rhetoric that both repudiates pre-revolutionary forms and yet, paradoxically, borrows from them to construct a new visual language (as noted in Chapter 1).

This synthesis is evident when considering the shift from decentralized, often haphazard cultural expressions to a more structured, state-directed visual campaign. The posters of the Civil War period, with their reliance on cliché as both a form of mechanical reproduction and a symbolic gesture, embody the transformative process we identified earlier: a deliberate inversion of cultural hierarchies that redefines everyday life. Here, the avant-garde aesthetics and the populist impulse to "transcend the everyday" are recast through the institutional mechanisms of Bolshevik propaganda, which sought not only to inspire but also to systematically mobilize and educate the masses. As questions of legibility and style intensified, so too did the state's desire to regulate them. Production was increasingly centralized, and institutions once focused on educational or agitational work began enforcing stricter visual guidelines. The stakes of form became institutional: no longer just what a poster looked like, but who had the authority to decide.

VTsIK, Apsit, and 'Unclear Instructions'

The Bolshevik propaganda apparatus thus emerges as an institutional realization of these broader cultural dynamics. The earliest Bolshevik Civil War-era poster-making was organized by the VTsIK's publishing house.[267] VTsIK - or the All-Union Central Executive Committee - served as the highest legislative and executive authority between sessions of the Congress of Soviets. It was a de-facto parliament within the USSR, and was responsible for enacting laws, issuing decrees, and overseeing the implementation of state politics. Composed of representatives from various regional soviets, VTsIK was meant to ensure that their legislative decisions reflected the broader revolutionary

[267] Vladimir Dobrenko, "The Image of the Enemy: The Evolution of the 'Other' in Bolshevik Political Posters from the October Revolution and the Civil War," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 87, no. 3–4 (2009): 685–704, 697

mandate across Bolshevik-controlled Russia. Through its publishing wing, VTSIK disseminated agitational and military literature in addition to official publications. In mobilizing this state power, the apparatus not only issued directives but also re-articulated the transformative tension between a traditional organizational *topos* (state-controlled, bureaucratic institutions) and an innovative re-orientation of earlier formal models of propagandistic proliferation.

Butnik-Siberskii, in *Sovetskii Plakatii epokhi grazhdanskoi voiny*, credits VTsIK's publishing wing with establishing the Soviet poster,[268] a form epitomized by artist Alexander Petrovich Apsit. A former book-illustrator turned propagandist, Apsit's early visual language became the focal point of a deliberate Bolshevik project aimed at distinguishing 'effective' propaganda from its weaker precursors - a process of self-refinement that targeted his work as a baseline for constructing a superior, more disciplined visual rhetoric. Apsit's reworking of established visual tropes mirrors the cultural reconfigurations we noted before, where the reinterpretation of the old is an essential prelude to the emergence of a radical new aesthetic.

In turn, many Soviet-era texts reflect a sort of disdain for Apsit's work; "Early Soviet posters of this kind," wrote Polonskii, in 1925, "were distinguished neither by the vividness of their color, nor by the originality of their composition and revolutionary ethos. They were simply 'banal, popular pictures.'"[269] Polonskii described Apsit, who had been virtually "the sole supplier of these [early Bolshevik] lithographs"[270] as a 'mediocre draftsman' who had all the faults of an artist that filled the pages of illustrated boulevard journals. Artist Dmitri Moor critiqued Apsit's posters for being "a conglomerate of cinema-poster pseudo dramatics - cheap vulgar symbolism and foreign old-fashioned romanticism," symbolizing "a purely philistine, petit-bourgeois understanding of the

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[268] Butnik-Siberskii, *Sovetskii plakat epokhi grazhdanskoi voiny,* 19

[269] Vyacheslav Polonskii, *Russkii revoliutsionnyi plakat*, 23

[270] White, *The Bolshevik Poster,* 18

revolution."[271] The struggle against a so-called 'Apsitism,' Moore declared, was in effect a struggle for the "politicized, concrete, proletarian poster."[272]

Apsit produced over forty military-agitational posters during the first year of the Civil War.[273] Most - as in Figure 2 - took on a heavily allegorical form, populated with figures that drew from a range of established visual traditions. Vladimir Dobrenko traces this distinctive 'Apsitist' style in the artist's "previous experience creating patriotic cartoons for pre-Revolutionary journals and posters,"[274] arguing that his Soviet-era work was rooted in distinctly pre-revolutionary formal sensibilities. The result was a hybridized visual language that, while eye-catching, did not always meet with approval from even the most sympathetic Soviet commentators, who regarded his allegorical flourishes as remnants of a "pernicious influence"[275] traceable to popular prints and newspaper cartoons that preceded the revolution.

Apsit's illustrations were often accompanied by verses from revolutionary poets, most often Demyan Bedny, who had gained a considerable following at the time as the pre-eminent "self-consciously proletarian bard of the new regime."[276] In Figure 2, Bedny's verse (which accompanies a different published version of this exact illustration) is replaced by the 'Varshavyanka,' a Polish working-class anthem translated into Russian by G.M. Krzhizhanovsky in 1897.[277] Its sentimental verses - 'a ferocious death is awaiting all the enemies, all the parasites of the working class' - pairs quite effectively with the poster's central theme of resistance to oppression and unity among workers. It is

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[271] Ibid.

[272] Ibid.

[273] White, *The Bolshevik Poster,* 32

[274] Vladimir Dobrenko, *The Image of the Enemy*, 697

[275] A. Eglit, "Pioner sovetskogo plakata," *Daugava*, no. 11 (1979): 122.

[276] White, *The Bolshevik Poster,* 32

[277] Butnik-Siberskii, *Sovetskii plakat,* 47

not difficult, however, to critique this work - and its paired verse - as amounting to a hollow rhetorical gesture - more spectacle than a genuine call-to-arms.

This criticism is part of a larger critical discourse of early revolutionary posters as having a 'mistaken' understanding of the nature of the Bolshevik movement. In one instance, Lenin drew attention to a poster which declared, 'The rule of workers and peasants will last forever'; in fact, he pointed out, this amounted to a declaration that socialism was impossible, for socialist society would, of course, be a classless one.[278] Another common criticism - particularly of posters perceived as overly 'broad' - was that they reduced the revolution to sheer carnage, failing to articulate either the socialist ideals or the social goals to which the new regime professed commitment. This reading is present in the popular reception of posters like Apsit's *Internationale* (in Figure 3), which, when shown to Red Armymen, was met with great condescension: "This is counter-revolution! This is a mockery!", they had objected,[279] revealing more than just aesthetic preference. It reflected a deeper concern over whether visual form could still bear ideological weight in the absence of clarity. Much of this criticism was leveled from the perspective of a formal 'free-for-all' in early *Apsitist* posters, where the Russian traditional, Biblical, classical and French revolutionary canons were 'raided indiscriminately'. This was by no means unique to Apsit's work - it was, in effect, part of a broader reflection of early revolutionary aesthetic sensibilities. Stephen White reflects on a particularly interesting subversion of pre-revolutionary motifs in the eagle, a commonly accepted symbol of Stardom. He mentions a proposal for a new emblem for the Bolshevik state in 1918, which suggested an old eagle, plucked and stripped of its regalia, and adorned with red stars and a Red Army cap.[280]

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[278] V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., vol. 43 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1965), 130.

[279] "Kniga i revoliutsiia," no. 5(17) (1922): 68, cited in Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 126

[280] White, *The Bolshevik Poster,* 115

Vladimir Dobrenko situates this symbolic 'liberty' as the cause of VTsIK poster's sense of ambiguity. He writes: "The problem with this, from the perspective of later artists such as Moor and Deni, was that they weren't straightforward enough in their message. Apsit and others from VTsIK's publishing house summarily depicted scenarios, without appealing for action… the audience were not given any specific interpretations to follow."[281]

Apsit spent less than two years engaged in propaganda work; in late 1919, hearing that Denikin's army was approaching Moscow, he began to fear that (as he put it) he might be "hung by the Whites for his posters" and left with his family for Ekaterinoslav in southern Russia.[282] Soon thereafter, VTsIK's publishing wing gave way for larger propaganda programs - the most impactful of which was, undoubtedly, Litizdat.

Litizdat and Red Centralization

"If the first two years of Soviet poster production were associated with VTsIK," writes Stephen White, "[then] the Civil War years were connected, above all, with Litizdat, the publishing house established in the summer of 1919, under the auspices of the RSFSR."[283] Its designation as a specialized propaganda-publishing agency stemmed from an awareness, among the Bolshevik leadership, that the sprawl of publishing activity within its varied departments, while effective, led to a disorganized, and often counterintuitive, propaganda directive; there was still a shortage of all kinds of publishing material, as well as facilities and resources, along with a lack of coordination among the varied propagandists, who sometimes produced the same work as one another. Litizdat, headed from the outset by the Soviet academic Vyacheslav Polonskii, was established in June 1919 to remedy this exact situation. The official decree of 1919 confirming its

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[281] Vladimir Dobrenko, *The Image of the Enemy*, 698

[282] I. N. Pavlov, *Zhizn' russkogo gravera* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1940), 162.

[283] White, *The Bolshevik Poster,* 49

establishment entrusted it with three tasks: the "preparation and issuing of periodicals posters, pictures, drawings [and] proclamations of a military-agitational character", "responsibility for the issuing of books, brochures and other materials of a military-technical/military-educational purpose", and for "the preparation of periodicals, proclamations, posters and materials for distribution among the soldiers of the White Army."[284] This consolidation of propagandistic production reflects the same dialectical process observed earlier - a deliberate reinvention that fuses historical continuity with revolutionary urgency to reshape everyday cultural reality. In view of the "exceptional importance and extraordinary urgency" of its work, Litizdat was given complete independence in resource allocation, technical assistance and financial support on the part of the State Congress. It was also empowered to absorb the activities (and budgets) of all other military publishing organizations, both in order to reduce 'duplicates', as well as to provide the propaganda program with a centralized, organized, ideological core.

Litizdat was internally divided into three distinct 'political', 'technical', and 'educational' publishing sections, with the political division being its best-fulled department. Between June 1919 and January 1921, for instance, the 'political' segment of Litizdat, alone, was responsible for 20.8 million copies of all its publications.[285] Most political publications involved proclamations, appeals, posters or open letters to troops; military publishing was, in itself, undertaken *under* the auspices of Litizdat by military headquarters on scattered fronts. The publishing department attached to the armies on the western front, for instance, issued over 35 million copies of publications in seven different languages during the Civil War.[286] One of Litizdat's best known military-

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[284] E. L. Nemirovsky and V. I. Kharlamov, eds., *Istoriya knig v SSSR, 1917–21*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Kniga, 1983–1986), 13.

[285] Ibid.

[286] White, *The Bolshevik Poster,* 41

agitational posters exists in the famous El Lissitzky lithograph *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (Figure 4).

While firmly outside the otherwise largely representational visual style of Bolshevik Civil War-era propaganda posters, Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites* exemplifies a core military-agitational imperative behind Litizdat's publishing program. Though it has come to be regarded as an exemplar of avant-gardist graphic art (and as such, outside of the immediate dictates of Bolshevik main-line cultural discourse - as in it being 'left-field'), its genesis was thoroughly tied to the urgent need to galvanize support on the front. Because Litizdat was empowered to absorb and coordinate the resources of all military publishing organizations, posters like Lissitzky's were printed in high volume and rapidly circulated near active battle lines. *Beat the Whites*, itself, was printed in several editions of 2,000 in 1920.[287] The Bolshevik approach to the role of the poster-print on the frontline is perhaps best exemplified in Mayakovsky's *Polnoe sobranie sochininenii*: "Red Army men [looked] at posters before a battle and went to fight, not with a prayer, but with a slogan on their lips."[288]

These, more experimental posters, were often at the center of a sharp critical discourse around 'efficient' models of socialist messaging. Butnik-Siberskii, for one, derided 'constructivism' writ large, in criticizing 'formalist' work as holding "no correspondence between the text and the drawing," resulting in there, effectively being "no poster."[289] What made a poster 'Soviet' was no longer self-evident. Critics like Riabinkin began to argue that formal innovation - particularly in Constructivist work -

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[287] *Otchet o detyatel'nosti Ordeal voennoi literatury pro RVSR i Vysshego voennogo redaktsionnogo sovieta s 1 yan. 1921g. po 31 dek. 1922 g.* (Moscow: Vysshi voennyi redaktsionnyi sovet, 1923) p. 10, 221. El Lissitzky's composition is described as 'the first metaphysical poster in the whole history of art' in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983) 80.

[288] Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 12 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1972), 143

[289] Butnik-Siberskii, *Sovetskii plakat epokhi grazhdanskoi voiny,* 36

was not only confusing but counter-revolutionary. The stakes were not aesthetic; they were epistemological. Could a poster still persuade if it had to be deciphered? He writes: "Such gaps could only be observed in the posters of formalist artists, who with their 'searches' and 'constructions' made the poster meaningless."[290]

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Litizdat's institutional legacy was its ability to both centralize command over the Red Army's broad propagandistic output - ranging from 'monumental' posters commemorating the Bolshevik agenda, as in Figure 8, to 'formalist' posters in El Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites* - while simultaneously facilitating this multi-pronged program. Its centralizing function, particularly in its openness to a multifaceted propagandistic project, stands in clear contrast to Osvag's more controlling institutionalization. Whereas Litizdat, in its institutional capacity, functioned primarily as a purveyor of material resources, Osvag sought to command - and wholly direct - the ideological tenor of White propaganda. While, as noted in our previous discussion on the historiography of the Bolshevik poster, the attempt to shepherd the socialist 'essence' of Red propaganda did exist, it was approached as a broad discourse that engaged various factions of Bolshevik society. Many were encouraged to create their own 'amateur posters'. In an effort to address the purported illegibility of certain mass-produced posters in Bolshevik-controlled provinces, 'sympathizers' were enabled to produce locally-specific posters, directed at immediate *kulaks* or unpopular landowners. This participatory model drew from the legacy of *Proletkul't*, engaging workers and peasants in the larger Marxist-Leninist program of developing a true 'mass-art'.

"During the Civil War," writes Butnik-Siberskii, "slogans were printed in large prints daily in every newspaper, often several on each page. The newspaper and political magazine were a simply source by which an artist found a ready-made text, theme and 'ideological solution'."[291] Unlike the Bolsheviks, the Whites had no apparatus for locally

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[290] Ibid.

[291] Butnik-Siberskii, *Sovetskii plakat epokhi grazhdanskoi voiny,* 28

produced, decentralized propaganda. Indeed, Litizdat - and its contemporaries - functioned as institutions that paradoxically enabled a certain *de-institutionalized* propagandistic project, drawing in wide swathes of the public not only as recipients of propaganda but, more significantly, as active participants in its production.

The Interiorized Poster: *Lubochnyi Plakat*

As the Civil War drew to a close and Soviet power solidified, the propaganda poster itself entered a new phase of its life. No longer confined to city streets, posters began to appear in more intimate settings, bridging the gap between public and private spheres. Soviet art historian Nikolai Tarabukin famously theorized this phenomenon of the *domesticated* poster. Tarabukin argued that Soviet-era print culture embodied a dual cultural identity: the rural, expressed through the *lubok* (or "*narodnaya kartina*," meaning national image), and the urban, represented by the *plakat*. He contended that these urban and rural visual languages converged in the form of a *lubochnyi plakat* (*lubok*-poster). He wrote that, in Soviet Russia, the city "strive[d] for the closest possible rapprochement with the countryside," while the village "fell under the influence of urban ideas and tastes."[292] Indeed, this seeming homogenization - this melding of urban/rural cultural expression - extended beyond formal discourse around the Bolshevik *plakat*. For Tarabukin, this convergence also fostered a consumerist orientation and a collecting mentality within the Russian village:

> If a neat, enticing, and inoffensive [*plakat*] - one that does not offend certain aspects of the peasant sensibility, arrives in the village on its own… then the peasant will take it, tear off his sooty and 'fly infested' *lubok,* and hang up a new one. And from this sheet, he will see the face of the new world… of new thought; the rigid order of the old [and the] everyday will gradually be eroded.[293]

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[292] Nikolai Tarabukin, "*Lubochnyi plakat,*" Sovetskoe iskusstvo, no. 3 (June 1925) 63-66, 64

[293] Ibid.

Mollie Arbuthnot, reflecting on Tarabukin's argument, notes that in using the enticing language of commercial advertising to describe this shift, he essentially reclassifies the political poster as an object of commodity and possession.[294] In invoking art historian Alois Riegl's notion of the *beholder's involvement* [295] - the idea that viewer and art-object jointly construct meaning - Arbuthnot emphasizes the Bolshevik poster's unique capacity to engage its audience in a co-creative experience. The viewer, in this conception, is not a passive recipient but an active participant in propaganda, internalizing and even personalizing the revolutionary message.

However, this very phenomenon reveals a profound dissonance in Tarabukin's "interiorized" poster. It suggests that the quintessential street art of the revolution had now moved indoors, bringing with it an inherent tension. After all, the military-agitational poster had originally been celebrated as "the art of the street, the indicator of its pulse."[296] in Iakov Tugendkhol'd's words – a public, unabashedly rough medium born of urban tumult. *"What can you do? This is the street… It is rude and tough,"*[297] one contemporary quipped of the poster's blunt vernacular. In turn, so much of the internal Soviet discourse around the role of the poster implied (both implicit and explicitly) the distinct 'rudeness' of this poster - its monosyllabism, its brevity - that reconfiguring the poster as an object for domestic consumption, seems rather striking. On its end, a discourse surrounding the poster as an object for leisured contemplation - akin to the 'bourgeois' easel-painting - evolves through the aftermath of the Civil War. The theorist A. Bogachev wrote in 1925 that:

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[294] Mollie Arbuthnot, "The People and the Poster: Theorizing the Soviet Viewer, 1920–1931," *Slavic Review* 78, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 717

[295] Alois Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, trans. Evelyn M. Kain and David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999); Ernst H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation (London: Phaidon Press, 1960).

[296] Iakov Tugendkhol′d, *Iskusstvo oktiabr'skoi epokhi* (Leningrad, 1930), 82

[297] Polonskii, *Russkii revoliutsionnyi plakat*. 15

Here [indoors, in cafes and railway stations] we don't see concision, texts are more expansive, the poster is made, as it were, more conversationally; its execution is more detailed, more varied, finished in better and greater detail. In this case, time is of no special consideration; the reader has plenty of it, so they can familiarize themselves with the content of the poster more attentively, with particular patience. [298]

Tugenkhol'd deemed the 'domestic' poster to be an ontologically distinct medium, writing that the "aesthetics of the poster [were] largely determined by its ultimate purpose, in other words, the conditions of its reception. Posters for the street, for an interior room… are in this sense completely different categories of poster."[299] "The familiar vocabulary of the street poster - concise or condensed, laconic, impactful, loud," writes Arbuthnot, "was notably absent from texts on the indoor poster, suggesting that the critical framework developed for the Civil War poster was redefined in the mid-1920s."[300]

Indeed, this 'indoor poster' points us to a distinct social convergence in post-Civil War USSR; Soviet texts largely approached the domestic poster as a product of the changing social milieu. The theorist Aleksandr Gushchin claimed: "this departure of the poster from the streets was caused by a change in the conditions of mass work…"[301] This is a striking prognosis - pointing us to evolving customer parity, where changing economic conditions of Soviet workers lead to changing consumer-tendencies.

This was antithetical to the persistent militant rhetoric surrounding discussions of the 'everyday', where terms such as *meshchanstvo* (philistines, middle class), *poshlost'* (bad taste, obscenity) and *kul'turnost'* (being cultured) were brought into the fray of conceptualizing socialism beyond immediate militant conflict. Here is how Mayakovsky presented the 'new frontiers' of the fight against *byt*:

On the wall is Marx

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[298] A. Bogachev, *Plakat* (Leningrad, 1926), 7-8.

[299] Tugendkhol′d, I*skusstvo oktiabr'skoi epokhi*, 173.

[300] Arbuthnot, *The People and The Poster* p. 729

[301] Aleksandr Gushcin, *Rabota s plakatom v klub i izbe-chital'ne* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1931)

The little frame is crimson
Lying on *The News*, a kitten is getting warm
And near the ceiling
Chirps
A frantic little canary.[302]

The middle-class 'philistine's' wish is "to turn the revolutionary struggle into a cozy communist idyll, and revolutionary gains into a collection of private fetishes."[303]

From the wall Marx watches and watches
And suddenly
Opening his mouth wide,
He starts howling:
The revolution is tangled up in philistine threads
More terrible than Wrangel is philistine *byt*
Better
To twist off canaries' heads —
So communism
Won't be struck down by canaries[304]

The little crimson frame encloses Marx; it seems to speak the language of a domestic poster. It is this encasement, however, that enrages Mayakovsky's Marx - the leader of the 'international proletariat' demands revolution from within - in his call for the execution of this exotic personification of petit-bourgeois *byt* - the yellow canary, the *locus amoenus* of the domesticated revolution. Marx's fury in the poem - *'More terrible*

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[302] Vladimir Mayakovsky, "O driani," in *Sochineniia.v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow: Pravda, 1988), vol. 1, 145

[303] Boym, *Common* Places, 34

[304] Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, ed. P. M. Nerler (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990)

than Wrangel is philistine byt' - pointedly suggests that bourgeois complacency was an even greater menace than General Wrangel, the White Army leader defeated in Crimea; internal decay was more feared than any external military threat.

Indeed, Mayakovsky's canary opens us up to the underside of this developing economy of Soviet private and public life. It points us to Bolshevik insecurity; namely, in their ability to chart out a novel vanguardist identity - a revolutionary militant-ideology in a time *after* militant conflict. In many ways, the Civil War was the ideal staging ground for the development of the image of socialist revolution; its hostility, its symbolic binarization on the propagandistic front, and its framing of revolution as a counter to immediate 'others' was a clean station for the evolution of 'culture' on the grounds of Lenin's aforementioned dictum - "Proletarian culture = proletarian organization"[305]

Just as this post-Civil War poster 'evolved' from a street-level, militant object into a domesticated artifact with consumerist overtones, proletarian identity (or the Party's proscriptive notion of said identity) was simultaneously reconfigured. Mayakovsky's hyperbole underscored a real fear: that the revolutionary flame was dying out not just symbolically but in social fact. To fully grasp this, we must consider what happened to the revolution's principal agent – the industrial proletariat – after years of war

As the Civil War gave way to political consolidation, the Bolsheviks were forced to confront a deepening contradiction at the heart of their revolutionary project: the visual language of class was no longer neatly aligned with material reality. Who *was* the proletarian in a society upended by war, mobility, and shifting labor patterns? What constituted revolutionary legitimacy when the external signs of class no longer guaranteed political trustworthiness? These questions shaped how identity was administratively recorded, rhetorically framed, and, crucially, visually represented. It was during this moment of postwar recalibration that a striking demographic crisis emerged: a

[305] V.I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinnii*, 5th ed., 55 vols. (Moscow, 1958-65) 38: 369

recruitment drive aimed at reinforcing proletarian presence within the Party, but one that relied on symbolic cues as much as on social reality.

The distinction between 'geneological' and 'positional' class identification practices point us to these anxieties; the opening days of the Civil War saw a profound disintegration in the industrial working force in Bolshevik-controlled urban centers. Many workers left towns and returned to their native villages. At the beginning of 1917, Russia's industrial working class (including workers in the non-Russian regions of the empire) was about 3.5 million strong, with an additional million or so railroad workers.[306] By the end of the Civil War, the total number of industrial workers had dropped to just over one million - a third of what it had been in 1917.[307] This demographic shift is often attributed to, among other factors, the sheer lack of infrastructure in urban centers. There was equally an expression of rejection of big towns where "hunger, syphilis and death"[308] reigned supreme. Indeed, between 1918 and 1921, Petrograd's population fell over 40 percent, from 1,217,000 to 722,000.[309] It was fundamentally this instability of city life, particularly through the course of the Civil War, when towns would frequently trade hands between various controlling factions, that drove thousands to seek out a rural abode as "a place to hide and to eat - a haven of survival."[310] Fitzpatrick reflected on the debilitating state of the 'proletarian' class: "Against the odds, [the Bolsheviks] had made

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[306] E. G. Gimpelson, *Sovetskii rabochii klass, 1918-20* (Moscow, 1974),. 80-81

[307] A. G. Rashin, "*Dinamika pomyshlennykh kadrov SSSR v 1917-1958 gg.,"* in *Izmeneniaa v chislennosti i sostave sovetskogo rabochego klassa* (Moscow, 1961),. 9.

[308] Richard Stites, Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 53

[309] Ibid.

[310] Ibid.

a worker's revolution. Then, in the hour of victory, the Russian proletariat had disappeared, leaving only its vanguard, like the smile of the Cheshire Cat, behind."[311]

Here, demographic change impacted both heavy-industry, as well as the party itself. Fitzpatrick reminds us that when one reads Bolshevik discourse through the Civil War and the early NEP years, one cannot help but feel that the Bolsheviks did not, in fact, have any real alternative to maintaining the 'proletarian connection' in the short term. The party's identity, and its vanguardist status, hinged on its firm belief that all regimes have a class base. She asks: "What class other than the proletariat could the Bolsheviks choose? What historical meaning had their revolution if it were not proletarian?"[312]

To remedy this, the Party Congress launched local drives to recruit former factory workers into the party.[313] The Central Committee plenum announced a general campaign (what was latter dubbed the 'Lenin levy') to enroll hundreds of thousands of workers from the bench as party members.[314] The idea here was to re-introduce the proletarian class to the party as a majority faction - to draw newly enrolled workers out of the factory and into administrative cadres.[315] This objective was deemed to be so dire that, according to the Party Congress's resolution of May 1924, it "[could not] be put off until some future time."[316]

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[311] Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Bolsheviks' Dilemma: The Class Issue in Party Politics and Culture," in *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 19.

[312] Ibid., 34

[313] E. V. Primerov, *Bor'ba partii za leninskoe edinstvo svoikh riadov (1921–1924): Na materialakh partorganizatsii krupneishikh promyshlennykh tsentrov strany* (Lvov: Izd-vo L'vovskogo universiteta, 1979), 186-187

[314] "O prieme rabochikh ot stanka v partiiu," 31 January 1924, *Pravda*, 1 February 1924.

[315] Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*,. 34

[316] "*Ob ocherednykh zadachakh partiinogo stroitel'stva,*" May 1924, in *Kommunisticheskaia Partiia Sovetskogo Soiuza v rezoliutsiiakh i resheniiakh s"ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov* TsK, vol. 3 (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1970), 46–47.

What is curious here, is the borderline baptismal route employed by the Party in charting its course through this demographic (and arguably, identitarian) crisis. The approach to 'labelling' an individual with the signifier 'proletarian' emphasized class origin, not class as symbolized by current occupation. Indeed, this 'genealogical' approach - the "What were you before?" - was an integral part of scoping out the old privileged class, who, it was thought, "might be hiding their true social identity behind an innocuous current occupation."[317] The foremost articulator of this skepticism was Lenin, whose remarks to the Eleventh Party Congress indict not only the working class of post Civil-War USSR, but also that of 1917:

> Very often when people say 'workers' they think that means factory proletariat. But it doesn't mean that at all. In Russia, since the war, people who are not proletarian at all have come to the plants and factories. They came to hide from the war, but are our social and economic conditions now really such that real proletarians come to the factories and plants? That is not true. It's true in Marx's terms, but Marx was not writing about Russia but about all capitalism as a whole, starting from the fifteenth century. Over the course of six hundred years it is true, but for present-day Russia it is not true. Often the people coming to the factory are not proletarians but all kinds of accidental elements.[318]

Approaching class-identity from the vantage of 'class-origin' however, proved to be inadequate to the large-scale social re-structuring platform of the Party. Since comparatively few 'proletarians' had 'proletarian parentage' (ie. the industrial working class), tracing a class-based ancestry proved wholly unfeasible for the Bolsheviks.[319] Within the Bolshevik Party, the two 'traditional' social groups had long been identified as 'workers' and 'intellectuals', the latter often being referred to as 'students' by the workers. Even in pre-revolutionary times, however, the terms did not seem to indicate present occupation; "It was common for workers to be fired from their jobs for political

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[317] Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*, 35

[318] Ibid.

[319] The great majority of Russian workers, both before and after the Civil War, were the children of either peasants or peasant-workers (the father spent all or part of the year in industrial employment away from the village)

activity… it was even more common for students to be expelled from university."[320] After the Civil War, and specifically through the course of this 'demographic crisis', the party's approach had to be rethought. In turn, the Party's local drives recruited former workers from villages back to the factory bench - here, they spent a few short months re-donning the proleterian marker, and, were quickly drawn out of the factory and into administrative cadres. This move raised potentially complex questions surrounding class-identity - was being 'proletarian' a narrow-signifier, meant to define an individual in their current state of occupation? Was it the "What are you?" over the "What were you before?"

The 'Lenin Levy' speaks back to Balibar's reminder that the fundamental characteristic of the 'proletarian condition' is its necessary insecurity.[321] The condition of the working class, writes Balibar, "is historically untenable. It implies another transition which will annul the preceding one and for which capitalist accumulation has already prepared the material conditions."[322] Indeed, the shifting signification in who was prescribed as 'proletarian' reminds us of the changing social milieu in Civil War Russia. And with changes in its demographic make-up, came changes in its cultural identity.

What this reveals is that class identity, for the Bolsheviks, was increasingly something to be *managed visually* - an image to be aligned with institutional legitimacy. Posters played a crucial role in this performance. They became not only tools for rallying support but also instruments for encoding and broadcasting who counted as "proletarian" in the new order. In this way, this period did not just reshape Party membership - it reconfigured the symbolic field in which the poster operated. No longer simply about messaging, the *plakat* had to embody a stabilized class typology, even as real-life subjectivity became more difficult to define.

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[320] Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*, 2

[321] Balibar, *In Search of the Proletariat*, 126

[322] Ibid.

The transformation of propaganda from a militant, street-bound instrument into a domesticated object marks the onset of this political crisis. The very act of rendering the poster 'domestic' echoed the Bolsheviks' uneasy reconciliation with a rapidly disappearing industrial proletariat - a crisis that forced the Party to reconsider the foundations of its legitimacy. Faced with the erosion of a stable working-class base, the Party's subsequent measures emerged as a desperate attempt to recast proletarian identity from a matter of current occupation to one of class origins. In her conclusion, Fitzpatrick observes that the Party's identity and sense of legitimacy were inextricably linked to the proletariat, and when that connection began to fray, no alternative remained but to redefine the very meaning of being 'proletarian' in revolutionary terms.

Conclusion

In the Civil War poster, we find an art form poised on the threshold of change – an object that lives in contradiction and thrives on duality. Yury Lotman and Boris Uspensky remind us that Russian culture itself often advances by inversion. So too did the Bolshevik poster turn tradition on its head: it was at once destructive and creative, negating a vision of the past while asserting that of a future. The *plakat's* imagery stood at this crossroads. It drew vitality from tearing down an old world even as it conjured up a new one, embodying what Sinyavsky called the oxymoronic dream of a 'new everyday' – *novyi byt* – which was, to him, a marriage of mutually exclusive concepts. The poster's very logic was split, forged in the tension between what had to be destroyed and what had to be imagined anew.

Yet, arguably, the 'legacy' of the Civil War poster lies in how it negotiated the everyday. As Svetlana Boym has suggested, in Russian modernity, *byt* – the prosaic realm of everyday life – was often cast as the enemy of heroic transformation. Bolshevik visual

culture deliberately positioned the mundane against the utopian. The posters were rife with everyday scenes inverted into visions of 'complete transcendence': kitchens and workshops became stages for epic allegories; ordinary workers were recast as mythic heroes. In the campaign against the "banal" realities of pre-revolutionary life, nothing less than *life itself* had to be revolutionized.

The fight against everydayness, Boym reminds us, was not about 'physical survival' but 'sacrifice', not preservation of a certain 'way of life' but its 'complete transcendence' in the name of a promised future 'collective happiness.' The Civil War poster operated in this dual register – grounded in common imagery of daily toil, yet straining toward a radiant utopia beyond the horizon of the ordinary. This dynamic, where cultural identity depended on a 'heroic opposition to everyday life', gave the poster its peculiar intensity. It had to resonate with familiar experiences even as it renounced them, immersing viewers in the dream of a world turned upside down.

This chapter has explored how the Bolshevik poster also underwent a physical and social metamorphosis – a shift from the public square to the private interior, from the street to the domestic space. What began as a weapon of agitation on city walls evolved into a fixture of everyday surroundings. Soviet theorist Nikolai Tarabukin noted that revolutionary print culture embodied a dual identity: the bold urban *plakat* seemingly converged with the traditional rural *lubok*, yielding a hybridized, classless art-object that purportedly spoke to both city-dweller and peasant. This almost dream-like convergence captures a profound transformation: the poster enters the home as an agent of cultural change, erasing the boundary between propaganda and daily life. Once a loud proclamation on a factory gate or barracks, the poster becomes a quieter guest in the household parlor.

No longer constrained by the poster's famed *monosyllabism* and brevity, these 'domesticated' posters grew more detailed and discursive, inviting leisurely contemplation. The familiar "laconic, impactful, loud" vocabulary of the street poster fell

away in this new context. In short, the *plakat* was reinventing itself in form and function, mirroring the young Soviet state's shift from the imposing tempo of war to the slower rhythms of reconstruction.

With this shift came a subtle crisis – a reconfiguration – of proletarian identity itself. Sheila Fitzpatrick's study of the early Soviet years describes a fundamental *Bolshevik dilemma*: the new regime's leaders were urban intellectuals who spoke in the name of workers and peasants, yet 'proletarian culture' had to be created from the ground up. During the Civil War, this dilemma was somewhat masked by urgency; the poster could portray a unified revolutionary worker-soldier mass, and for a moment the image could correspond with reality as the Bolsheviks led a genuine workers' uprising. But as soon as the 'dust settled', the question of *what* proletarian identity really meant became acute and unresolved.

The Party's attempt to impose its vision of a working-class culture revealed an inherent contradiction: to *prescribe* identity from above was to admit that the working class's own culture was insufficient or deviating from the ideal. The poster's trajectory in the 1920s reflects this tension. Just as the post-Civil War poster 'evolved' from a militant street placard into a domesticated artifact with consumerist overtones, the Party's very notion of the proletariat (what it meant to be the vanguard of the people) was being simultaneously reconfigured. In becoming a commodity to be chosen, collected, and hung in a peasant's hut or a worker's club, the propaganda image straddled a fine line between genuine class expression and top-down didacticism. The poster promised to bring the revolution into every home, yet in making itself "inoffensive" and alluring enough to replace the 'folk' *lubok*, it risked blurring into the very *byt* it sought to overthrow. This duality – revolutionary content in a domestic, even bourgeois, format – speaks to a broader anxiety in the 1920s: was the proletarian culture a spontaneous creation of the people, or a state-directed performance staged in the people's living rooms? The *plakat*

does not resolve this paradox so much as it puts it on display, bearing the hopes of a new collective identity and the fears of that identity's fragility at once.

Epilogue

The leaf fades. The summer is passing.

The hoar-frost is silver…

Junger Schmidt wants to shoot himself with his pistol.

Wait, mad one, once again

The foliage will revive!

Junger Schmidt! My word of honor!

The summer will return!

'Iunker Schmidt' by Koz'ma Prutkov (1976)[323]

There is a peculiar stillness that follows the end of conflict - not peace, precisely, but a suspended silence in which the turbulence of history begins to cohere into faint, legible patterns. This thesis has situated itself within that indeterminate interval - not to eulogize the revolution or elegize its opposition, but to examine how, through the very mechanisms of visual representation, early Bolshevik and anti-Bolshevik propaganda exposed the ruptures and reconfigurations of a society in the process of remaking itself.

The Civil War-era *plakat*, in all its schismatic multiplicity, was never a static form. It did not exist as a mere object - mute, inert, or passive. Rather, it was ontologically elevated, suspended above the realm of objecthood, animated with a kind of animism. Nor was it simply an event, for that would confine it to a moment, a fixed point in time. The *plakat* stretched forward, always in a linear conception of history: projecting toward a classless, revolutionary future in the Bolshevik imagination, or toward a stable, time-honored order in the White variant, illuminated by the ideals of a vision of European

[323] Koz'ma Prutkov, *Sochiineniia Koz'my Prutkova* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1976), 32

Enlightenment ‘at home’. Yet all the while, it looked back at a tinted past: It mined history incessantly, searching for a root from which a new spring might bloom. Indeed, the Civil War-era poster was a proposition - of power, of futurity, of legibility. It asked what authority could look like, who might be seen as a rightful subject of revolution. That it emerged from printshops, drafted by bureaucrats, artists, or improvisers, does not diminish the weight it bore. Its force lay in its threshold condition: blurring the line between elite and popular, instruction and incitement, image and ideology. The poster dwelled in the space between myth and policy, between what was and what might be.

Together, the Red and White posters formed a dissonant duet, two voices always in opposition yet unwittingly in conversation. What survives of that tumultuous conversation now? A century removed, they ask one to consider not who was right in the moment, but rather how each side sought to shape reality to its will. They remind one that in any era of upheaval, art and ideology become inseparable forces. The truths that official histories tell - of victory, of inevitable progress or inevitable ruin - are one thing. The truths these posters tell are messier, more intimate.

Did the Red posters lie when they promised land and bread to all, or the dawn of a global brotherhood? Did the White posters lie when they swore they fought for the soul of a nation and not for their own bygone privilege? In a narrow sense, perhaps they did. But it would be too simple to dismiss these images as mere falsehoods. Each lie was told in earnest, born from conviction and desperation. The Bolsheviks truly believed a new world was within grasp, and if exaggerating its immediacy helped summon it forth, so be it. The Whites believed civilization itself hung by a thread, and if demonizing their foes might save it, that was a necessary fiction. In these impassioned distortions, we find something distinct: a will to believe so strong that it bends reality rather than accepts defeat.

After the cessation of violence and the withdrawal of overt military symbols, the poster endured as a continued medium for shaping revolutionary consciousness. The Bolshevik *plakat* underwent its next metamorphosis, turning from civil war agitator to peacetime builder of the Soviet state. In the decades that followed, the visual rhetoric pioneered in the Civil War became the lingua franca of a new empire of signs and symbols. The lessons learned through those early posters - how to capture a viewer's mind at a glance, how to distill ideology into emblem and allegory - were carried forward into the construction of a vast new society.

To Lie Like A Witness - the phrase that titles this thesis - no longer feels like a paradox, but a necessity. It speaks to the way these posters, and propaganda more broadly, operate. A witness swears to tell the truth; a liar manipulates belief. The propagandist, in a sense, must do both at once. The civil war poster was a witness to fervor: it saw what it wished to see and showed what it wished others to see. Its testimony was biased, partisan, often blatantly false in detail, and yet it was testimony all the same. In each exaggerated figure and simplified slogan, there lies an account of its makers' beliefs. The individuals who crafted these images bore witness to the revolution as they *imagined* it - often more ideal than real - and they hoped to convince others to see that vision as truth. Their posters are thus double-edged testaments, lying to us about reality even as they truthfully reveal aspirations.

If Chapter One approached this through theoretical lineage and historiographical fracture-in the poster as inheritor of both avant-garde rupture and religious icon-then what emerged was not a genealogy but a diagram of conflict: a conflict over meaning, over pedagogical legitimacy, over who could rightfully claim the authority to represent a people in revolution. That early Bolshevik theorists could draw simultaneously from the *lubok* and from the academy, from Marxist inevitability and imperial aesthetic convention, underscores this process of ideological self-actualization.

In Chapter Two, the focus shifted to the dissonant universe of White propaganda, a project haunted by a loss it could not fully name. Here, the poster was not an image of becoming but of refusal. It sought not to teach but to remind - and, in reminding, to warn. Yet this invocation of memory was never neutral. The past it conjured had already been stylized, tidied, made serviceable. What the Whites feared was not simply Bolshevism but a loss of narrative coherence itself. Thus, their posters strained toward unity - of nation, of church, of tsar - even as their coalitions fractured in the real. If Red propaganda was the will to construct, White propaganda was the will to ossify.

And then, in Chapter Three, a return to the Red image - not as artifact but as logic. How did these works speak? What kinds of legibility did they demand or deny? To whom were they addressed, and what did they presume of their viewer? The Bolshevik poster was often less a window onto revolution than a diagram of how revolution wanted to be seen. Its exaggerations not simplifications so much as selective clarities.

Through the course of this work, the poster has unfolded not as a minor genre or marginal curiosity, but as a site where foundational conflicts - over class, representation, pedagogy, culture - were rehearsed with furious intensity. What the archive reveals is not merely how the Bolsheviks or Whites envisioned the world, but how they wished to train others into that vision. Each side hoped not only to persuade, but to produce a way of seeing that could endure beyond the war itself.

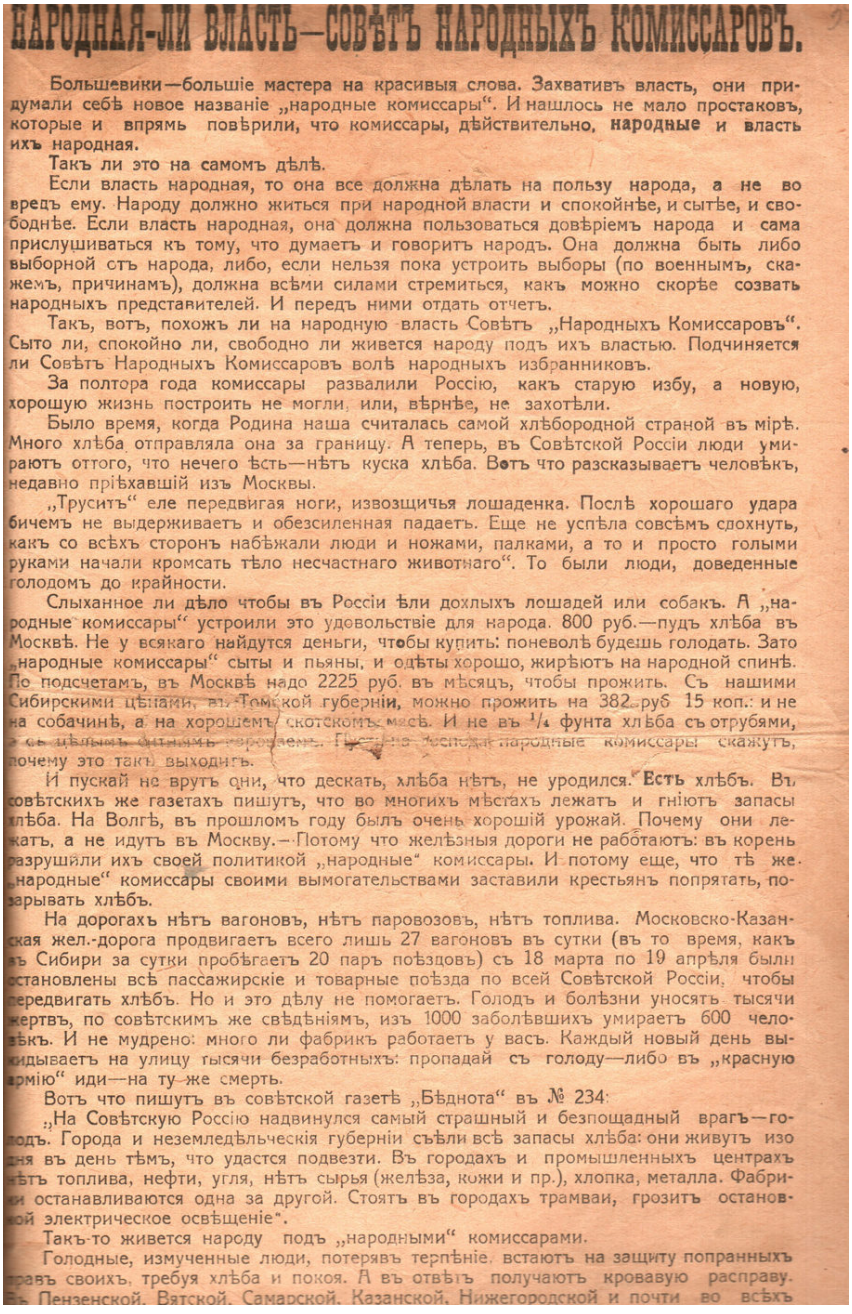
In this sense, the Civil War poster functions less as a mirror than as a mold. It shaped the viewer as much as it shaped the message. It demanded recognition not just of its imagery, but of the structures of thought it implied. To engage with these posters is to encounter forms of authority being drafted in real time: the teacherly tone of the Red educational image, the sacred severity of the White moral plea, the strange overlaps where both camps, at times, borrowed from one another's visual idioms in the hopes of

seizing shared affect. None of these strategies were fully stable. That is precisely what makes them illuminating. The fragility of these visual languages - their reliance on resonance, their dependence on affective uptake - means that they also reveal their own limits. A poster that must scream its message may also be a poster unsure it will be heard. A visual style that must draw from contradictory traditions may be doing so out of necessity, not indecision. In this, the poster is not only a tool of power, but a record of its insecurities.

To read these materials now, through the lens of their contradictions and recalibrations, is not to dismiss them as failures of coherence. Rather, it is to understand them as artifacts of process. Revolution, counter-revolution, state consolidation - none of these arrive prepackaged. They are made, unmade, and remade, often through images first. The Civil War-era poster, in all its volatility, offers a visual vocabulary of that making. It is not smooth. It is not always convincing. But it is full of motion. Full of attempts. These posters do not show us finished ideologies. They show us ideology under construction. And in doing so, they open a space for reading the revolution not just as an historical event, but as a visual argument in progress - a debate between promises, between aesthetics, between pedagogies. That debate never truly ends. It only changes form. The revolution may have found its symbols. But its posters show us the struggle to earn them.

We are left, finally, with fragments. Some printed in triplicate, others never distributed. They point in every direction. But in this, they are not diminished. They are, in fact, most themselves. For what the plakat teaches us is not how to read the past, but how to see the mechanics of its becoming.

Figures, Chapter One:



НАРОДНАЯ-ЛИ ВЛАСТЬ—СОВѢТЪ НАРОДНЫХЪ КОМИССАРОВЪ.

Большевики—большіе мастера на красивыя слова. Захвативъ власть, они придумали себѣ новое названіе „народные комиссары". И нашлось не мало простаковъ, которые и впрямь повѣрили, что комиссары, дѣйствительно, народные и власть ихъ народная.

Такъ ли это на самомъ дѣлѣ.

Если власть народная, то она все должна дѣлать на пользу народа, а не во вредъ ему. Народу должно житься при народной власти и спокойнѣе, и сытѣе, и свободнѣе. Если власть народная, она должна пользоваться довѣріемъ народа и сама прислушиваться къ тому, что думаетъ и говоритъ народъ. Она должна быть либо выборной отъ народа, либо, если нельзя пока устроить выборы (по военнымъ, скажемъ, причинамъ), должна всѣми силами стремиться, какъ можно скорѣе созвать народныхъ представителей. И передъ ними отдать отчетъ.

Такъ, вотъ, похожъ ли на народную власть Совѣтъ „Народныхъ Комиссаровъ". Сыто ли, спокойно ли, свободно ли живется народу подъ ихъ властью. Подчиняется ли Совѣтъ Народныхъ Комиссаровъ волѣ народныхъ избранниковъ.

За полтора года комиссары развалили Россію, какъ старую избу, а новую, хорошую жизнь построить не могли, или, вѣрнѣе, не захотѣли.

Было время, когда Родина наша считалась самой хлѣбородной страной въ мірѣ. Много хлѣба отправляла она за границу. А теперь, въ Совѣтской Россіи люди умираютъ оттого, что нечего ѣсть—нѣтъ куска хлѣба. Вотъ что разсказываетъ человѣкъ, недавно пріѣхавшій изъ Москвы.

„Труситъ" еле передвигая ноги, извозчичья лошаденка. Послѣ хорошаго удара бичемъ не выдерживаетъ и обезсиленная падаетъ. Еще не успѣла совсѣмъ сдохнуть, какъ со всѣхъ сторонъ набѣжали люди и ножами, палками, а то и просто голыми руками начали кромсать тѣло несчастнаго животнаго". То были люди, доведенные голодомъ до крайности.

Слыханное ли дѣло чтобы въ Россіи ѣли дохлыхъ лошадей или собакъ. А „народные комиссары" устроили это удовольствіе для народа. 800 руб.—пудъ хлѣба въ Москвѣ. Не у всякаго найдутся деньги, чтобы купить: поневолѣ будешь голодать. Зато „народные комиссары" сыты и пьяны, и одѣты хорошо, жирѣютъ на народной спинѣ. По подсчетамъ, въ Москвѣ надо 2225 руб. въ мѣсяцъ, чтобы прожить. Съ нашими Сибирскими цѣнами, въ Томской губерніи, можно прожить на 382 руб 15 коп.: и не на собачинѣ, а на хорошемъ скотскомъ мясѣ. И не въ ¼ фунта хлѣба съ отрубями, а съ цѣлымъ фунтомъ хорошаго. Пусть-ка господа народные комиссары скажутъ, почему это такъ выходитъ.

И пускай не врутъ они, что дескать, хлѣба нѣтъ, не уродился. Есть хлѣбъ. Въ совѣтскихъ же газетахъ пишутъ, что во многихъ мѣстахъ лежатъ и гніютъ запасы хлѣба. На Волгѣ, въ прошломъ году былъ очень хорошій урожай. Почему они лежатъ, а не идутъ въ Москву.—Потому что желѣзныя дороги не работаютъ: въ корень разрушили ихъ своей политикой „народные" комиссары. И потому еще, что тѣ же „народные" комиссары своими вымогательствами заставили крестьянъ попрятать, позарывать хлѣбъ.

На дорогахъ нѣтъ вагоновъ, нѣтъ паровозовъ, нѣтъ топлива. Московско-Казанская жел.-дорога продвигаетъ всего лишь 27 вагоновъ въ сутки (въ то время, какъ въ Сибири за сутки пробѣгаетъ 20 паръ поѣздовъ) съ 18 марта по 19 апрѣля были остановлены всѣ пассажирскіе и товарные поѣзда по всей Совѣтской Россіи, чтобы передвигать хлѣбъ. Но и это дѣлу не помогаетъ. Голодъ и болѣзни уносятъ тысячи жертвъ, по совѣтскимъ же свѣдѣніямъ, изъ 1000 заболѣвшихъ умираетъ 600 человѣкъ. И не мудрено: много ли фабрикъ работаетъ у васъ. Каждый новый день выкидываетъ на улицу тысячи безработныхъ: пропадай съ голоду—либо въ „красную армію" иди—на ту же смерть.

Вотъ что пишутъ въ совѣтской газетѣ „Бѣднота" въ № 234:

„На Совѣтскую Россію надвинулся самый страшный и безпощадный врагъ—голодъ. Города и неземледѣльческія губерніи съѣли всѣ запасы хлѣба: они живутъ изо дня въ день тѣмъ, что удастся подвезти. Въ городахъ и промышленныхъ центрахъ нѣтъ топлива, нефти, угля, нѣтъ сырья (желѣза, кожи и пр.), хлопка, металла. Фабрики останавливаются одна за другой. Стоятъ въ городахъ трамваи, грозитъ остановкой электрическое освѣщеніе".

Такъ-то живется народу подъ „народными" комиссарами.

Голодные, измученные люди, потерявъ терпѣніе, встаютъ на защиту попранныхъ правъ своихъ, требуя хлѣба и покоя. А въ отвѣтъ получаютъ кровавую расправу. въ Пензенской, Вятской, Самарской, Казанской, Нижегородской и почти во всѣхъ

Figure 1: Листовка Белой армии «Народная ли власть – Совет народных комиссаров». Б/д ГААОСО. Ф. Р-1. Оп. 2. Д. 48734. Л. 39

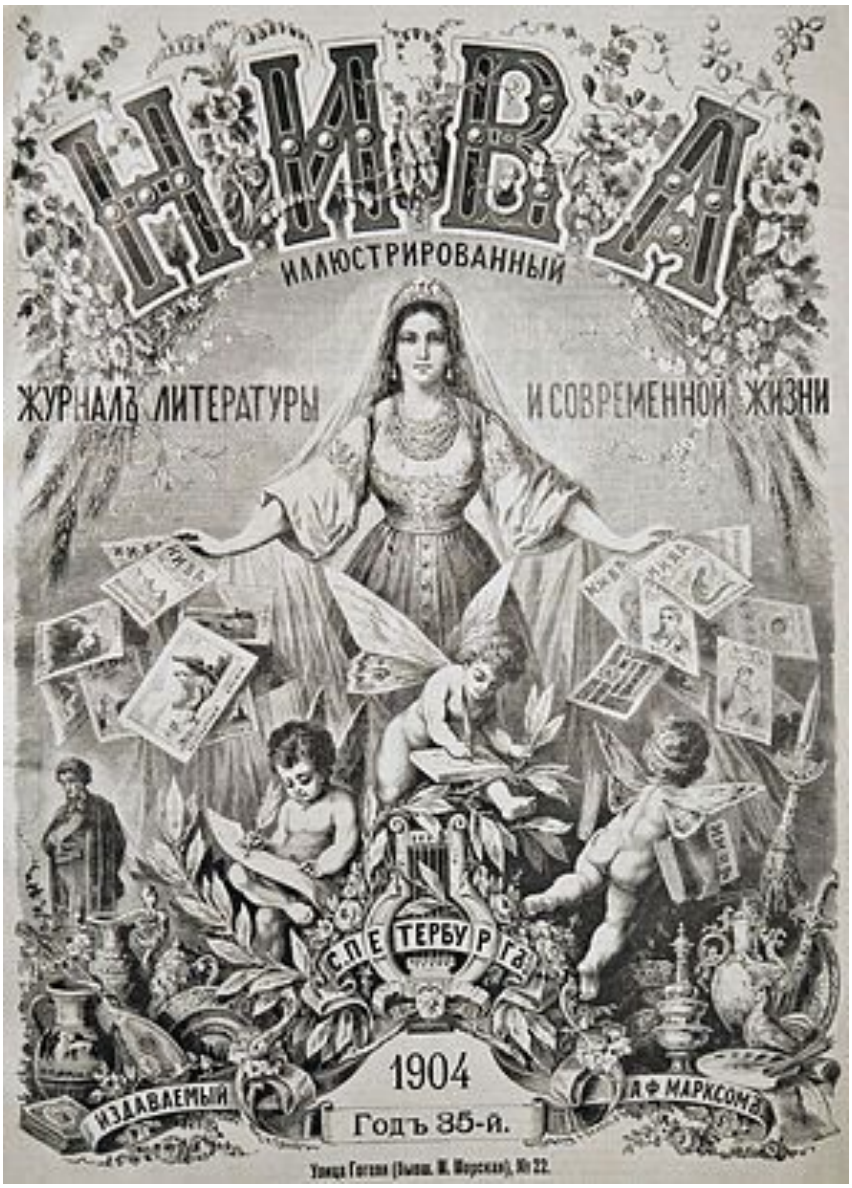


Figure 2 - Niva Journal Annual Poster, 1904.



Figure 3: 5½% War Bond - Issued by the Imperial State.



Figure 4: 5 1/2 % Freedom Loan - Issued by the Provisional Government



Figure 5: A Bolshevik poster in the style of a *lubok*, with an episodic narrative.



Figure 6: A Poster calling for ‘Freedom Loans’ - The motif of St. George and the Dragon take center stage here.



Figure 7: Provisional Government WW1 poster - *Do Not Forget Those, behind whose backs you drink coffee*.

Chapter Two:



Figure 1: A. Apsit; Euphoric Vision: 'A Year of Proletarian Dictatorship' (1918)



Figure 2: Anti-Bolshevik Poster. ‘Why are you not on the Front?’



Figure 3: Bolshevik Poster. ‘Comrade! Rush to the Revolutionary Front!’



Figure 4: Anti-Bolshevik Poster. ‘Here is what we, volunteers, fight for:’



Figure 5: White Poster: Hyperinflation under Bolshevism



Figure 6: White Poster: Inflationary Prices under Bolshevism.



Figure 7: Anti-Bolshevik Poster: Peace and Freedom in the Soviets.



Figure 8: Bolshevik Poster: ‘Global Armament of the Proletariat’



Figure 9: Bolshevik ‘May Day’ Poster



Figure 10: White Poster: Thus, Bolshevik punitive detachments composed of Latvians and Chinese forcibly seize bread, ravage villages, and shoot peasants.



Figure 11: White Poster: Even the sailors—those desperate hooligans and brigands—were terrified by the honest and life-giving Cross of the Lord; consequently, the commissars summoned the Chinese, and they, without a tremor, executed the priest This took place in Moscow



Figure 12: White Poster: ‘Disgraceful Bolsheviks in the Church’

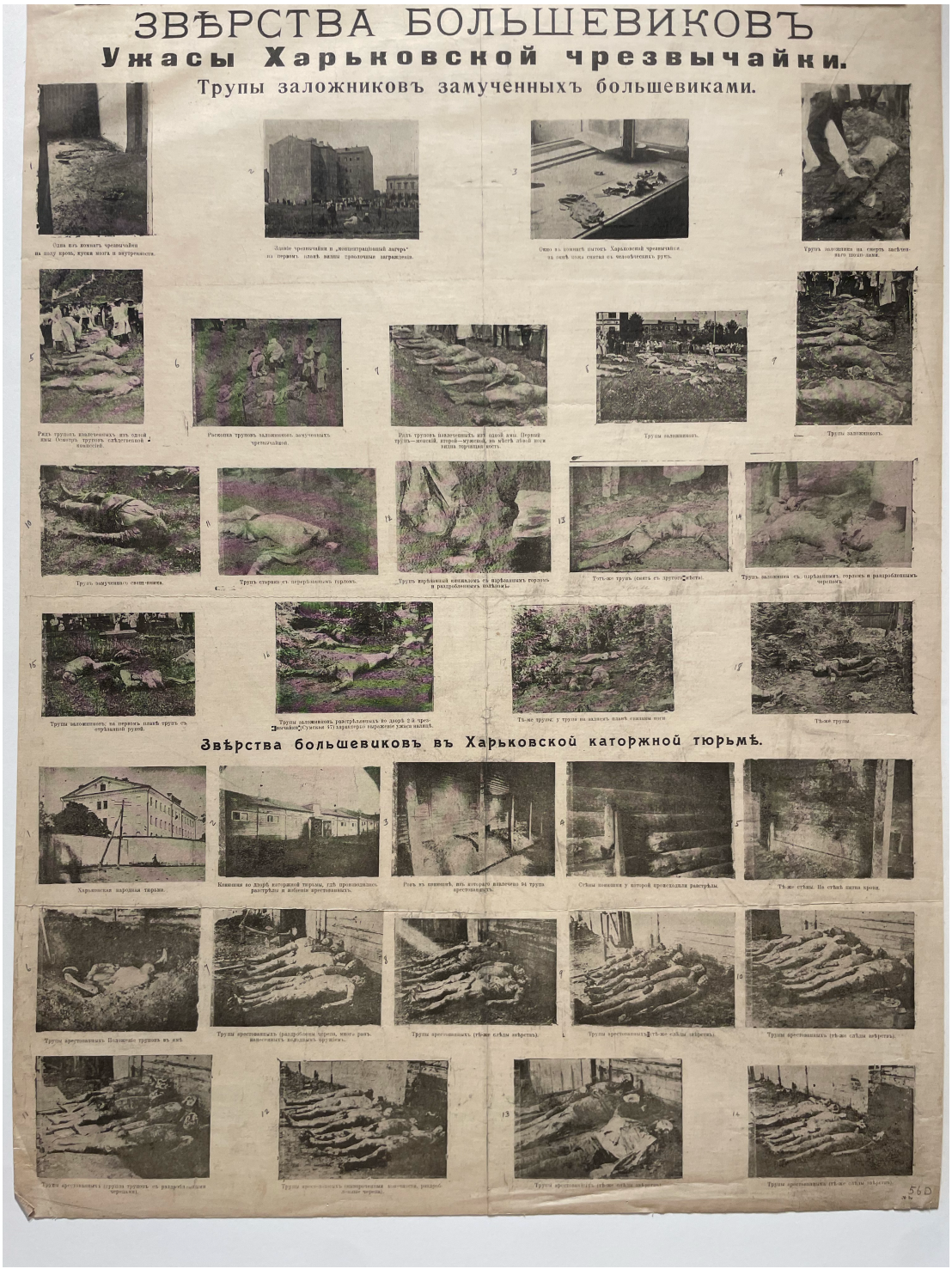


Figure 13: White Poster: Horrors of the Kharkiv Cheka



Figure 14: Detail.



Figure 15: General Denikin arrives at Rostov-on-Don



Figure 16: A Commemorative poster of General Denikin



Figure 17: Detail

Chapter Three:



Figure 1. Bolshevik Poster: 'European Kitchen'



Figure 2: Alexander Apsit - Vengeance of the Tsars



Figure 3: Alexander Apsit - Internationale

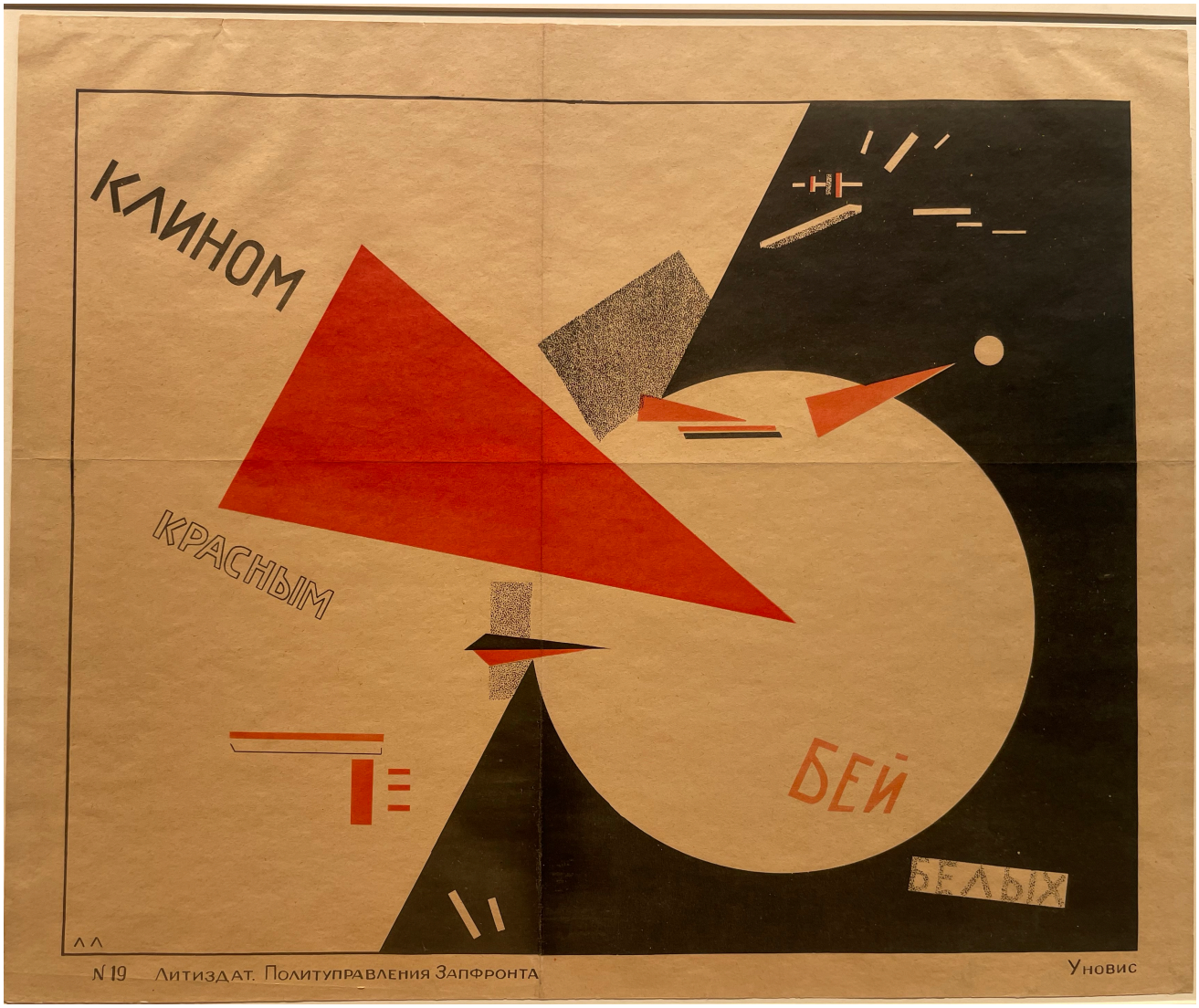


Figure 4: El Lissitzky, *Klinom krasnym bei belikh* (Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge), two colored lithograph, 1920, 54 x 72 cm

Glossary of Russian Terms & Phrases:

Affiche (Афиша) - In Russian and French, *affiche* refers to a public notice or advertisement, often used for theatrical events, cinema, or exhibitions. While related to *plakat* (плакат), which typically denotes political or propagandistic posters, *affiche* carries more neutral or commercial connotations. In early Soviet usage, the terms could overlap depending on context, but *plakat* was more ideologically charged, whereas *affiche* was often reserved for event announcements or cultural programming.

Baba-Yaga (Баба-Яга) - A witch-like figure in Slavic folklore, often appearing in fairy tales and lubok prints as a malevolent old woman who lives in a hut on chicken legs.

Bezbozhnik (Безбожник) – Literally "Godless." The title of a Soviet atheistic satirical magazine (1920s) known for its anti-religious cartoons and propaganda.

Bogatyr (богатырь) – In Russian epic folklore, a warrior-hero or knight. The *bogatyrs* (богатыри) are legendary heroes celebrated for their strength and bravery.

Byt (быт) – Everyday life, the mundane daily existence or “everydayness.” In early Soviet discourse, *byt* referred to the ordinary habits and domestic life that revolutionaries aimed to transform.

Bytie (бытие) – Being or existence (often in a spiritual or philosophical sense). Contrasted with *byt* in Russian culture to distinguish the higher realm of existence from banal everyday life.

Glavpolitprosvet (Главполитпросвет) – Abbreviation for the Main Political-Educational Committee of the RSFSR. A Soviet agency under Narkompros responsible for political education and enlightenment of the masses (founded 1920).

Klinom krasnym bei belykh (Клином красным бей белых) – "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge." A famous Civil War poster slogan (and artwork by El Lissitzky) urging the Red Army to defeat the White forces, symbolized by a red wedge striking a white circle.

Krasnaya Zvezda (Красная звезда) – "Red Star." The name of a Bolshevik agitational ship used during the Civil War to spread propaganda along the rivers. (Also later the name of the official Soviet military newspaper.)

Lubochnyi plakat (лубочный плакат) – "*Lubok* poster." A hybrid propaganda poster in the style of a *lubok*, combining the simple folk-art imagery of *lubok* prints with the bold messaging of the Soviet *plakat*.

Lubok (лубо́к) – A popular Russian folk print or broadside, often featuring colorful illustrations with brief texts. Lubki (plural) traditionally depicted folklore, satire, or current events in a simple, accessible style.

Mir Iskusstva (Мир искусства) – "World of Art." An influential Russian art movement and magazine (circa 1898–early 1900s) that championed aestheticism and folk art. Its name is mentioned as part of the cultural backdrop influencing poster art.

Moskovskie Vedomosti (Московские ведомости)– "Moscow Gazette." A conservative imperial-era newspaper published in Moscow. Often cited as reflecting monarchist or traditional viewpoints before the revolution.

Narkompros (Наркомпрос) – Short for *Narodny Komissariat Prosveshcheniya* (Народный комиссариат просвещения), the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment. The Soviet ministry for education and culture (1917–1930), which oversaw schools, arts, and propaganda efforts.

Narod (народ) – "The people" or "the folk." In Russian discourse, *narod* refers to the common people or nation at large, often idealized as the source of cultural strength or political power.

Novyi byt (новый быт) – "New everyday life." A concept in early Soviet ideology envisioning a radical transformation of daily living under socialism. *Novyi byt* implied new social relations, habits, and domestic culture free from pre-revolutionary "backwardness."

Okhrana (Охрана) – Literally "protection." The popular name for the Tsarist secret police (Department for Protecting Public Security and Order, 1881–1917). The Okhrana conducted surveillance and repression of revolutionary movements before 1917.

Osvedomitel'noe-agitatsionnoe otdelenie (Осведомительно-агитационное отделение) – Literally "Informational-Agitational Department." The White Army's propaganda bureau during the Civil War, which organized information and agitation campaigns for the anti-Bolshevik forces (often referred to by the acronym Osvag).

Plakat (плакат) – Poster (especially a propaganda poster). In the Soviet context, *plakat* refers to the bold graphic posters used for agitation and propaganda during the Civil War and afterwards.

Politprosvetrabota (политпросветработа) – Short for "political enlightenment work." A term for propaganda and educational efforts aimed at politically enlightening the

population. It emphasizes the didactic mission of propaganda to educate and uplift the masses.

Pravda (Правда) – "Truth." The title of the Bolshevik (later Soviet) newspaper that served as the official party mouthpiece. *Pravda* was founded in 1912 and became the leading Communist daily publication.

Proletkult (Пролеткульт) – Short for *Proletarskaya Kultura* (Пролетарская культура, "Proletarian Culture"). A movement and network of organizations (established 1917) dedicated to fostering a distinct proletarian art and culture independent of bourgeois influence.

Voennyi zaem (Военный заем) – "War loan" or war bond. A government bond issued to finance military efforts. In late Imperial Russia, *voennyi zaem* referred to bonds (such as the 5½% war loan) marketed to the public to support the war effort.

Zaem Svobody (Заем Свободы) – "Freedom Loan." The name given to a war bond issued by the Russian Provisional Government in 1917 (essentially rebranding the previous Tsarist war bond). The term framed the bond as tied to the cause of liberty after the February Revolution.

Short Biographical Notes

Alekseev, Mikhail Vasilyevich (1857–1918) – Imperial Russian general who became a leading organizer of the White Army. He helped found the Volunteer Army in southern Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, rallying counterrevolutionary forces until his death in 1918.

Apsit, Alexander Petrovich (1880–1944) – Latvian-born Soviet graphic artist famous for his Bolshevik propaganda posters during the Civil War. Commissioned by the Soviet state publishing house, Apsit designed vivid revolutionary posters to mobilize support for the Red cause.

Benois, Alexander Nikolayevich (1870–1960) – Russian artist, art critic, and founding member of the Mir Iskusstva movement. Although he emigrated after 1918, Benois provided contemporary commentary on Russian art and culture, noting the influence of folk art (lubok) and tradition even amid revolutionary change.

Blok, Alexander Alexandrovich (1880–1921) – Acclaimed Russian symbolist poet who welcomed the 1917 Revolution in works like *The Twelve*. Blok's later writings reflected the turmoil and disillusionment of the Civil War period, capturing the psychological landscape of a society in upheaval.

Bukharin, Nikolai Ivanovich (1888–1938) – Bolshevik revolutionary and Marxist theorist who played a prominent role in the Soviet government during the Civil War. As editor of the party newspaper *Pravda* and a vocal leader, Bukharin helped shape Bolshevik propaganda and policy in the tumultuous early years of Soviet rule.

Denikin, Anton Ivanovich (1872–1947) – Russian general and one of the principal leaders of the White movement during the Civil War. He commanded the Armed Forces

of South Russia and at one point led a major offensive toward Moscow; after the Whites' defeat, Denikin went into exile.

Gippius, Zinaida Nikolaevna (1869–1945) – Russian symbolist poet and writer who was an eyewitness to the Revolution and Civil War, staunchly anti-Bolshevik in her views. In her diaries and letters from Petrograd, Gippius vividly described the chaos and despair of the civil war, famously denouncing Lenin's regime as a "pack of scoundrels" and foreseeing a "Civil War, without end and without limits!"

Kolchak, Alexander Vasilyevich (1874–1920) – Admiral of the Imperial Navy who became the "Supreme Ruler" of the White anti-Bolshevik government in Siberia during the Civil War. Kolchak led White armies in Siberia and the Urals and was internationally recognized by other White commanders, until he was captured and executed by the Bolsheviks in 1920.

Kornilov, Lavr Georgievich (1870–1918) – Former Imperial Army general and prominent White commander. He is known for the failed Kornilov Affair of 1917 and later for leading the Volunteer Army in the early Civil War; Kornilov was killed in 1918 during an assault on Ekaterinodar while fighting the Bolsheviks.

Krasnov, Pyotr Nikolayevich (1869–1947) – Don Cossack General who opposed the Bolsheviks. In 1917–18 Krasnov briefly led an anti-Bolshevik Cossack army around the Don region and sought German support; after defeat in the Civil War, he eventually fled, later collaborating with Nazi Germany and being executed by the Soviets in 1947.

Kulabukov, Alexei Ivanovich (1880–1919) – Kuban Cossack leader and politician who sided with the White movement while advocating for Cossack autonomy. He represented the Kuban at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference seeking support, but upon return was

arrested and hanged by General Denikin's order for making separate peace overtures, exemplifying the internal tensions within the White camp.

Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich (1870–1924) – Revolutionary leader of the Bolsheviks and head of the Soviet government during the Civil War. Lenin orchestrated the October Revolution of 1917 and guided the Red forces through the Civil War, employing decisive leadership and propaganda (e.g. speeches, decrees, and slogans like "Peace, Land, Bread") to secure Bolshevik victory and establish the USSR.

Lissitzky, El (Lazar Markovich) (1890–1941) – Russian avant-garde artist and designer who created some of the most iconic visual propaganda of the Civil War era. As a major figure in the Suprematist movement, Lissitzky applied modernist styles to Bolshevik posters – for example, his 1919 lithograph *"Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge"* became a symbol of the revolutionary cause.

Lunacharsky, Anatoly Vasilyevich (1875–1933) – Bolshevik statesman who served as the first Soviet People's Commissar of Enlightenment (in charge of education and culture). Throughout the Civil War, Lunacharsky oversaw cultural policy and propaganda, promoting revolutionary art and literacy, and supporting initiatives like *Proletkult* to align culture with the goals of the new socialist state.

Mayakovsky, Vladimir Vladimirovich (1893–1930) – Renowned Russian Futurist poet who became the loud voice of the Revolution through his art. During the Civil War he devoted his talent to Bolshevik propaganda, writing agitational poems, satirical slogans, and creating popular "ROSTA window" cartoons, all to inspire the Red Army and the populace in support of the Soviet regime.

Moor, Dmitry Stakhievich (1883–1946) – Pen name of Dmitry Orlov, a leading Soviet graphic artist of the Civil War period. Moor's striking political cartoons and posters (such

as the famous Red Army recruitment poster *"Have You Enlisted as a Volunteer?"*) were powerful propaganda tools for the Bolsheviks, helping to mobilize public sentiment against the Whites.

Nicholas II (Nikolai Alexandrovich Romanov, 1868–1918) – The last Emperor of Russia, whose overthrow in the 1917 Revolution set the stage for the Civil War. Nicholas II and his family were imprisoned by the Bolsheviks and executed in July 1918, an act intended to prevent any rallying point for monarchist White forces and symbolizing the irrevocable break with the old regime.

Pilnyak, Boris Andreyevich (1894–1938) – Soviet writer who captured the upheaval of the Revolution and Civil War in his literary works. His novel *The Naked Year* (1922) is set during the Civil War and portrays the chaos and social breakdown of that time; Pilnyak's works offer a contemporaneous cultural reflection of the human cost of the conflict.

Polonsky, Vyacheslav Pavlovich (1886–1932) – Bolshevik literary critic, journalist, and editor active in the Civil War and post-war period. As editor of the journal *Pechat' i revolutsiya* ("Press and Revolution") and other publications, Polonsky helped articulate and shape Soviet cultural policy, insisting on literature and journalism that served the proletarian revolution.

Semyonov, Grigory Mikhaylovich (1890–1946) – Cossack ataman and prominent White warlord in Siberia and the Far East. Backed by Japanese intervention, Semyonov controlled Transbaikal territories during the Civil War and fought against the Bolsheviks with brutal tactics; he remained a steadfast anti-Bolshevik until captured and executed by Soviet authorities in 1946.

Shevchenko, Alexander Vasilyevich (1883–1948) – Russian avant-garde painter and theorist who participated in early Soviet artistic culture. In the revolutionary era, Shevchenko advocated blending traditional popular art (like the lubok print) with modern styles to create a new proletarian art; he was influential through his writings and teaching in shaping the visual culture of the period.

Shklovsky, Viktor Borisovich (1893–1984) – Russian writer and literary critic who lived through the Revolution and Civil War, later famed as a founder of Formalist literary theory. During the civil war years Shklovsky served in the Red Army and in 1919 wrote *A Sentimental Journey*, a memoir documenting his wartime experiences and the bewildering social collapse, offering invaluable insight into the era's psyche.

Stalin, Joseph Vissarionovich (1878–1953) – Bolshevik revolutionary who played an active role in the Civil War and later became the leader of the Soviet Union. During the Civil War, Stalin (then People's Commissar for Nationalities) took on key military-administrative tasks, such as organizing defense of Tsaritsyn, and was part of the Bolshevik inner circle directing wartime policy; his ruthlessness in this period prefigured the style of rule he would consolidate in the ensuing decades.

Sytin, Ivan Dmitrievich (1851–1934) – Prominent publisher of popular literature and lubok (folk art) prints in Russia. Before and during the revolutionary period, Sytin's publishing house mass-produced inexpensive books, pamphlets, and illustrated broadsides; many early Soviet propaganda posters and leaflets drew on the lubok style that Sytin had championed, bridging pre-revolutionary popular culture and Bolshevik agitational propaganda.

Tarabukin, Nikolai Mikhailovich (1889–1956) – Soviet art theorist associated with the Proletkult movement during and after the Civil War. Tarabukin wrote influential critiques in the 1920s about the direction of revolutionary art – notably arguing for the move "from

the easel to the machine" – and he championed a utilitarian, politically engaged art that aligned with Bolshevik ideological needs in the post-revolutionary society.

Trotsky, Leon (Lev Davidovich Bronstein, 1879–1940) – One of the foremost leaders of the Russian Revolution and architect of the Red Army. As People's Commissar of War throughout the Civil War, Trotsky built and led the Bolshevik army to victory against the Whites, using his skills as an organizer, strategist, and orator; he crisscrossed the fronts in his armored train to boost morale, enforce discipline, and spread Bolshevik propaganda among troops and civilians.

Wrangel, Pyotr Nikolayevich (1878–1928) – Russian General who emerged as the final commander of the White forces in the south. Succeeding Denikin in 1920, Baron Wrangel attempted to consolidate the remaining anti-Bolshevik forces in Crimea and implement reforms to gain popular support, but his army was defeated and he led the last mass White emigration when the Reds overran Crimea in November 1920.

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