

Russian Propaganda Posters through Revolution and Civil War by Aaron Hale-Dorrell, PhD

Russian propaganda posters show how revolution and civil war turned society upside down. The posters helped popularize the ideology of the Russian Revolution and, in the years following the Russian Civil War (1917–22), remained symbols of the conflict that established the Soviet Union. The leaders of the revolution, once fugitives from the tsarist secret police, emerged victorious from the civil war and grasped the levers of political power. Workers rose quickly to positions of authority in government, police, and the army. Women seized openings in public life and saw their legal and social position improve (PP304). The conservative legal code backed by the Orthodox Church gave way to a secular one that permitted equality between spouses, enabled divorce, and legalized abortion. Soviet posters helped put new terms on familiar inequalities in Russian society (PP001, PP026, PP322, PP694), making plain ideas about class struggle and international revolutionary movements pledging to bring about equality.

Marked by brutality, political collapse, and social upheaval, the Russian Civil War capped an era that one historian has called a “continuum of crisis,” which included World War I and the twin Russian revolutions of February and October 1917. These events transformed both Russia and the world by bringing the Soviet Union into existence. As a model—however deeply flawed—for an alternative kind of society, the USSR challenged other countries to confront the demands of workers, peasants, and the oppressed.

For decades prior to 1914, the Russian Empire expanded industrial output, built railways, and promoted literacy, all to maintain status as a Great Power equal to Great Britain, France, and Germany. In the 1860s, liberal legal reforms emancipated the majority of the population, who had been serfs bound by law to work land they did not own. In the 1880s, industrial growth created new factories and urban centers. By 1900, free peasants coveted the land comprising aristocratic estates. Factory workers faced low wages, heavy labor, and squalid living conditions. The educated classes resented the antiquated absolutism of the monarchy. In the wake of economic downturn and disaster on the battlefields of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), these discontents sparked the Revolution of 1905. The vulnerable government of Tsar Nicholas II survived the protests, strikes, and rebellions using force and, where necessary, making limited concessions to establish a tenuous new stability.

In July 1914, Russia took an ill-advised plunge into the World War I. Although a wave of patriotism buoyed Russia during the early stages of the war, by 1917, the government had proven corrupt and

the army incapable of beating the Germans. Although the Romanov Dynasty had ruled for more than 300 years, it fell easily in February 1917 after only a few days of strikes, street protests, and defections from the army in Petrograd, as St. Petersburg was renamed during the war.

Political parties and factions competed for control of two vital organizations, the government and the soviets. Declaring themselves the Provisional Government, moderates took control of vital ministries, such as war and foreign affairs. They proposed to put the brakes on change and to continue the war with Germany until victory. The soviets, popularly mandated councils representing the soldiers, sailors, and workers of Petrograd and other major cities, called for a halt to the war. In time, their members gravitated toward the leftwing parties, whose members returned from exile and emerged from underground hiding. By July 1917, Vladimir Lenin's radical Bolshevik, or "majority," faction of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party had become the most popular because it made radical demands to secure peace and to vest power in the soviets. In October, Lenin persuaded his comrades to dissolve the Provisional Government, which had exhausted its popular support by continuing the war. This seizure of power triggered a ferocious civil war.

Taking power in the name of workers, the new Soviet government under Lenin and the Bolsheviks declared a "dictatorship of the proletariat" and pledged to cast down old elites: aristocrats and capitalists. To shape popular opinion, propaganda posters recast humble toilers as heroes of the factories and mines (PP001, PP432, PP694). The Bolsheviks also offered the oppressed what they wanted most: peace, land, and bread. First, Lenin issued decrees expropriating agricultural land from aristocratic landowners and distributing it to the land-hungry peasants. Second, the Soviet government promised to feed urban workers, whose hunger had been a spark for the unrest in February. Lastly, Lenin called for an immediate end to the fighting against Germany.

The German military command had different ideas. With the Russian army dissolving as peasant soldiers returned home to claim their share of the land, the Germans advanced to seize grain needed to feed their own people and sustain a wavering war effort. Debate raged in the Soviet government. Some Bolsheviks called for spreading revolution by force of arms. Lenin and his supporters argued that only peace could preserve the embryonic Soviet government, making it worth any price. Winning the argument, Lenin conceded territory to Germany in return for a March 1918 peace treaty. Believing it irrelevant in the long term, Lenin expected the warring powers of Europe to fall to Russian-style revolutions. The new working-class governments would cooperate with Soviet

Russia, eliminating imperialistic territorial disputes. For a while, Lenin's vision seemed on its way to becoming reality. In late 1918 and early 1919, political and social collapse enveloped Germany and Austria–Hungary. Short-lived radical republics calling themselves “soviet” sprang up in Munich, Budapest, Berlin, and elsewhere. Failing to survive, they left Soviet Russia isolated. Yet they encouraged the Bolsheviks to codify their internationalist ideals by founding the Communist Third International, or Comintern, in 1919. It adopted the motto of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's 1848 Communist Manifesto: “Workers of the world, unite!” (PP091, PP325, PP115, PP456, PP024).

In Russia, the fighting intensified by early 1918. The Soviet government commanded only a few thousand crack riflemen and the worker militias of major cities. Thanks to the skillful organizing of Leon Trotsky, the Red Army grew into an effective, millions-strong military force. Workers signed up, motivated by principle and propaganda (PP428, PP747, PP756). The Red Army also drafted peasants to fill the ranks and co-opted former tsarist officers, whose tactical skill it needed. Both remained under the watchful eyes of reliable Bolshevik militants called commissars.

Industrialists lost their factories, officers their commissions, and society women their estates. Denounced as class enemies, representatives of the hated bourgeoisie were forced to work menial jobs and live on starvation rations, or to simply flee. Anyone could distinguish those with “clean hands” from the workers and peasants, whose dirty and gnarled ones demonstrated familiarity with manual labor. In rural communities, the Bolsheviks encouraged poor peasants to confront better-off neighbors by labeling them with the pejorative “*kulak*,” a word denoting a pitiless grasping “fist” (PP420).

At first, the government used violence sparingly against civilians. In August 1918, however, high-profile assassinations and an attempt on Lenin's life loosed the Red Terror. The Soviet government formed a secret police known as the Cheka, a forerunner to the KGB. Agents interrogated and executed former elites, liberals, and others deemed dangerous. In turn, anti-Bolshevik armies summarily executed communists and workers. Some anti-revolutionary forces carried out atrocities against civilians. In particular, Jewish communities suffered in pogroms fueled by hatred of the revolutionaries, some of whom were of Jewish descent.

The Soviet government faced many enemies, rather than a unified opposition. In addition to the “White” armies drawn primarily from the tsarist army, the Red Army fought local nationalists and peasant anarchists. Even as the Germans withdrew in defeat in late 1918, Great Britain, the United

States, and their allies continued to support the White forces. Between 1918 and 1920, the Red Army fought on three main fronts: in the Northwest, the Germans and then White forces threatened Petrograd, the cradle of revolution. The North Caucasus and modern-day Ukraine saw successive onslaughts by Germans, Ukrainian nationalists, and anarchists. The most persistent threat, however, came from the White “Volunteer Army” headed first by General Anton Denikin (PP428) and then by Baron Petr Wrangel (PP747). To the East, the Red Army battled White and other opponents along the Volga River and the corridor formed by the Trans–Siberian Railway. In each case, by the end of 1920, the anti–Bolshevik forces were in retreat, isolated and losing the material support of the intervening foreign powers.

Yet the crisis did not end: in 1920, the newly reconstituted Poland invaded and its forces advanced as far as Kiev. Giving hopes to those who desired to spread revolution by force of arms (PP591), the Red Army counterattacked, but suffered defeat before the gates of Warsaw. Mop-up actions in the Caucasus, Siberia, and Central Asia continued into 1922. Nonetheless, stability remained elusive. In 1920, peasants in Central Russia rebelled. In 1921, the sailors of the Kronstadt naval base, who had supported the Bolsheviks in 1917 and protected Petrograd, rose up against the centralizing, antidemocratic, and authoritarian Soviet regime.

A legend grew up of the party’s monolithic unity, but the Bolsheviks in fact faced constant infighting, political disagreements, and localism in their far-flung regional branches. In reality, the Bolsheviks and their Soviet government won because they maintained control of the country’s geographic center, which contained major cities, factories, a railway network, and populated areas home to some 60 million people. Proving his flexibility, Lenin compromised with nationalist groups dissatisfied by the imperial system and persistent Russian chauvinism.

The Bolsheviks won a country destroyed and reduced to a state described by observers as “primitive.” Economic activity devolved into barter. By 1921, industrial production had plummeted to one-fifth its 1913 level. Millions of soldiers and civilians had died in the Great War, and the Civil War killed an additional million. Harvests declined, causing further suffering from malnutrition and the pandemic diseases, including cholera and influenza, which followed. In 1921 and 1922, the humanitarian disaster culminated in a famine that gripped the lower Volga region, claiming several million victims despite relief efforts (PP408), including those of future US President Herbert Hoover and his American Relief Administration.

The Russian Civil War decisively shaped the emerging Soviet Union by entrenching government control over the economy, militarizing Russian society, instigating mass surveillance, and normalizing callousness toward individual human lives. Designed by Lenin as a compromise to facilitate postwar rebuilding, the New Economic Policy (NEP) that lasted from 1922 to 1928 saw little need for violence and repression. Yet party leaders always kept such wartime expedients in mind. When the NEP faltered in 1928, Josef Stalin and his followers used repression and violence to impose Moscow's rule on the countryside and confiscate peasants' grain. They employed similar authoritarian practices to build the mines and factories of the First Five-Year Plan (1928–32) and the Second (1933–37) at the breakneck pace required by the constant threat of war, which only intensified when Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933.

Suggested Reading:

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Images Referenced



PP304



PP001, PP026, PP322, PP694



PP001, PP432, PP694



PP091, PP325, PP115, PP456, PP024

