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Saints Into Soviets: Russian Orthodox Symbolism and Soviet Political Posters

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Georgia State University

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SAINTS INTO SOVIETS:
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX SYMBOLISM AND SOVIET POLITICAL POSTERS

by

GLORIA CALHOUN

Under the Direction of Hugh D. Hudson, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Visual archetypes from Russian Orthodox iconography shaped a widely understood visual vocabulary with politically important cultural meaning. Icons derived their symbolic authority from their status in Orthodox doctrine as divinely revealed sacred truth. Although the Bolsheviks who seized power in 1917 officially denounced organized religion, revolutionary artists nonetheless recycled iconic archetypes in political posters. These recycled Orthodox symbols legitimized the revolution and its leaders, idealized new heroes and social behaviors, and promoted Soviet utopia. Russian Orthodox archetypes thus became important elements of the new “master fiction” underpinning the Soviet regime’s exercise of political power.

Other authors have noted stylistic similarities between icons and posters but have tended to overlook icons' deeper cultural significance. In contrast, this study applies elements of visual, semiotic, and cultural theory to explore icons' symbolic cultural meanings, the dynamics of their transfer from Russian Orthodoxy to the Soviet context, and their implications for Soviet political power.

INDEX WORDS: Russian icon, Soviet poster, Political culture, Cultural idiom, Visual perspective, Cultural recycling

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by

GLORIA CALHOUN

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Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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Gloria Calhoun
2014

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GLORIA CALHOUN

Committee Chair: Hugh Hudson

Committee: Denise Davidson

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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For John D. Calhoun, through whom the light shines brightly.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The 1917 Russian Revolution that swept away tsarist rule created both the need and the opportunity for revolutionaries to replace symbols of tsarist autocracy. The Bolsheviks who seized power in late 1917 began constructing a new political culture in part by producing masses of political posters, posters that were to prove instrumental to the exercise of political power throughout the Soviet period. Despite the official atheism of Bolshevik leaders and the Soviet state, many elements of the posters' visual language originated in the visual vocabulary of Russian Orthodox Christianity. Imagery based on traditional religious paintings known as icons appeared repeatedly in Soviet political posters dating from 1918 until World War II and even later.

Orthodox iconography embodied a centuries-old visual tradition whose images and their deeply ingrained cultural meanings were intimately familiar to the Russian people. Icons thus provided a wealth of symbols whose meanings were readily intelligible to the masses. This familiarity facilitated a complex transfer of influential cultural meaning from Russian Orthodox images to the emerging Soviet political context. This work focuses primarily on the images' cultural meanings, on the dynamics of their transfer from the Russian Orthodox to the Soviet context, and on their implications for Soviet political power.

Certain stylistic or thematic similarities between icons and posters have been noted by a number of scholars, some of whom have offered generalizations regarding Soviet attempts to transfer mass reverence for icons to political art. The historiography largely lacks structured analysis of the dynamics by which Russian Orthodox images were used to actively mediate or construct Soviet political power. The primary purpose of this work is to begin addressing this gap. Iconographic images—culturally accepted as

sources of sacred truth—carried specific theological and politically meanings valuable to the Soviet regime. This work details processes by which visual images with meanings deeply rooted in Russian Orthodox doctrine accomplished three important political goals when recycled in Soviet posters: these images legitimized the new regime, they idealized new heroes while modeling new behavioral expectations for the masses, and they promulgated an idealized worldview based on Soviet goals for rapid industrial and agricultural modernization.

Visual images are potent political tools precisely because they create and recreate cultural meaning. Analyzing icons and posters, therefore, requires a basic theoretical understanding of the process by which images create meaning. We begin in chapter 2 by exploring elements of the relevant visual and cultural theory, especially as it pertains to visual political culture. Briefly, the perceived significance of what one sees—what we call meaning—is produced visually when a particular image becomes associated with a particular mental concept. For example, images associated with abstract concepts such as safety or danger become meaningful references that help structure one’s perceptions and guide one’s subsequent behaviors. Crucially, the conceptual association or meaning of such images is established within a specific cultural context. From the perspective of a middle class suburban widow, for instance, an image of the police would likely mean safety. In the context familiar to an inner city drug dealer, however, the same image could evoke danger. As a result of this relationship between an image and its cultural context, effective visual communication requires a set of symbols and other visual forms with meanings shared as a matter of cultural convention.

To build meaning on a mass basis, an image must be widely available and well understood. Chapter 3 frames matters of availability and comprehension by outlining the traditional significance of Russian Orthodox icons, which had been prominent in Russian life for centuries prior to the revolution. In the Orthodox tradition, icons functioned as a source of sacred truth with respect both to everyday life and to an encompassing worldview. The widespread intelligibility of icons was tied to their ubiquity in the experiences of daily life and to their noteworthy visual stability over long periods of time. Icons also were integral to a worldview that long had blended religion with politics and national identity. Most significantly, however, Russian Orthodox doctrine held icons as a source of sacred truth and as active channels for transmitting divine grace from the spiritual to the material world. Consequently, icons were not only familiar; they carried tremendous emotional significance—both religious and political—for viewers versed in their visual symbolism.

Beyond simply promoting comprehension, the Orthodox roots of Soviet images served at least two other crucial political purposes. First, the images visually created a conceptual correspondence or continuity between the Soviet-promoted utopian future and the deeply rooted Russian Orthodox doctrine of transfiguration. Central to this doctrine was a belief in the miraculous perfectibility of individuals and the world. Second, the status of icons as sacred truth imbued posters based on icons with an emotionally compelling veracity that imparted political legitimacy to the Soviet regime, its leaders, and its heroes. This is the dynamic to which other authors allude when they suggest that Soviet artists turned to iconic imagery hoping that “popular reverence” for icons would facilitate an emotional identification with posters’ messages.

A rigorous analysis of this dynamic first requires examining specific symbolic meaning rooted in Russian Orthodox doctrine and that meaning's visual expression in icons. These symbols must then be analyzed as they were recycled into their Soviet manifestations, in which they retained the culturally embedded and politically important meaning established in the Russian Orthodox context. As longstanding cultural idioms, Russian Orthodox symbols were crucial elements of the cultural context in which political posters would have been viewed by ordinary Russians as they struggled to make sense of the changes wrought by revolution. Thorough analysis, therefore, requires delving into Russian Orthodox doctrine and practice as the basis for understanding religious and political symbolic meanings embedded in icons and transferred to posters.

In icons, Russian Orthodox symbols legitimized important individuals and events with sacred authority, constructed abstract conceptual categories, and conveyed an overarching worldview. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 deal with the manner in which such symbols were recycled in posters to elevate the new heroes, the new conceptual categories, and the paradigmatic worldview of the Soviet state. Chapter 4 details how, despite the regime's general denunciation of organized religion, Orthodox iconographic symbols nonetheless reemerged in Soviet posters, where they imparted legitimacy to both the revolution and its leaders. Chapter 5 analyzes visual heroic archetypes from Russian Orthodoxy that, when adapted to Soviet political purposes, re-associated well-established cultural meaning with new categories of social behavior and heroic identity, such as comrades. Chapter 6 addresses the Russian Orthodox roots of Soviet utopianism, with particular emphasis on the visual expression of utopian miracles. That chapter also concerns itself with the broader question of the integral relationship

between visual perspective and worldview, particularly with regard to the underlying tension between the individual and society.

1.1 Historiography

Using visual images for political purposes is a practice that stretches into antiquity. Countless monuments and artifacts from the ancient world visually symbolize the power of pharaohs, monarchs, and emperors. Indeed, contemporary scholars still “read” these ancient images to discern their embedded political narratives. Despite this long history, however, as late as 1979 the study of political imagery remained something of what Maurice Agulhon called a frontier zone for historians; more recently, as historians increasingly have borrowed anthropologists’ techniques for “reading” culture, they more often have studied the “counterpoint [of] the history of an image with the history of an idea.”¹ As a result, political images now are prominent in historical scholarship across diverse fields, particularly those concerned with the connections between politics and culture. Visual political culture has assumed greater prominence among scholars because political images are powerful tools for producing, reproducing, or transmitting social values and concomitant behavioral expectations and thus for effecting political and social change.²

1. Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 189.

2. In this work, I use terms involving “visual political culture” or “visual political images” somewhat interchangeably to denote images used to create, legitimize, or maintain political power, as well as those intended to shape values and expectations for collective behavior. This working definition is based in part on Lynn Hunt’s characterization of the French Revolution’s political culture as “the values, expectations, and implicit rules that expressed and shaped collective intentions and actions.” See Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 10.

Extensive English sources are available on Russian Orthodox iconography, ranging from standard works of art history on icons and icon painting techniques to more esoteric works detailing the icon's semiotic structures. Likewise, many English sources are available on twentieth-century Russian and Soviet art history, political culture, and Soviet propaganda practices, including poster production. Nonetheless, a limited body of literature in English focuses directly on the relationship between Russian Orthodox icons and Soviet political posters.

In general, historians have recognized or alluded to the connection between icons and posters but rarely have subjected that connection to rigorous analysis. Even those authors who do address the topic tend to take as a given that political artists were influenced by icon painting, rather than probing for deep and persistent cultural connections or processes. In most cases, the details of this relationship and its processes are tangential to the author's primary focus, with the unfortunate result that even authors who note particular visual similarities between icons and posters have tended to focus more on superficial or stylistic elements than on continuities in symbolic meaning.

In *The Icon and the Axe* (1970), James Billington suggests a specific connection between icons and Soviet propaganda. He writes that, for Stalin, who had studied at seminary, "the icon lived on . . . as a model for mass indoctrination . . . [and as an] attempt to capitalize politically on the popular reverence for icons."³ Billington also outlines ways in which arrangements of Soviet leaders' photographs might have mimicked icons' arrangement in Russian Orthodox churches or homes. The scope of his

3. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, 36–37.

overall work, however, is to trace the history of Russian culture from its first millennium origins to the twentieth century. Beyond offering such intriguing but general suggestions, therefore, he provides little analysis involving particular iconic images or symbols, and he offers nothing to suggest a viable cultural process through which such popular reverence might be stimulated.

Authors who provide more than passing mention of the relationship between icons and posters include Ulf Abel (1987), Stephen White (1988), Victoria Bonnell (1997), Nina Tumarkin (1999), and Andrew Spira (2008). Of these, only Abel and Spira focus directly on the relationship between Russian Orthodox iconography and Soviet art. White and Bonnell primarily study posters, and Tumarkin focuses on the Lenin cult, but each provides some material on the Russian Orthodox connections of Soviet symbols.

In 1987, Ulf Abel contributed a chapter on the relationship between icons and Soviet art to a collection of essays on Soviet political symbols.⁴ Abel argues that “icons, together with the entire pictorial theology of the Orthodox Church, have played a pivotal role in Soviet art and views of art, and also in the making of the political picture.”⁵ Abel also notes that in a 1968 German publication, Karl Onasch had “pointed to a resemblance between the medieval icon and the poster, both aesthetically and sociologically.”⁶ Abel further suggests that both icons and posters “are designed to convey a heavily concentrated message, compressing as much as possible into a form readily apprehended by the eye,” even when viewed at a distance. In addition, Abel

4. See Ulf Abel, “Icons and Soviet Art,” in *Symbols of Power: The Esthetics of Political Legitimation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, ed. Claes Arvidsson and Lars Erik Blomqvist (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1987), 141–162.

5. *Ibid.*, 150.

6. *Ibid.*, 142.

identifies “thematic repetition and the value of widespread distribution” as “other points of contact between icons and posters.”⁷ Abel provides a concise overview of icons’ centrality in Russian culture and daily life, and he does offer some comments on the pictorial and symbolic language of posters, including the general importance of the color red. Given the brevity of his chapter, however, he draws only a few isolated comparisons between specific icons or iconic styles and specific posters. The lack of an organizing principle, such as a widely shared visual language, limits the comparisons Abel does make. Fittingly, he concludes that the “influence exerted by icons on the style and subject matter (iconography) of Soviet pictorial art is an immense, rewarding but virtually unexplored field of inquiry.”⁸

In *The Bolshevik Poster* (1988), Stephen White observes that posters “were more likely to be harnessed to Party purposes than the other arts.”⁹ White provides a useful chronology of poster themes from the 1917 revolution to the late Soviet period, outlining the thematic shifts among military, social, political, and economic concerns.¹⁰ He describes the years beginning in 1917 as a period of experiment in poster art, and he briefly mentions links between posters and religion, noting that early Bolshevik artists “borrowed freely from the classical and even Christian traditions.”¹¹ His examples of such borrowing include a poster with the “ten commandments of the proletariat;” another features Leon Trotsky, who led the Red Army during the 1917-1921 civil war, recast in

7. Ibid., 150.

8. Ibid., 154–55.

9. Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 159.

10. Ibid., 157–58.

11. Ibid., 157.

the poster as St. George fighting a bourgeois serpent.¹² White's work provides a useful overview of the range and types of Bolshevik posters, but it stops short of analyzing the dynamics by which deeply rooted cultural meaning was transferred from icons to posters for political purposes.

Writing in 1997 on the Lenin cult, Nina Tumarkin comes tantalizingly close to the subject a number of times, but ultimately she resorts to generalized observations rather than to a more specific analysis of the relationship between Russian Orthodox and Bolshevik images. She notes, for example, that a Bolshevik hero appeared in a certain poster on a white horse and thus was visually related to icons of St. George.¹³ She also mentions the prevalence of religious imagery in agitation posters and leaflets from the civil war years and provides a few related examples. In positing explanations for the presence of religious imagery in Soviet propaganda, she suggests that, for some graphic artists, the revolution "had inspired deep feelings of religious veneration, which they expressed through the only symbols that could adequately convey them."¹⁴ Other artists, she remarks, "may have been intentionally attempting to create works that would effectively move the peasant viewer. . . [and] calculating that religious symbols were likely to resonate in the peasant soul and transfer deep-seated feelings of reverence for holy images to equally profound stirrings of devotion to the Communist Party."¹⁵ Despite the reasonability of these conjectures, Tumarkin's poster examples tend to focus more

12. White, 157.

13. Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 69.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 69–70.

on the appearance of images as “iconographic” rather than on icon-based symbols or their meanings in a contextual cultural field. The symbolic content of icons, however, was critically important for political purposes; that content was deeply enmeshed in a complex matrix of symbols that fused the concept of divine legitimacy with the power of sacred truth. The deep cultural meaning of this symbolic content formed the core of icons’ political value, and this meaning deserves far more detailed attention from scholars than it thus far has received.

With *The Iconography of Power* (1997), Victoria Bonnell contributed an important study of Soviet art’s function in disseminating official ideology. In that work, she analyzes political posters as the “symbolic representation of power.”¹⁶ With respect to icons’ influence on Soviet art, she notes that the audience for Bolshevik political art was “highly variegated,” but that its common link was “exposure to a highly visual culture dominated, above all, by the icons of the Russian Orthodox Church.”¹⁷ Despite the centrality of this common link, and notwithstanding her repeated references to the “cultural repertoires” viewers brought to Soviet posters, Bonnell still does not focus on icons’ deep cultural meanings nor on the dynamic process by which these meanings were transferred from icons to political posters.¹⁸ She does refer intermittently to iconic technique or subject matter, emphasizing elements such as perspectival distortions, the color red’s

16. Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xix.

17. *Ibid.*, 12.

18. This might be a function of the fact that, as Berezin points out in her review of Bonnell’s work, the book originated as a series of articles that later were combined into a single volume. No single article, therefore, explored the deep connections between icons and posters that would have benefited each article. See Mabel Berezin, “Review: [untitled],” *Contemporary Sociology* 28, no. 2 (March 1999): 194–95, doi:10.2307/2654875.

prominence, or representations of St. George. Yet in contrast with the massive database she created for political posters, for icons Bonnell seems to have worked from secondary sources more than from detailed analyses of icons themselves. Even at that, secondary works related directly to icons constitute only about two percent of her otherwise extensive bibliography. Chapter 5 discusses some of Bonnell's interpretations about specific posters and explains how those interpretations might have benefited from a deeper exploration of symbolic and archetypal meanings translated from Russian Orthodox iconography to Soviet political art.

A 2008 study by Andrew Spira gives fresh and detailed insights into the rich connections between medieval Russian icons and twentieth-century Russian and Soviet art. Spira's primary focus is icon painting's influence on the Russian avant-garde, but he includes substantial information on the political posters produced by formerly avant-garde artists who sought opportunities in the post-revolutionary political order. With respect to the early Soviet period, Spira notes the cultural mediation and recycling of religious doctrine and experience. He finds these not at all "ambiguous for propagandist posters, in which the parallels with icons—as didactic, awe-inspiring representations of higher truths—are immediately apparent," and he suggests that icons' "association with the promise of salvation" was important to Bolshevik propagandists.¹⁹ Spira then makes the somewhat contradictory observation that the religious meaning of icons was "savagely rejected, but the captivating power of their pictorial language, originally developed in conjunction with their religious meaning, was subtly retained and made to

19. Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and The Icon Painting Tradition* (Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2008), 191–92.

serve new ends.”²⁰ This last observation neglects the difference between disavowing religious institutions and rejecting symbolic meaning; it further overlooks the utility of important concepts such as legitimacy, heroism, and miraculous transformation for both politics and religion. In other words, the power of icons’ visual language was inseparable from their religious meaning—a subject we explore in depth in subsequent chapters.

Other scholars, then, have tended to acknowledge a relationship between Russian Orthodox iconography and Soviet political posters. For the most part, however, this relationship has been tangential to the author’s primary focus and has thus been treated superficially. While Spira has taken a major step toward more thorough analysis, much work remains to more fully appreciate this complex cultural relationship. The primary goal of this study is to expand the existing body of scholarship by detailing the dynamics through which politically important and emotionally resonant symbolic meaning was visually transferred from Russian Orthodox icons to construct Soviet political power.

20. *Ibid.*, 192.

2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Basic elements of visual and cultural theory provide a useful analytical framework for exploring how politically important meaning was transferred from Russian Orthodox sacred images to Soviet political posters. These theory-based reference points illuminate the dynamic linkage between visual images and the exercise of political power. In this chapter, we briefly consider the following topics: creating visual meaning; symbols and visual communication; the mediating relationship among images, culture, and power; “seeing” as a subjective cultural practice; how images and meaning are culturally recycled; the relationship between images and political “master fictions”; and how visual repetition helps shape a worldview and social behavior.

2.1 Creating Visual Meaning

Images are crucial to the exercise of political power because images create meaning. Visual meaning can be understood most simply in terms of how one makes sense of or assigns significance to what one sees.²¹ Broadly speaking, assigning significance to images involves a dynamic interrelationship among emotions, beliefs, cognition, and experience. These are not separate processes but are facets of the complex mental activity that yields “meaning.” As Murray Edelman points out, “the separate categories ‘cognitive’ and ‘emotional’ are not distinct, but rather aspects of one another.”²² Emotionally provocative images, therefore, can become embedded in belief and experience, producing cognitive associations that create meaning.

21. “Meaning” in this sense is defined as the “significance, purpose, underlying truth, etc., of something.” OED Online (Oxford University Press, November 2013). <http://www.oed.com.proxygsu-uga1.galileo.usg.edu/view/Entry/115465?rskey=E9B1m8&result=2#eid> (accessed November 1, 2013).

22. Murray Edelman, *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 54.

Images are especially potent, moreover, because they can construct entire categories of abstract meaning. Edelman argues that we make sense of our observations in the social world by classifying or categorizing them, to the extent that categorization becomes “the necessary condition of abstract thought and of the utilization of symbols in reasoning and expression.”²³ Symbolic images, in short, help create categories that we use to organize or make sense of what we see—that we use to establish meaning.

Beyond merely creating meaningful categories, images can signify that an individual belongs to a certain category or possesses a certain quality shared with others. Symbolic images are particularly powerful with respect to abstract complex meanings that signify an overarching category or quality. For example, the halo symbolizes membership in the category *holy*. The halo alone does not identify a specific holy person, but refers to the entire abstract category *holy*, which applies to, yet transcends, its individual members. The Christian cross in its familiar Latin crucifix form provides another example. The cross originated as “a symbol of Christ, but it has been invested with deeper meanings and by its universal use has come to signify Christianity. The Cross is an attribute of all followers of Christ.”²⁴ Even a visually simple symbol, then, can encompass complex meaning and have broad application.

Categories create even more complex meaning through the layering effect of subcategories, or “networks of categories that reinforce each other.”²⁵ These networks

23. *Ibid.*, 110.

24. LeRoy H. Appleton and Stephen Bridges, *Symbolism in Liturgical Art* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), 24.

25. Edelman, *From Art to Politics*, 111.

form a complex matrix of categories and subcategories that can visually convey even intricate abstract information using simple symbols. An image of a particular saint, for instance, can designate that individual as a member of the category *saints* while simultaneously signifying a particular subcategory of saints, such as *martyrs*. Further layers of meaning can be added by evoking subcategories associated with martyrs. Figure 2.1, for example, shows a Russian Orthodox icon of Saint Paraskeva, who is the patron saint of Fridays and is also associated with fertility. Paraskeva's halo indicates that she belongs to the category *saints*. She holds a martyr's cross in her right hand, and the crown placed on her head by angels further signifies her inclusion in the category *martyrs*. In her left hand, she holds a scroll proclaiming her belief in God. The scroll signifies that her martyr's death resulted from her steadfast refusal to renounce her faith, or her *witness*. This superficially simple icon, therefore, contains at least three layers of abstract categories and subcategories whose meanings are conveyed through simple symbols that transcend this particular saint's identity.

Images also create relational or comparative meanings, such as *good* and *evil* or *legitimate* and *illegitimate*. As a result, idealized concepts such as "victory or defeat in battle, heroic or tyrannical leadership . . . find their models in well-known works of art."²⁶ A ruling regime can assert its membership in the relational category *legitimate* by visually associating its leaders with images that culturally or historically convey legitimacy. This helps explain why, in a Bolshevik revolutionary procession held in Moscow on November 7, 1918, a portrait of Karl Marx was carried "to help provide legitimation for the new

26. Ibid., 39.

regime.”²⁷ We might refer to this practice as establishing “relational legitimacy,” a practice that continued as the Soviet regime changed leadership. Relational legitimacy explains why Stalin’s succession to Lenin was often legitimized by including Lenin in images of Stalin, thus representing Stalin as “Lenin’s intellectual and spiritual heir.”²⁸ Legitimizing symbols are discussed in detail chapter 4, which focuses on images from Russian Orthodoxy revered as sacred truth and recycled in Soviet posters to legitimize Soviet rule.

Categorical and idealized images are closely related to visual *archetypes*. Archetype has several connotations in common usage, including original pattern, primordial image, recurring symbolic motif, or ideal type.²⁹ Archetypes function visually as metaphors that construct and communicate idealized concepts, such as *hero*.³⁰ Archetypes have multiple practical political uses. For example, heroes are useful not only for legitimating leaders; heroes also model desirable behaviors for others to emulate. Although archetypes are often tied to characters in literary analysis, metaphorical visual archetypes need not be anthropomorphic or signify any other living being: images can give visual form to a complex worldview through the use of recurring archetypal motifs. This key point underlies the analysis in chapter 6, in which we consider the forms traditionally used in icons to symbolize the natural and built environments. These iconic forms were antecedents of archetypes that later emerged in Soviet political posters to

27. Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*, 67.

28. Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art Under Stalin* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991), 87.

29. The entries for “archetype” and “archetypal” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd Edition) provide useful overviews of the concept’s evolution and use in psychology, literary criticism, and philosophy.

30. Archetypal figures, of course, can also embody objectionable qualities or enemies.

signify a utopian world achieved through rapid industrialization and abundant agricultural production.

2.2 Symbols and Visual Communication

Basic definitions from semiotics can clarify the process by which symbols become associated with meaning. Semiotics as a discipline can be understood simply as the study of signs.³¹ In semiotics, a *sign* includes two parts: the *signifier*, which for our purposes is the image, and the *signified*, which is the sign's conventional meaning.³² A *symbol* is a particular type of *sign* that stands for something else in an arbitrary, conventional way. The symbol's meaning is not tied to any inherent characteristic of the image; the symbol's arbitrary quality thus arises from the fact that "symbols are all established by social convention."³³ The key element of a *symbol* is the conventional meaning of the link between the *signifier* and the *signified*.³⁴

Because a symbol's meaning is arbitrary, a symbol depends for its meaning on a particular cultural context. This is why Geertz, while observing that a governing elite maintains "a set of symbolic forms expressing the fact that it is in truth governing," adds the crucial caveat that "political authority . . . requires a cultural frame in which to define

31. For an accessible and comprehensive overview of semiotic theory, see Thomas A. Sebeok, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). More technically, semiotics concerns itself with "how messages are, successively, generated, encoded, transmitted, decoded, and interpreted, and how this entire transaction (semiosis) is worked upon the context." Sebeok, *Signs*, 128. Some examples in this thesis follow the structure of Sebeok's examples but apply that structure to symbols or concepts more relevant to the images analyzed in this work.

32. See *ibid.*, 39–40.

33. *Ibid.*, 55.

34. *Ibid.*

itself and advance its claims.”³⁵ The cultural frame is essential because symbolic forms are linked with their conventional meanings in a cultural context.

If a symbolic image’s meaning is embedded in a specific cultural context, then it follows that a viewer must understand that context to associate the symbol with its intended meaning. For our purposes, context means the “situation—physical, psychological, and social—in which an [image] is used or occurs, or to which it refers.”³⁶ Consider, for example, David Morgan’s observation that, “like any medium of communication, images can be laden with information, densely encoded with ideas, values, or feelings that *certain* viewers are able to discern.”³⁷ Morgan’s qualification that “certain” viewers can discern these messages is critical, because the viewer must be familiar with the image’s cultural context to understand the image’s meaning. In other words, an image’s meaning depends on the context of “cultural and historical conditions which are relevant for the given work of art [as] systems which, taken as a whole, form the ‘language’ of art.”³⁸ An image’s context is crucial to its meaning because cultural context forms the vocabulary and structure of the visual language with which an image’s meaning is encoded by its creator and decoded by its viewer.

As with any other language, communication through images relies on the ability of both sender and receiver—in this case the artist and the audience—to encode and

35. Clifford Geertz, “Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power,” in *Culture and Its Creators: Essays in Honor of Edward Shils*, ed. Joseph Ben-David and Terry Nichols Clark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 153, 168.

36. Sebeok, *Signs*, 152.

37. David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 68 Emphasis added.

38. Boris Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, ed. Stephen Rudy (Lisse: Peter De Ridder Press, 1976), 17.

decode a visual message with mutually comprehensible meanings. In essence, “knowledge of the artistic system . . . is, in principle, assumed to be possessed not only by the artist who painted the picture . . . but also by the viewer who perceives it.”³⁹ Between artists and viewers, there exists “a situation of give-and-take—indeed, of mutual conditioning.”⁴⁰ The mutual conditioning of Russian artists and audiences by the symbolic language of Russian Orthodox icons forms the subject of chapter 3.

Because an image’s link to meaning is not fixed but is established by cultural convention, the convention can and does change. In much contemporary Christian imagery, for example, the category *angel* is conventionally depicted through *wings*, whether those *wings* appear as the diminutive cherub variety or as the magnificent appendages of an archangel. Angels have not always been signified by wings, however. “Wings, which are to us the identifying angelic feature, were not used by Christians in pre-Constantinian art. They were too closely associated with favorite subjects in classical art. A staff, as an indicator of a messenger on a mission, was the sole attribute of an angel at first.”⁴¹ The fact that *wings* replaced the *staff* to symbolize *angel* reinforces the important point that the link between an image and its meaning is established by cultural convention. Membership in the category *angel*, therefore, could just as arbitrarily be symbolized by *purple-striped high top shoes*. The crucial point is that a symbol’s meaning is assigned and understood as a matter of arbitrary cultural convention. In

39. Ibid., 18.

40. Hubertus Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 4.

41. Appleton and Bridges, *Symbolism in Liturgical Art*, 4.

short, the relationship between the image and its meaning, between the signifier and the signified, is culturally defined.

2.3 Images, Culture, and Power

An image is not a passive cultural object. Rather, images actively mediate culture. Mediate, in this dynamic sense, means “to influence or cause a process or event.”⁴² In another particularly relevant sense, the word mediate refers to a mental process or cognitive activity brought about as a response to a stimulus.⁴³ In yet another closely related sense, the term mediate indicates a medium that brings about a force or reaction.⁴⁴ Combining these three senses yields a working definition for the capacity of images to mediate—to influence or bring about a cognitive reaction in response to a visual stimulus.

The mediating function of images occurs in two principal ways. First, images can operate as multichannel communication systems. At its most fundamental, communication refers to an exchange of meaning, and that exchange can occur on multiple levels. For instance, an image can simultaneously communicate information, provoke emotions, and evoke abstractions. In this manner, images mediate cognition by giving visual form to culturally meaningful information or concepts.

In a second and even more crucial mediating function, images construct and reconstruct the very culture in which they are embedded. This mediation is a very different dynamic than simply representing or communicating about an extrinsic or

42. *MacMillan Dictionary* online, s.v. “mediate,” <http://www.macmillandictionary.com> (accessed October 27, 2013).

43. *Oxford English Dictionary* online, s.v. “mediate,” <http://www.oed.com.proxygsu-uga1.galileo.usg.edu/view/Entry/115659?rkey=Yv348j&result=2#eid> (accessed October 27, 2013).

44. *Ibid.*

independent culture. This mediating function underlies Edelman's argument that political art creates a "new reality," one whose essence stands apart from its putative subject:

While art that refers to political issues and personalities seems on its face to be simply one more way to represent these entities, it is really doing something quite different. It is creating a new reality, a semblance apart from everyday life. . . . It is neither description nor representation, but a powerful influence toward visualizing issues and people in a particular way for reasons that need have no source at all in everyday life, though the art then shapes the meaning of everyday life.⁴⁵

For Edelman, the mediating function of images means that "works of art do not represent 'reality'. . . art creates realities and worlds. People perceive and conceive in the light of narratives, pictures, and images. That is why art is central to politics."⁴⁶ In this view, political images do not merely depict the power of an independently established political entity. Rather, because images mediate culture, including political culture, images also actively mediate an entity's political power.

Indeed, power is itself neither static nor extrinsic but is generated and regenerated repeatedly in symbiosis with culture. In this sense, "power is not a *thing* but a *process*."⁴⁷ Because power must be continually regenerated, "the political process becomes a parade of symbols and images."⁴⁸ Symbols thus play a pivotal role in acquiring and exercising political power, such that symbols "are basic to any understanding of how politics works, how authority is established, and how power is wielded."⁴⁹ Geertz also

45. Edelman, *From Art to Politics*, 63.

46. *Ibid.*, 7.

47. Mario Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier: The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 19.

48. Edelman, *From Art to Politics*, 62.

49. David I. Kertzer, *Politics & Symbols: The Italian Communist Party and the Fall of Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 5.

emphasizes the dynamic relationship between power and images of power. He argues that, if political “centers of society . . . are cultural phenomena and thus historically constructed, investigations into the symbolics of power and into its nature are very similar. . . . The easy distinction between the trappings of rule and its substance becomes less sharp, even less real; what counts is the manner in which, a bit like mass and energy, they are transformed into each other.”⁵⁰ The key point for our purposes is that political images do much more than merely depict or represent political power—symbolic images are essential to the process by which political power is produced and exercised.

Despite the centrality of symbols in constructing political culture, the construction process may not be apparent to an image’s viewers, and its effectiveness will be enhanced by its transparency. Images can embody concepts of leadership or authority, such that “works of art generate the ideas . . . that people typically assume to be reflections of their own observations and reasoning.”⁵¹ The ideas thus generated “are especially powerful as shapers of political beliefs . . . when they appear to be natural, self-evident, or simply descriptive.”⁵² New political meanings will appear more “natural” or “self-evident” when they are tied to established and familiar symbols such as, in the Soviet case, the familiar iconography of Russian Orthodoxy.

In summary, a visual image is far more than a passive cultural object. Rather, images actively communicate culturally important concepts, and images mediate

50. Geertz, “Centers, Kings, and Charisma,” 152.

51. Edelman, *From Art to Politics*, 2–3.

52. *Ibid.*, 110.

viewers' cognitive experience in a manner that constructs and reconstructs the cultural context in which images operate. As a result, images are politically potent, not only because they communicate, but because they shape and reshape cultural perceptions of what is valid or valued—and they do so in a way that can be largely transparent to the viewer.

2.4 “Seeing” as a Subjective Cultural Practice

Understanding images as active mediators calls into question the nature of seeing. Specifically, if an image is not a passive object whose meaning is externally fixed, then “seeing” images involves much more than simply processing optical, cerebral, or other physiological impulses.

Scholars in the fields of political and religious visual culture argue that “seeing” is, indeed, a subjective cultural practice. Edelman, for example, cautions that, due to “the inclination to assume that seeing is an objective process, there is serious underestimation of the extent to which seeing is constructed and so reflects models that art forms provide.”⁵³ Morgan, meanwhile, argues that images should be “understood as an integral part of *visual practice* . . . [as] a visual mediation of relations among a particular group of humans and the forces that help to organize their world.”⁵⁴ Morgan construes “seeing” broadly with respect to visual culture, contending that seeing “is an operation that relies on an apparatus of assumptions and inclinations, habits and routines, historical associations and cultural practices.”⁵⁵ This complex social operation

53. Ibid., 1–2.

54. Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 55.

55. Ibid., 3.

involves “seeing what is there, seeing by virtue of habit what one expects to see there, seeing what one desires to be there, and seeing what one is told to see there.”⁵⁶ Morgan maintains that the proper focus for students of visual culture is “the social apparatus that creates and deploys the object, the gaze that apprehends the image in the social operation of seeing.”⁵⁷

Embedded in this social operation of seeing are such non-objective phenomena as emotions, beliefs, or perceptions of truth, all of which are culturally mediated aspects of “seeing.” Consider, for example, the alternative meanings that could be associated with the poster in figure 2.2, in which smoke pours from factory chimneys. On the one hand, if viewed by an environmental activist in the twenty-first century, this image could easily symbolize vast environmental damage caused by rampant industrial pollution. On the other hand, for its intended Russian viewers in about 1920, the smoke plumes were meant to evoke Soviet goals for rapid industrialization. The poster’s caption, in fact, translates as “The Smoke of Chimneys is the Breath of Soviet Russia.” Depending on its cultural context, then, the same image could symbolize either wanton environmental destruction or desirable industrial growth. In chapter 3, we examine the cultural context that existed at the time Bolshevik political posters began to appear. Specifically, we delve into the cultural frame that informed “seeing” and visual practice as they pertained to Russian Orthodox icons. In doing so, we pay particular attention to the emotionally resonant status of icons as sacred truth, because icons’ cultural truth value was vital to their political usefulness.

56. Ibid., 74.

57. Ibid., 32.

2.5 Cultural Recycling

If the meaning of a symbolic image is culturally defined, it follows that an image's meaning can be culturally redefined. Indeed, this flexibility facilitates the transfer of meaning from one subject to another and thus is an important source of imagery's political utility. New meaning can be associated with old symbols, and new symbols can be associated with established meaning. The latter, for example, occurred in post-Constantinian Christian art, when *wings* replaced the *staff* as the symbol for *angels*. Generally, we can call this re-associative process cultural recycling.

Symbols can be culturally recycled because, once a cognitive association has been culturally established between a symbol and its meaning, that association also helps organize future perceptions. As a known symbol for the category *holy*, a *halo* can facilitate the transfer of established meaning to images whose main subjects are new or unfamiliar. Because symbols and meanings function as building blocks or components that can be culturally assembled, disassembled, and re-assembled in new configurations, symbolic images facilitate the transfer of meaning from one context to another. Detailed analyses of such transfers of meaning form the subjects of chapters 4, 5, and 6. Through cultural recycling, the emotionally resonant truth value of a religious image can symbolically be transferred to a political context. This is precisely what poster artists attempted as they recycled important Russian Orthodox religious symbols and their meanings in Soviet political images.

Cultural recycling is not unique to Soviet Russia. Claude Lévi-Strauss delineates the recycling process as a theoretical construct in the study of mythology. He details the processes by which fundamental building blocks of myth, which he calls *mythemes*, are recycled to convey meaning about recurring and socially important questions. Such

recycling is possible, he argues, because mythemes represent “invariant elements among superficial differences.”⁵⁸

The structure of Lévi-Strauss’s model can also be applied to the visual symbolic code of Russian Orthodoxy that was recycled in political posters. In essence, politically important *signifiers* or images were associated with *signifieds* or conventional meanings rooted in sacred images; these associations produced new hybrid political *symbols* to which established, religiously inflected meaning was transferred. Another type of hybrid was formed when an established religious symbol was realigned with new, politically inflected meaning. We can think of this process in terms of recycling or transferring visual units of meaning. Borrowing from linguistics, in which the basic element of meaning is known as a *morpheme*, we can treat recycled visual units of meaning as *visual morphemes*. In chapters 4, 5, and 6, we analyze images and meanings that functioned as visual morphemes—as the more stable visual units of meaning beneath the more superficial forms of Russian Orthodox iconography and Soviet political posters.

This emphasis on recycling visual morphemes is not to suggest that either symbols or meanings remain completely static or precisely controllable. Nor does it suggest that an entire visual code changes completely or synchronously. Rather, as Theda Skocpol so cogently argues, multiple cultural idioms intersect and reach an accommodation during a revolutionary process; from that intersection structures or patterned relationships emerge that elude the direct control of any one entity.⁵⁹ The

58. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 8.

59. Theda Skocpol, “Cultural Idioms and Political Ideologies in the Revolutionary Reconstruction of State Power: A Rejoinder to Sewell,” *The Journal of Modern History* 57, no. 1 (March 1985): 87–88, doi:10.2307/1898936.under <http://ezproxy.gsu.edu:2061/stable/1898936> (accessed May 13, 2009).

Soviet state officially denounced organized religion, but the state's professed atheism did not erase religious idioms from the cultural frame. On the contrary, religious idioms persisted, intersected with, and reemerged in political forms, at times more subtly and at other times more overtly.

Skocpol is correct in warning against the temptation "to treat fundamental cultural and ideological change as the synchronous and complete replacement of one society-wide cultural system by another."⁶⁰ Despite the massive changes attending the revolution, Soviet political culture cannot be characterized as a synchronous nor complete replacement of the entire Russian cultural system. Rather, cultural building blocks that Lévi-Strauss calls *mythemes* and Skocpol calls *cultural idioms* were dismantled and rearranged during a period of profoundly disruptive change. In such situations, according to Edelman, symbols help people adapt to material situations by condensing "a wide range of individual fears, hopes, and cognitions into a focus on a narrow set of socially reinforced perceptions" that help resolve anxiety by creating meaning.⁶¹ During the profound disruptions and uncertainties of the Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing civil war, old and familiar symbols intersected with new realities, and people turned to the familiar to make sense of what was new and unfamiliar. In the process, a well-established visual language replete with complex symbols and deep cultural meanings advanced new political meaning.

The intersection of religious cultural idioms with revolutionary politics was not limited to poster art but also pervaded other genres. Mark Steinberg, for example,

60. Ibid., 90.

61. Edelman, *From Art to Politics*, 74.

studied the symbolic language used by worker-writers in the period 1910-1925. These writers “found the symbolic language of the sacred especially resonant,” and Steinberg concludes that “religious idioms and images were appealing partly because they were so familiar, a part of workers’ worlds, especially their emotional worlds, since childhood.”⁶² As a result, although most of these workers had rejected the Orthodox Church and its formalities of faith, they nevertheless “typically kept hold of religious imagery, language, and sensibility . . . [and] employed religious motifs as an emotionally meaningful way to present and interpret the world and to envision change.”⁶³ In other words, despite the writers’ superficial rejection of religious formalities, emotionally meaningful religious cultural idioms persisted as deeply familiar ways of expressing meaning—and the same dynamic held true for revolutionary poster artists.

This persistence of religious symbolism across genres is consistent with Lévi-Strauss’s observation that underlying mythemes exhibit long term stability. Skocpol, too, points out that “cultural idioms have a longer-term, more anonymous, and less partisan existence than ideologies.”⁶⁴ As a case in point, consider Lenin’s view that technology would displace religion and that providing tractors for the peasantry would “do away with God.”⁶⁵ Unexpectedly, priests held “thanksgiving services for the arrival of tractors in

62. Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910-1925* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 231.

63. *Ibid.*, 232.

64. Skocpol, “Cultural Idioms,” 91.

65. Walter Birnbaum, *Christenheit in Sowjetrussland* (Tübingen: Katzmann-Verlag, 1961), 180, quoted in Harvey Fireside, *Icon and Swastika: The Russian Orthodox Church under Nazi and Soviet Control* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 50.

their villages and peasants affix[ed] crosses to the machines.”⁶⁶ This example amply supports Skocpol’s contention that “multiple cultural idioms coexist, and they arise, decline, and intermingle in tempos that need to be explored by intellectual and sociocultural historians.”⁶⁷ In another juxtaposition that wonderfully illustrates Skocpol’s argument, in 1927 Walter Benjamin described a visit to Moscow street markets in which Russian Orthodox devotional images were still offered for sale alongside pictures of Lenin.⁶⁸ More broadly, the recycling by Bolshevik artists of images and meanings from Russian Orthodox icons represents just such an intermingling of multiple cultural idioms.

2.6 Images and “Master Fictions”

The exercise of political power relies on what is known as a “master fiction”—a political myth accepted as truth and invoked to legitimize a governing entity’s rule. According to Geertz, who coined the term, master fictions “mark the [political] center as center and give what goes on there its aura of being not merely important but . . . connected with the way the world is built.”⁶⁹ A well-known example of such a master fiction is the claim by early modern European monarchs that their absolutist rule was justified on the basis of a “divine right.”

When a regime seizes political control through revolution, the newly ascendant ruling regime requires a new or revised master fiction that establishes a new center for political power and legitimizes the regime’s place at that center. As Lynn Hunt argues,

66. Walter Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1962), 20, quoted in *Ibid.*

67. Skocpol, “Cultural Idioms,” 91.

68. Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 2009), 182.

69. Geertz, “Centers, Kings, and Charisma,” 152–53.

this became particularly evident during the French Revolution, which “showed for the first time that politics was shaped by culture, that a new political authority required a new ‘master fiction’, and, most important, that the members of society could invent culture and politics for themselves.”⁷⁰ In any event, whether a regime acquires power through revolution or by orderly transition, an overarching master fiction legitimizing its rule is crucial to exercising that power.

Symbolic images and actions are crucial to master fictions and to marking the political center. Ruling elites thus rely on “narratives and images [that] govern seeing and believing.”⁷¹ Rulers justify their positions symbolically, using “a collection of stories, ceremonies, insignia, formalities, and appurtenances that they have either inherited or, in more revolutionary situations, invented.”⁷² The connection between symbols and a compelling master fiction underlies Victoria Bonnell’s assertion that “the critical issue facing the Bolsheviks in 1917 was not merely the seizure of power but the seizure of meaning.”⁷³ Symbols’ importance in controlling meaning also explains why the Bolshevik claim to the red flag, considered “a universal symbol of the revolution,” was strenuously contested by factions with whom the Bolsheviks competed for post-tsarist power.⁷⁴ The common point in all these views is that a ruling regime must establish and control a legitimating master fiction, and to do so the regime must establish and control the

70. Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 88.

71. Edelman, *From Art to Politics*, 2.

72. Geertz, “Centers, Kings, and Charisma,” 152.

73. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 1.

74. Orlando Figes and Boris I. Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 3.

meaning of hegemonic symbols. In short, creating and controlling visual meaning is essential to a regime's exercise of political power.⁷⁵

If a governing elite needs legitimizing images associated with its master fiction, then a revolutionary regime change logically calls for establishing new images suitable to the new regime's master fiction. In connection with the 1789 French Revolution, Maurice Agulhon notes that "changing the State and the principles upon which it rested meant abolishing its symbols and therefore being obliged to invent new ones."⁷⁶ Further, "when it set up the Republic in the place of the Monarchy, the Revolution of 1792 was obliged to change the official image of the State."⁷⁷ Nonetheless, multiple difficulties attend changing official imagery, as the French experience amply illustrated. In France, establishing new official images was complicated by the republican state's abstract nature, especially compared with the monarch's tangible person. Louis XIV had famously declared himself to be the embodiment of the state, but, following the revolution, if *l'état* no longer was embodied in a monarch's *moi*, then how would the state be represented in official political imagery?

The Bolshevik revolutionaries were confronted with the same issues that earlier had faced the French. Prior to the revolution, official Russian state imagery had been dominated by the trappings of imperial rule, such as the double-headed imperial eagle.

75. Not all scholars agree on the political centrality or efficacy of images. For example, see Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). Berezin questions whether even totalitarian states can impose meaning or identities on citizens, and she engages with "debates about the role of symbols, images, and language in political practice and challenges the assumption that representations of power equal realities of power." *Ibid.*, 7. Berezin finds greater meaning in repeated patterns of ritual behavior, arguing that political meaning and communication are embedded in repeated ritual action. While not to discount Berezin's work on political ritual, on the whole, arguments for the culturally constructive power of political imagery are more persuasive.

76. Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle*, 186.

77. *Ibid.*, 17.

The eagle had been adopted shortly after 1480, in keeping with changing conceptions of the Russian state that depersonalized the person of the prince in favor of the “impersonal or suprapersonal nature” of the tsar.⁷⁸ Some symbols connected with tsardom, such as the sun, also were prominent in Russian Orthodox imagery and found their way into Bolshevik posters.⁷⁹ Distinctly imperial images, however, were not compatible with revolution and thus were not viable candidates for appropriation.⁸⁰

Another critical issue with changing official imagery is that, to be effective, new images must be easily understandable. Without readily apparent meanings, images cannot perform their essential work of mediating perception or constructing a master fiction. The connection between a regime’s images and its master fiction, therefore, must be intelligible to the mass audience expected to accept the master fiction as political truth. The efforts of French revolutionaries again are instructive with regard to symbolically conveying revolutionary meaning. In France, some symbols used for the Republic alluded to Graeco-Roman mythology, but such symbols were largely incomprehensible to the masses.⁸¹ Symbols whose meanings were lost on their viewers naturally failed to produce a desirable political effect. In Russia, revolutionary poster artists had available a wealth of canonical symbolic images from Russian Orthodox

78. Michael Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People: Studies in Russian Myths* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 42–43.

79. As discussed in detail in chapter 2, there had long been a fusion of religious and political meaning embedded in Russian Orthodox icons. Further, there was no notion of separation between church and state, or between *sacerdotium* and *imperium*. See Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, 61. Nonetheless, Russian state symbols, especially those adopted after the seventeenth century, had connotations more associated with the tsar and *imperium*.

80. The Provisional Government, in fact, had attempted to use a modified imperial eagle as the national seal and emblem during 1917, with particularly poor results. See Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 82.

81. Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle*, 22.

iconography. Furthermore, these images were replete with cultural meaning that was widely shared among both artists and viewers. As a result, the iconography of the Russian Orthodox Church could readily be recycled into symbolic elements of the revolutionary master fiction.

2.7 Social Behavior, Propaganda, and Visual Repetition

An essential element of visual culture's political importance is its capacity to shape social behavior. Because images are central to establishing collective meanings and values, they help guide social behavior in politically desirable ways. In this sense, images can be construed as visual propaganda. In contemporary usage, propaganda often carries negative connotations of deceit or manipulation. Its root in the term "propagate" is more neutral, connoting reproduction or transmission. Notwithstanding the more negative connotations, the more neutral reading underscores propaganda's potential to propagate mass perceptions and behavior, for better or for worse.

In his study of Bolshevik practices, Peter Kenez defines propaganda as an "attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and thereby behavior."⁸² In this sense, images are potent propaganda tools, because images can quickly and powerfully evoke in the viewer an emotional-cognitive response that guides social behavior. Geertz suggests that humans' neuroplasticity and complex genetics create an array of potential general responses rather than genetically determined specific responses. As such, he argues, humans require and respond to

82. Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4.

additional external behavioral guidance.⁸³ Propaganda acts on that requirement by providing external guidance.

The Bolsheviks intended to transform social values and to do so by visual means, an intention that has often been documented. Initially, “the Bolsheviks attempted to gain control over the sphere of public discourse and to transform popular attitudes and beliefs by introducing new symbols, rituals, and visual imagery” that would redefine social values.⁸⁴ In the 1920s, “the [Bolshevik] revolutionary leadership attempted to transform man and society through mass indoctrination.”⁸⁵ This goal was formalized by the Soviets in 1931 by a “Central Committee resolution on political art . . . [that] accentuated the ambitious task of political art in the Stalin era: to change people’s structure of thinking at its deepest level.”⁸⁶ Even in the late Soviet period, a 1984 Soviet collective work on culture described creative work as representing both the private work of a creative individual and a “labor of social utility’ that creates . . . the ‘socio-moral norms’ in society.”⁸⁷ As these examples show, Soviet visual political culture was persistently understood by Soviet authorities themselves as a tool that shaped collective identity and behavior by inculcating viewers with social and moral behavioral expectations.

Visual repetition is essential to the socially transforming effect of publically displayed political images, as the French Revolution also illustrated. The French

83. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 46.

84. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 1.

85. Kenez, *Birth of the Propaganda State*, 1.

86. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 37–38.

87. Cited in Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 12.

Revolutionary politician known as the Abbé Grégoire argued in 1796 that with a new government “it is necessary to republicanize everything. . . . Soon the soul is penetrated by the objects reproduced constantly . . . and this combination . . . of emblems which retraces without cease for the citizen his rights and his duties . . . [forms] the republican mold which gives him a national character and the demeanor of a free man.”⁸⁸ Once hegemonic political symbols are established, constant repetition of those symbols can transform society.

Indeed, repetition frequently was employed in both Russian Orthodox iconography and Soviet political art. Standardizing and repeating certain symbols or compositional forms in many different images becomes, in effect, the visual analog of using “boilerplate” text or templates.⁸⁹ As such, these symbols or forms become so common that they can be perceived as “background” or stylistic elements, taken as givens, and therefore elude rational scrutiny. Standardized and repeated elements are critically important, particularly in political art, because they help symbolically construct and reinforce an all-encompassing worldview.

Promoting socially desirable behaviors through icon-based political posters is the focus of chapter 5, while propagating a Soviet worldview is the subject of chapter 6. For now, the important points are: (1) symbolic repetition is an important device for building meaning, including revolutionary political meaning, and (2) by recycling certain repetitive elements in the iconographic tradition, Soviet political posters not only promoted socially desirable behaviors but also helped propagate an idealized revolutionary worldview.

* * *

88. Quoted in Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, 91–92.

89. Mass production of posters, while also a valuable form of repetition, is a different topic.

Analyzing the deep cultural connections between Soviet political posters and Russian Orthodox icons is particularly instructive with regard to visual mediation and cultural construction. The ubiquity of icons prior to the revolution and the ubiquity of posters thereafter provide a unique vantage point for observing cultural idioms in the active process of shifting and intermingling. The icons provide an observational base that allows us to perceive the posters actively operating within a changing “social apparatus” as artists recycled, redeployed, or transferred politically important meaning from Russian Orthodox culture to socialist political images.

Observing these shifts also helps to explicate the integral relationship between symbols and politics as they operate symbiotically within a cultural frame. Because the relationship between a symbol and its meaning is culturally constructed, that relationship can be culturally reconstructed in a way that transfers meaning from one type of image to another. This cultural dynamic underpins the process of recycling religious imagery into political symbols. In Soviet Russia, the emotionally powerful meanings signified by certain images from icons were re-associated with new, visually similar signifiers in political posters. The poster images then came to signify the former religious meanings of the icons. The result was a political sign or image imbued with both the informational and the emotional content of the icon, including the icon’s truth value. The basic unit of meaning—the visual morpheme—superficially was transferred to a new context for a new purpose, while retaining its deeper and more persistent cultural meaning.

In this manner, Russian Orthodox symbols—which signified important individuals, abstract conceptual categories, and an overarching worldview—were recycled to embody the new heroes, the new ideology, and the paradigmatic worldview of the Soviet

state. In the process, socialist heroes and ideology were legitimized with socially resonant and emotionally charged cultural meaning, as the Soviet regime constructed the new “master fiction” underpinning its exercise of political power.



Figure 2.1 St. Paraskeva.

Russian icon of St. Paraskeva, patron saint of Fridays, ca.1600. Image courtesy of Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, MA.



Figure 2.2 *The Smoke of Chimneys is the Breath of Soviet Russia.* Bolshevik Poster, 1917-1921. New York Public Library, Digital ID#1216160. Permalink <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1216160>. Used by permission of New York Public Library.

3 ICONS: SACRED TRUTH IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Orthodox Christianity was central to Russian culture from the late tenth century, when the Grand Prince of Kiev began consolidating power to form what eventually would become the Russian nation.⁹⁰ Religion was synonymous with national identity to the extent that “to say ‘Russian’ was to say ‘Orthodox.’”⁹¹ In addition to its influence on national identity, Russian Orthodoxy created “the first distinctively Russian culture and . . . the basic forms of artistic expression and the framework of belief for modern Russia.”⁹² The Russian Orthodox icon visually expressed these artistic forms and the worldview connected with this framework of belief.

This chapter outlines the icon’s traditional significance for Russian Orthodox Christians with respect to three important elements: everyday life, worldview, and perceptions of sacred truth.⁹³ These elements provide a foundation for comprehending the cultural power of political images based on icons. The power of such images stemmed first from the centrality of Russian Orthodox visual culture in daily life. This centrality ensured the widespread comprehension of the icon’s emotionally resonant visual language. This intelligibility was reinforced by icons’ remarkable visual stability

90. For a brief overview of Russian Orthodox Christianity’s tenth-century origins, see Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, 5–6.

91. Orlando Figes, *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Picador, 2002), 301.

92. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, x.

93. Russian Orthodoxy continued to thrive among emigrants and those who continued its practice within Russia even during periods of Soviet repression, and the faith remains active and viable today. Nonetheless, our concern here is with how the Russian Orthodox populace would have been culturally conditioned to perceive icon-based political images encountered in the first decades after the 1917 revolution. Although many elements of the pre-1917 Orthodox liturgy and faith no doubt still persist, the past tense is used herein to emphasize that this work focuses on Russian Orthodoxy primarily as it existed prior to 1917, and, in some cases, through the Stalinist period. We thus make no representations as to the applicability of this analysis for today’s Russian Orthodox faith.

over long periods of time. Icons also visually expressed a worldview that blended religious belief in miracles with politics and national identity. Most significantly of all, Orthodox doctrine held icons to be sacred truth revealed by God. As a result of this doctrinal status, icons were much more than familiar elements of the cultural frame—they carried tremendous emotional significance for viewers fluent in their symbolic language.

The political potential of the icon's symbolic language was not lost on revolutionary artists or leaders. As Richard Stites argues, “the Bolshevik leaders possessed a strong consciousness of the power of symbols. It is too facile simply to argue that as cynical power-mongers they perceived at once the uses of propaganda and manipulation. They were underground revolutionaries in a land of peasants—thus painfully aware of the problems of communication between leaders and masses, and determined to make a fresh start in the matter of symbols.”⁹⁴ Exploring icons in relation to daily life, worldview, and as a source of revealed truth provides an essential foundation for understanding the symbolic meaning and emotional power of images recycled from icons to political posters. This foundation also provides an analytical context that does much to explain why even proclaimed atheists such as the Bolsheviks found centuries-old religious imagery compelling as they embarked on their “fresh” symbolic start.

3.1 Religious and Secular Icons

Icons communicate symbolically, whether those icons are religious or secular. Because the word “icon” has multiple common meanings, it is important to differentiate

⁹⁴ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 85.

its Russian Orthodox meaning from its other possible uses. For example, icons can symbolically represent culturally important locations; images of the Empire State Building and the Eiffel Tower are “icons” associated with New York and Paris, respectively. A well-known individual identified with a certain industry is described as an icon within that context: Steve Jobs and Bill Gates thus are “icons” with respect to personal computing. With its reliance on graphical user interfaces, personal computing itself uses “icons” to symbolize specific actions. A computer icon typically resembles its related action: one prints by clicking an image of a printer or italicizes by clicking an italic letter. Computer icons thus hint at the term’s semiotic meaning. In a semiotic sense, “an icon is a sign that is made to resemble, simulate, or reproduce” that to which it refers.⁹⁵ In other words, an icon is a sign representing that which it signifies by bearing its likeness.

From a physical standpoint, religious icons are paintings bearing the likeness of important religious subjects, such as Jesus Christ, his mother, or various saints. The painting is usually tempera on wood and might be embellished with other materials. While factually accurate, this description is nonetheless tantamount to describing the Eiffel Tower as a tall, open, metal structure more narrow at its top than at its base. In both cases, the description omits the icon’s crucial meaning as a cultural symbol.

In the Russian Orthodox tradition, religious icons were first and foremost sacred devotional objects believed to embody sacred truth. The key to their profound cultural power was the belief that icons formed connections between the spiritual and the material worlds. Icons were believed to use “images and forms drawn from the material world to transmit the revelation of the Divine world, making this world accessible to

95. Sebeok, *Signs*, 10.

understanding and contemplation.”⁹⁶ While icons bore the “likeness” of their subjects, this likeness was understood to be both physical and spiritual, with the spiritual qualities conveyed through conventional symbols. The icon thus was a vehicle for simultaneously depicting and enacting the mysteries of the faith.⁹⁷ Icons were understood to be religious art, but they also were understood to be theology divinely revealed in the “language of artistic symbols . . . [or] in images instead of words.”⁹⁸ The symbols used to paint icons differed from the characters used to record divinely revealed Christian scripture, but the meanings of both icons and scripture were believed to be precisely the same.

3.2 Russian Icons and Daily Life

The ubiquity of icons in Russian culture prior to 1917 is a key reason their visual language was so widely understood. Icons formed what Jan Goldstein, in another context, called the “sensory pedagogy of everyday life.”⁹⁹ These sacred images had figured prominently in Russian culture for hundreds of years, to the extent that the icon was “much more than an image, more part of a way of life.”¹⁰⁰ As “an artefact of daily ritual,” the icon was “encountered everywhere--not just in homes and churches but in shops and offices and wayside shrines.”¹⁰¹ Icons were sources of continuity for individuals, as icons marked important occasions throughout one’s life. One typically

96. Léonide Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1982), 30.

97. *Ibid.*, 31.

98. *Ibid.*, 41.

99. Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 74.

100. Geoffrey A Hosking, *Russia and the Russians: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 23.

101. Figs, *Natasha’s Dance*, 11.

received an icon of one's name saint at baptism; that same icon would be carried during one's wedding procession and at one's funeral.¹⁰²

Russian Orthodox churches were replete with icons, which served not as ornaments but as essential elements of worship. In churches, "sacred images of all kinds were an integral part of the divine liturgy, of the experience of being in a church or holy place."¹⁰³ Much of the liturgy took place behind a screen or divider separating priests from worshipers. This screen, an example of which is shown in figure 3.1, is known as an *iconostasis*, or icon stand. The Russian iconostasis has been called "Russia's most distinctive contribution to the use of icons . . . representing a kind of pictorial encyclopedia of Christian belief."¹⁰⁴

The arrangement of icons in an iconostasis conveyed specific meanings related to order and hierarchy.¹⁰⁵ Certain images were considered essential, while others were optional. Depending on a church's location and size, the iconostasis might range from modest to highly elaborate, sometimes stretching to a larger church's ceiling. Regardless of its overall size or complexity, the icons present were arranged in a standard order. By the seventeenth century, row upon row of carefully arranged icons provided "a model for the hierarchical order of Russian society . . . [and] the basis of an entire social order."¹⁰⁶

102. Pierre Pascal, *The Religion of the Russian People* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 16.

103. Hosking, *Russia and the Russians*, 23.

104. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, 33.

105. *Ibid.*, 2.

106. *Ibid.*, 35. For a general overview of icon stands and their arrangements, see *Ibid.*, 33-36.

Icons in Russian Orthodox homes were integrally functional rather than ornamental, just as they were in churches. The integration of icons in daily life is illustrated by the mid-sixteenth century household management manual *Domostroi* (lit. “house order”).¹⁰⁷ The *Domostroi* contains instructions from a well-to-do Russian father to his son on how to maintain a proper and prosperous Christian household. There are about 30 references to icons, and the manual includes advice on topics ranging from the proper way of kissing icons (holding the breath, lips together) to the correct way of hanging them in the home and protecting them from dust. In addition to documenting good housekeeping practice, the *Domostroi* also functioned as something of an etiquette manual for polite society. As icons were prominent in domestic rituals, the *Domostroi* details protocol for using icons when visiting, during wedding processions or marriage feasts, when giving gifts, or when attending the ill.

The icon’s integration in everyday activities persisted over the centuries. An eyewitness account from the 1870s, for example, attests to the icon’s continuing importance in community rituals. This account describes the details of an Easter Monday ritual involving a popular icon that, by prearranged appointment, was carried in procession from a church to the home of a wealthy Moscow merchant family.¹⁰⁸ From such detailed descriptions, we are able to appreciate the extent to which icons traditionally were integrated in the daily lives of the well-to-do.

107. Carolyn Johnston Pouncy, ed., *The “Domostroi”: Rules for Russian Households in the Time of Ivan the Terrible*, trans. Carolyn Johnston Pouncy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

108. For a detailed account of this ritual, see Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, 304–305.

Domestic icons, moreover, were not limited to prosperous homes. Most Russian peasants were Orthodox Christians, even into the late 1930s.¹⁰⁹ As practiced by the peasantry, popular religion was “a homestead cult.”¹¹⁰ Icons typically were present “in an ordinary house, even in a peasant’s hut . . . occupy[ing] a corner of the best room in the house . . . where honored guests were received and where major events in the life of the family were celebrated.”¹¹¹ The icon’s presence in the hut gave the peasant’s home the status of a mini-shrine.¹¹² If a sacramental need such as burial arose and a village priest was not available, the appropriate ceremonies simply were conducted before the domestic icons by the head of the peasant family; the head of family might also conduct a worship service at home if the need arose.¹¹³

Icons reflected the beliefs in Christ and sainthood that were fundamental to Russian Orthodoxy. Icons also supported the veneration of Mary, who functioned as something of a “supersaint.”¹¹⁴ Patron saints, especially those associated with the agricultural calendar, also were prominent in icons. There were patron saints for such

109. Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (New York: New Press, 1994), 61. See also Harvey Fireside, *Icon and Swastika: The Russian Orthodox Church under Nazi and Soviet Control* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 35, for 1937 census data estimating the Russian Orthodox population of villages as two-thirds and nationally about one-half. Fireside considers these figures “under-rated” based on an understandable reluctance to answer religion-oriented census questions, given Stalinist repressions.

110. Lewin, *Making of the Soviet System*, 269.

111. Hosking, *Russia and the Russians*, 23.

112. Lewin, *Making of the Soviet System*, 62.

113. Pascal, *The Religion of the Russian People*, 21. Pascal suggests further that the persistence of Russian Orthodoxy during periods of Soviet state repression can be attributed to the peasant’s lack of dependence on the clergy.

114. Lewin, *Making of the Soviet System*, 61.

things as cattle, horses, rain, and thunder, and even for tools or other farm implements. Some patron saints were adopted nationally, while others had local followings.¹¹⁵

Beyond the home, portable travel icons were common. These could be small enough to be worn around the neck, or they could consist of a single small panel, a triptych, or even a complex folding iconostasis. In addition, icons might be called into service outdoors on certain important occasions, such as saints' feast days, for processions or other celebrations, or in preparation for military ventures. Peasants paid local priests to process "with icons and incense, to protect cattle and the fields against parasites and epidemics."¹¹⁶ Icons also accompanied pilgrims; a report from 1903 describes pilgrims camped in Russian forests, "their icons posted to the trees."¹¹⁷

As these examples make evident, icons were defining elements of Russian Orthodox religious practice and inextricably integrated in daily life. Even though the post-revolutionary state officially espoused atheism and periodically engaged in anti-religious violence, "the tenacious life of the religious flame in spite of all official attempts to extinguish it owes much to its shelter at most Russian hearths."¹¹⁸ This widespread tenacity helps explain the availability and persistence of icons and their symbols as cultural idioms, even decades after the 1917 revolution.

Icons' remarkable visual stability also contributed to their intelligibility. Icon painting, known in Russian as icon "writing," was not considered a creative endeavor in which artists created unique visions, and it changed relatively little over long time

115. Ibid., 61–62.

116. Ibid., 62.

117. Quoted in Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 309.

118. Fireside, *Icon and Swastika*, 40.

periods.¹¹⁹ Because icons were understood as sacred truths whose subjects had been living historical “prototypes,” the icon’s veracity depended heavily on the icon artist’s faithful reproduction of the prototype’s attributes. To ensure continuity, images were standardized in pattern books known as *podlinniki*. In the early iconic tradition, dedicated artists labored in semi-monastic icon workshops, where they reproduced icons faithful to the *podlinniki*. The icon artists’ efforts were similar to those of medieval European monks who labored in *scriptoria*, recopying scripture by hand. Such sacred manual labor would be too slow for revolutionary purposes, but lithography and poster art offered the Bolsheviks a mass medium with which to disseminate political images.

The *podlinniki* specified and controlled details of the visual representation and arrangement of religious figures who were the icons’ subjects. This protected the icon’s truth value by preserving the icon’s fidelity to its prototype.¹²⁰ Controlled representation also had its later parallels in Soviet visual culture. In both cases, “forms and meanings were highly regulated and deliberately limited.”¹²¹ Beyond simply functioning as artists’ guides, then, *podlinniki* helped ensure that icons’ symbolic meanings remained consistent over time, which preserved their truth value.

119. The material related to icons’ visual stability, even where not directly quoted, draws heavily on Boris Uspensky’s detailed descriptions of *podlinniki* or icon painting guides. See Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*. Uspensky’s descriptions also are consistent with *podlinniki* available in the Special Collections Library at McGill University.

120. The *podlinniki*, in effect, functioned as corporate or institutional brand “style guides” do today. Just as style guides are intended to protect the value of corporate brands by controlling details of their production and use, the *podlinniki* protected the truth value of the prototype as historical fact by providing facial and compositional models, and by specifying color, clothing, and other elements that icon painters were trained to use as matters of religious faith and practice.

121. Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger, “Introduction,” in *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 5.

Podlinniki provided visual details that identified specific saints. According to Uspensky, “the features differentiating various saints . . . [were] set forth in detail in the icon-painting manuals” according to rules that differentiated between “personal” and “extra-personal” elements.¹²² Personal and extra-personal elements carried great significance, and they sometimes were painted by different masters working on the same icon. Personal elements were individual signs that identified a particular saint. For example, the shape of a saint’s beard was strictly regulated because the shape helped signify a specific individual.¹²³ Among the extra-personal elements, clothing was foremost. With respect to saints, “the clothing is analogous in its sign function” to the nimbus or halo.¹²⁴ Just as there were hierarchical orders of angels, there were hierarchical orders of saints. Clothing functioned as a marker for different orders, thus indicating a saint’s hierarchical category. The *podlinniki* documented different “forms for the garments of the following figures: Forefathers, Old Testament personages, Apostles, Priests, Deacons, Martyrs, Boyars, Princes, Warriors, and Tsars.”¹²⁵ Beyond clothing, an individual saint’s hierarchical status was visually reinforced when an icon was incorporated into an icon stand, because particular rows or locations on the iconostasis corresponded to specific orders or categories of holy persons.

One not versed in the visual language or the cultural context of icons might miss the extra-personal signs, but these were meaningful elements for both the artist and the viewer. In addition, as explained in chapter 6, many extra-personal elements became

122. Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, 13.

123. *Ibid.*, 25.

124. *Ibid.*, 13.

125. *Ibid.*

visually important to the revolutionary cause; this was particularly true of those elements related to the natural and built environments. The key points for the moment, however, are that (1) icons were ubiquitous in prerevolutionary Russian Orthodox life; and (2) icons maintained a remarkable degree of visual consistency over long time periods. Their ubiquity in daily activities and their visual consistency resulted in widespread familiarity with icons and their symbolic meanings for artists and viewers alike.

3.3 Icons, Political Identity, and Worldview

Visually or otherwise, the confluence of religion and politics was not unique to post-revolutionary Russia. Intermingling politics with religion echoed the Byzantine-like relationship between what sometimes are treated as separate analytical categories, but for which there had never been a clear separation in prerevolutionary Russia. Billington suggests that it would be anomalous “to speak even in Byzantium of ‘church’ and ‘state’ rather than of two types of sanctified authority (*sacerdotium* and *imperium*) . . . [but in Russia] the two were even more closely intertwined.”¹²⁶

Indeed, the idea of “Russia” as a state had been identified with Christianity from the state’s very inception. Certain icons have been credited with symbolizing “national unity long before such unity became political fact.”¹²⁷ The conflation of religion and politics helps explain why scores of Russian princes and princesses are counted among Russian Orthodox saints, because “in Russian popular tradition and in Russian political theology, all princes were seen as saints, through actions or in their being.”¹²⁸ When the

126. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, 61.

127. *Ibid.*, 32.

128. Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, 32.

Muscovite Prince Ivan IV (“the Terrible,” r. 1533-1584) assumed the title tsar in 1547, the “cult of saintly princes was gradually transmogrified into the myth of a tsar who was at once secular and yet ruled by divine right.”¹²⁹ Overall, “the theory of the State, the very concept of State was introduced into Russia as part of the Christian ethos,” and there was no concept of a secular state “outside Christianity and its purposes.”¹³⁰ As a result of the traditional intermingling of Russia’s religion and its politics, images related to both were interwoven in the same “sacred gaze.”¹³¹

Prior to the 1917 revolution, explicitly political meaning had long been associated with specific icons. Moreover, because visual culture “consistently remains a highly valued ingredient in the construction of identities, power structures, and forms of social communication,” one notes in Russia the “overwhelming role of reigning authorities—the church, the state, and [later] the party—in producing, shaping, and controlling images.”¹³² For example, in the sixteenth century Ivan IV initiated what Hosking calls a “new” style of icon painting by commissioning an icon popularly called *Church Militant* (fig. 3.2). This icon’s subject is Ivan’s key military victory over Kazan in 1552.¹³³ In connection with *Church Militant*, Hosking suggests that using “icons to convey political messages was an innovation which ran counter to the purely spiritual content of past icon painting.”¹³⁴

129. Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*, 6.

130. Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, 33.

131. Morgan uses the term “sacred gaze” to denote “the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance.” See Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 50.

132. Kivelson and Neuberger, “Introduction,” 5, 7.

133. Hosking, *Russia and the Russians*, 119. This victory was also celebrated by building the cathedral now known as St. Basil’s, which still stands in Moscow’s Red Square.

134. *Ibid.*

Given the lack of demarcation between religion and politics in Russia dating from its tenth century origins, along with Russians' demonstrated tendency to view princes as saints, we might debate Hosking's characterization of earlier icon content as "purely spiritual." Nonetheless, we will accept his finding that a church council considered the matter in 1554, after which "it was considered legitimate to deploy religious imagery in the interests of the state."¹³⁵

Church Militant visually conveyed themes "crucial to the worldview of early modern Russians."¹³⁶ In Russian thought, Russia and Christianity itself were synonymous, as they had been from the time Russia had begun building its imperial vision as the Third Rome following Constantinople's fall in 1453. In *Church Militant*, Russia's defenders also defended the entire Christian faith. In defending all Christendom, Ivan's army continued the "eternal struggle of good against evil that began in Old Testament Israel and will continue until the end of time."¹³⁷ In this icon, the archangel Michael leads the victorious Russian troops back to Moscow. Meanwhile, on the image's far left, the Mother of God protects Moscow itself and dispenses martyrs' crowns, which angels deliver to returning warriors. At the time this icon was painted, "the protection of Rus/Russia by the Mother of God had become probably the single most important theme in Russian political thought."¹³⁸

135. Ibid.

136. Daniel Rowland, "Blessed Is the Host of the Heavenly Tsar: An Icon from the Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin," in *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture*, ed. Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 33.

137. Ibid., 35. This description is largely based on Rowland's detailed analysis of *Church Militant*.

138. Ibid., 36.

Notwithstanding the tradition of canonizing secular princes, some scholars note a progressive secularization in Russian icons' subjects after a sixteenth-century "classical period."¹³⁹ Many of Russia's later leaders, including "most of the Romanovs, and many of their generals had themselves painted in semi-iconographic style."¹⁴⁰ There has even been some suggestion that, by the nineteenth century, "icon production as a state concession" had replaced "icon painting as a sacred tradition."¹⁴¹ In one form or another, then, we can perceive over time the "unmistakable dominance of the ruling authorities in the production of the images."¹⁴² Fundamentally, the intermingling of political and religious styles, themes, and subjects in icons reflects the traditionally symbiotic relationship between Russian political rule and Russian Orthodox Christianity.

Beyond an icon's subject, even its location could have political significance.¹⁴³ The most venerated of all icons in Russian Orthodoxy was the *Vladimir Mother of God* (also known as *Our Lady of Kazan*), revered particularly for its cultural association with national protection and important military victories. Beginning in the twelfth century, "this (originally Byzantine) icon was moved from one place to another in the country [and these moves] were signs of important changes in the politico-geographical structure of Russia, marking a shift in the military centre of gravity."¹⁴⁴ The *Vladimir Mother of God*,

139. Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 48–49.

140. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, 37.

141. *Ibid.*, 36.

142. Kivelson and Neuberger, "Introduction," 7.

143. Abel, "Icons and Soviet Art," 145–47.

144. *Ibid.*

and later *Church Militant*, provide centuries-old visual evidence for the intermingling of religious and political symbolic meaning in Russian icons.

Early in the twentieth century, icons continued to appear in political contexts, including war-related activities or political demonstrations. Icons were prominent during the 1905 Revolution, and “when the workers of S. Petersburg—tens of thousands of them, with their wives and children—resolved, on the 9th (N.S. 22nd) of January, 1905, to take their grievances to the Tsar, the holy images went before them, to stress the serious and near religious character of their procession; for the icon resides over political as well as domestic life.”¹⁴⁵ A few years later, World War I engendered a convergence of religious and political imagery. Outpourings of conservative patriotism in the war years resulted in “masses of people, including recent revolutionary students, [who] sing the national anthem and promenade in the streets with icons, portraits of the Tsar, and national flags.”¹⁴⁶ Icons also offered a source of spiritual comfort during the war, providing “consolation, healing, and redemption for the sorrows of life, a need that was great in wartime Russia.”¹⁴⁷ In summary, icons were much in evidence in political contexts in the years immediately prior to 1917, just as they had been for centuries.

The wartime importance of traditional Russian culture reflected a broader revival of interest in traditional Russian architecture and art that had begun in the late nineteenth century. In the 1870s, a renewal of styles rooted in Russian Orthodoxy and folk art

145. Pascal, *The Religion of the Russian People*, 17. Also see Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*, 11. for a similar but more detailed description of the same event.

146. Quoted in Aaron J. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable: World War, Modern Art, & the Politics of Public Culture in Russia, 1914-1917*, Studies in War, Society, and the Military (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 63.

147. *Ibid.*, 144.

began, especially around Moscow, where some of Russia's leading artists produced work based on folk images and icons for their wealthy patrons.¹⁴⁸ The renewed interest in traditional forms also was related to an even broader *fin-de-siècle* "search for spiritual regeneration that . . . found a resonance within Bolshevism."¹⁴⁹ As Tumarkin describes it, "the period from the late 1890s through the revolution was a time of deep spiritual crisis for the Russian intelligentsia, many of whose most creative members turned to religion to find an identity for themselves and for Russia."¹⁵⁰ In this context, it is not surprising that by World War I, the icon had also become a prominent topic in public debates about art and war among avant-garde Russian artists; some of these artists had used traditional themes and images in helping promote mobilization for the war.¹⁵¹ In a 1913 issue of the journal *Apollo*, the contemporary art critic Nikolai Punin (1888—1953) argued for a return to tradition in place of formalism. Punin specifically elaborated on the value of icons as an artistic system. He maintained that icons were "based on an objective emotional and symbolic system that was accessible to the whole of society," with line, color, and composition "used according to an ancient system in which each feature communicates a depth of meaning and emotion that it has absorbed over the centuries."¹⁵² Following the 1917 revolution, some formerly avant-garde Russian artists began producing revolutionary art for the Bolshevik regime. According to Cohen, the political involvement of the avant-garde was not unique to the revolution, but was "a continuation, redirection,

148. See Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 173.

149. Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*, 20.

150. *Ibid.*, 18.

151. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, 160.

152. Spira, *Avant-Garde Icon*, 81.

and intensification of attitudes and behavior that had begun in the mobilization for war.”¹⁵³ The Russian avant-garde’s aesthetic conventions, which had blended religious imagery with political messages during World War I, thus continued in service to the revolution.

Many prominent artists of the time had had previous experiences with icons or church murals. Analyzing Soviet art from the Stalinist period, Cullerne Bown notes that “the influence of Russian icon painting and church murals is apparent in the work of important artists from a variety of groups.”¹⁵⁴ For example, Pavel Kuznetsov (1878—1968) was a painter prominent in the 1920s art world who is thought to have been influenced by his father’s icon painting, as well as by his own experiences painting church murals.¹⁵⁵ Some political artists had been trained as icon painters prior to the revolution, and these included Alexander Apsit (1880—1943).¹⁵⁶ Apsit, the most prominent early Soviet poster artist, produced about 40 revolutionary posters between 1918 and 1922.¹⁵⁷ Apsit “intuitively grasped very effective ways of appealing to popular sentiment,” and his posters were printed in large runs of up to 50,000 copies.¹⁵⁸ The influence of Apsit’s training as an icon painter is evident in some of his most significant poster work, which is analyzed in chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis.

153. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, 149.

154. Cullerne Bown, *Art Under Stalin*, 45.

155. *Ibid.*

156. Stephen White, e-mail message to author, February 20, 2014.

157. Stephen Eskilson, *Graphic Design: A New History*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 187–88.

158. *Ibid.*

Other graphic artists prominent in Bolshevik poster production specifically acknowledged the influence of icons on their work. According to Stephen White, the celebrated graphic artist Dmitrii Moor (1883—1946) favored the icon for its “ability to make the broadest possible popular appeal.”¹⁵⁹ White reports that Moor “had made a close study of icons . . . [and] concentrated particularly upon the composition of icons, their use of colour, their narrative and illustrative techniques, and their form.”¹⁶⁰ The analysis of icons and posters in chapter 4 of this work includes examples of Moor’s posters, in which the influence of icons is readily apparent.

In addition to the effects of neo-Russian artistic trends, wartime patriotism, or prior training, enduring symbols from icons might also have appealed to artists as entailing less personal risk or greater opportunity in the emerging revolutionary order. As Cohen notes, “material desperation and professional ambition were powerful incentives . . . [when] existence as an artist depended on the policies, even whims, of the government.”¹⁶¹ With respect to posters in particular, White suggests that “poster work was the only form of employment that was reasonably available” for graphic artists after the revolution.¹⁶² Revolutionary poster work represented an especially welcome opportunity for avant-garde artists, as they had enjoyed little in the way of professional success prior to the revolution.¹⁶³ Tried and true symbols with widespread public

159. White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, 6.

160. *Ibid.*, 7.

161. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, 174.

162. White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, 11.

163. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, 174.

resonance, such as those familiar from icons, must have surely been compelling models for such artists.

The combination of a *fin-de-siècle* renewal of Russian Orthodox style, the prevalence of conservative and religious images during World War I, and the avant-garde's wartime interest in traditional forms all provide further evidence of the cultural frame in which revolutionary political posters were produced and viewed. For both artists and viewers, that frame would have been heavily conditioned by previous cultural experiences with icons. Hubertus Jahn emphasizes the importance of considering Russian posters in their own cultural context, noting that, "like other visual material, [posters] belonged to a system of aesthetic conventions that had its own rules and traditions."¹⁶⁴ World War I art demonstrates that, just prior to the 1917 revolution, both the Russian public and artists who thereafter produced revolutionary images were well-acquainted with a cultural frame and aesthetic conventions that intermingled religious and political imagery as the need arose.

In summary, when the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, Russian Orthodox icons had a centuries-long history of political significance, reflecting the fact that Russian Orthodoxy itself had long been melded with political rule. Canonized secular princes appeared in icons, tsars ruled by divine right, and the very presence of certain icons served to strengthen national identity or to confer political authority or even veneration on particular locations or leaders. With this foundation, in subsequent chapters we will explore in further detail the relationship between particular symbols from icons and their translation for revolutionary political purposes. The important point for the present is that,

164. Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I*, 72. Jahn makes this observation in a different context, yet his point also is valid here.

when Soviet political posters began to appear, intermingling political and religious themes or symbols would not have appeared unusual for either Russian artists or their viewing audience.¹⁶⁵

3.4 Icons as Sacred Truth

Icons and their symbols were emotionally powerful political tools because, in Russian Orthodox doctrine, icons were regarded as sacred truth. This cultural truth value had two principal components. First, icons were accepted as the embodiment of divinely revealed truth in the form of the image, just as scripture was accepted as divinely revealed truth in the form of the word: “Christianity is the revelation by God-Man not only of the Word of God, but also of the Image of God.”¹⁶⁶ In this understanding, icons and other sacred images were not ancillary illustrations of scripture. Rather, icons were “the most revered form of theological expression in Russia.”¹⁶⁷ Russian Orthodox doctrine attributed to sacred art “the same dogmatic, liturgic, and educational significance as it does to the Holy Scriptures. The meaning both of the word and of the image, their role and significance are the same.”¹⁶⁸ Icons were essential elements of faith itself, rather than aesthetic accessories used to practice one’s faith:

The denial of the icon of Christ appears as a denial of the truth and immutability of the fact of His becoming man and therefore of the whole Divine dispensation. Defending the icon in the period of iconoclasm, the Church was not defending

165. One might argue that this confluence would not have appeared unusual even as recently as 2006. On a trip to Moscow that year, this author was dismayed to discover that the Vladimir Mother of God icon had been temporarily removed from its museum location. One can only speculate if this was because it had been called into political service yet again, as that visit coincided with the massive public celebration of a Russian Federation holiday.

166. Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 2.

167. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, 8.

168. Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 30.

merely [the icon's] educational role, and, still less, its aesthetic value; it was fighting for the very foundations of the Christian faith, the visible testimony of God become man, as the basis of our salvation.¹⁶⁹

Theologically, denying icons' truth value or the propriety of icon veneration would be tantamount to denying the entire doctrine of salvation tied to the divine incarnation of Jesus Christ in human form.

The doctrinal status of icons was decided in 787 by the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Second Council of Nicaea), which sanctioned icon veneration as consistent with church doctrine. The council "reestablished the veneration of icons . . . on a level . . . with the Gospels, as representing a complete correspondence between verbal image and visible image."¹⁷⁰ In Orthodox dogma, consequently, both holy images and holy scriptures convey "not human ideas and conceptions of truth, but truth itself—the Divine revelation."¹⁷¹ Near the end of the tenth century, when Eastern Orthodox Christianity was adopted by Vladimir the Great and became the unifying religion for the largely pagan Kievan Rus', doctrine related to icons was well established. The status of icons as sacred truth was accepted without question by the early Russians, who were "drawn to Christianity by the aesthetic appeal of its liturgy, not the rational shape of its theology."¹⁷² In contrast with Western Europe, where various heresies competed with traditional dogma, Eastern Orthodox doctrine was accepted as a whole: "Western and Northern Europe had inherited a still primitive and uncodified Christianity from the crumbling Roman Empire of the West, [but] Russia took over a finished creed from the still-

169. Ibid., 34.

170. Ibid., 30.

171. Ibid., 41.

172. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, 9.

unvanquished Eastern Empire.”¹⁷³ As a result, Russian Orthodox doctrine and practice wholeheartedly embraced icons as a source of sacred truth.

A second key belief contributed to the icon’s cultural truth value. Icons were believed to form an ongoing and active connection between the spiritual and the quotidian worlds. These connections were understood as actively channeling divine presence and divine grace to the everyday world. The active nature of these connections carried the concomitant and always present possibility of divine intervention in the material world. In Orthodox belief, the experience of viewing an icon brought the viewer into contact with the spiritual world.¹⁷⁴ For this reason, the Russian Orthodox “pray with their eyes open—their gaze fixed on an icon.”¹⁷⁵ Through icons, the worldly faithful actively encountered a holy presence through a “channel of grace that visualizes the holy figure, who directs grace to the believer.”¹⁷⁶ This holy presence was understood as spiritual contact with the icon’s subject, whether Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mother, or other saint. In that spiritual dimension, intercession could be sought and obtained by the devout supplicant, which is why icons were so often described as miraculous or miracle working. This understanding of an icon’s nature—as a mystical channel for miraculous grace—was central to Russian Orthodoxy. The icon was believed to maintain a living and dynamic connection between its faithful viewer and its historical subject. Even more profound was the Orthodox belief that “liturgic art is not only our offering to God, but also

173. Ibid.

174. Hosking, *Russia and the Russians*, 23.

175. Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, 299.

176. Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 61.

God's descent into our midst."¹⁷⁷ Without this crucial doctrinal foundation, the observer might perceive icons as art objects commemorating important individuals or events from church history. Orthodox believers understood icons far more profoundly, viewing them as sacred points of active mediation between the spiritual and material worlds.

* * *

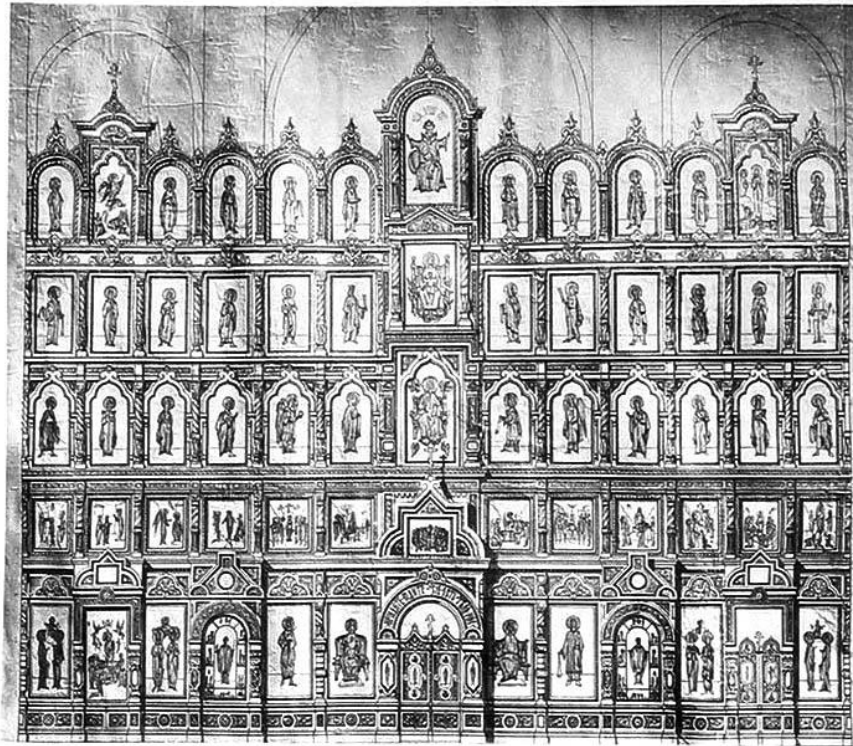
The ubiquity of icons, their integration in daily life, and their stable visual characteristics together ensured that icons' visual language was widely understood both before and after the 1917 revolution. These factors further ensured that artists and the Russian Orthodox masses shared a culturally constructed symbolic vocabulary, and this mutual familiarity was important for building revolutionary political meaning.

The truth value of icons outweighed all these factors, however. The icon's status as divinely revealed truth imbued icons with their most profound cultural importance. Symbols communicate, but the core emotional power of icons to stimulate belief lay in their acceptance as sacred truth. Lenin demonstrated his grasp of such an emotional connection's significance when he observed that "art belongs to the people, [and] it should extend with its deepest roots to the very heart of the great working masses. It should be understood and loved by these masses. It should bring together the feeling, the thought and the will of these masses."¹⁷⁸ The political power of images stems from the deep emotional connections Lenin describes. The political promise of the icon's symbols in revolutionizing the will of the masses lay rooted in icons' traditional status as ubiquitous signifiers of sacred truth. Appreciating the depth of this cultural truth value is

177. Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 36.

178. Quoted in Cullerne Bown, *Art Under Stalin*, 25.

essential to comprehending the emotional power of the symbols that were recycled by revolutionary artists to legitimize a new political center, to idealize new heroes, and to promote the Soviet utopian vision of a transformed world.



БОКОВОЙ ОТОЛБЪ 4-го ЯРУСА.

ДЕТАЛИ ИКОНОСТАСА

ОРЕДНІЙ ОТОЛБЪ 4-го ЯРУСА.

Figure 3.1 Iconostasis. Nikolo-Ugreshky Cathedral, Moscow.

Public domain image. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moscow,_Nikolo-Ugreshsky_Cathedral,_Iconostasis,_A.S.Kaminsky,_1890.jpg, accessed December 7, 2013.



Figure 3.2 *Blessed is the Host of the King of Heaven.*

Russian icon, ca. 1550-1560. Also known as *Church Militant*. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Public domain photograph of original artwork. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ChurchMilitant.jpg>, accessed October 19, 2013.

4 LEGITIMIZING THE REVOLUTION

Legitimacy was a central theme in the Bolshevik regime's earliest posters. Printed political posters, which offered a mass medium for disseminating legitimizing symbols, began appearing in August of 1918, at about the same time the post-revolutionary civil war (1918-1921) was beginning.¹⁷⁹ Russian Orthodox icons had long been an important source of familiar images that visually symbolized "legitimacy." Consequently, despite the new state's professed anti-religious ethos, symbols from Russian Orthodox iconography reemerged in posters that sought to legitimize both the revolution and its leaders. Posters that drew their political meaning from Russian Orthodox imagery thus helped construct the Bolshevik "master fiction" justifying the Bolshevik regime as the revolutionary state's rightful rulers.

Certain elements of Orthodox doctrine, particularly those related to the transfiguration gospels, are key to understanding important legitimizing symbols redeployed in posters. In this chapter, we first outline transfiguration doctrine and its visual expression in icons. We then trace the transfer of transfiguring meaning from icon-based symbols through a number of posters, and we will pay particular attention to the revolutionary red flag and its connections to legitimizing sacred symbols. This analysis exposes the dynamics of the process by which longstanding visual cultural fidioms were used to transfer authenticating meaning from Russian Orthodoxy to the Soviet regime.

179. White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, 23.

4.1 Legitimizing Symbols in Icons

Legitimizing symbols were crucial to the Bolshevik cause. The Bolshevik Party's ability to exercise political control depended on establishing itself in public perception as the rightful leader of the revolution itself and of the revolutionary state. As Nina Tumarkin observes, rule by fiat cannot persist indefinitely; rather, "the ruled must perceive their rulers as legitimate and worthy of trust."¹⁸⁰ Beyond the need to establish its legitimacy with the Russian people, the Bolsheviks' leadership claims were contested by other revolutionary socialist factions. Bolshevik leadership was further contested by forces of the recently deposed old order. In such a tenuous setting, it is hardly surprising that revolutionary artists would look to icons for inspiration, because icons visually conveyed legitimacy in familiar ways that were both general and specific.

Generally, the belief in Russian Orthodox icons as sacred truth revealed by God implicitly imparted divine legitimacy to an icon's subject. Specifically, one of the most prominent ways that icons conveyed legitimacy was by embodying the theological concept known as *transfiguration*. Transfiguration symbols were legitimizing symbols because they signified both divine sanction of an icon's subject and that subject's participation in divine life. As a foundation for analyzing how legitimizing meaning was transferred from icons to political posters, therefore, we must first recount the basics of transfiguration doctrine and explore its traditional symbolic expression in icons.

In Christian theology, transfiguration relates to New Testament accounts of Jesus Christ's radiant metamorphosis with what was understood by Christians to be divine light. In Matthew's gospel account of the transfiguration, Jesus led three of his disciples

180. Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*, 64.

up a mountain, and “he was transfigured before them and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.”¹⁸¹ As this passage makes evident, light is the primary symbol of transfiguration.

In Russian Orthodoxy, transfiguring light related specifically to the transfiguration gospel, and light was also generally understood to be the illumination of a person’s “spiritual and material constitution by the uncreated light of Divine Grace.”¹⁸² As a visual expression of that illumination, the icon was “a likeness not of an animate but of a deified prototype . . . of flesh transfigured, radiant with Divine light.”¹⁸³ Crucially, despite Christ’s centrality to the transfiguration gospels, this illuminating metamorphosis also was understood by Orthodox believers to be available to others, and the icon was “an indication of the participation of a given person in Divine life.”¹⁸⁴ In addition, then, to the abundant icons dealing specifically with Christ’s transfiguration, other holy subjects of icons also appeared in transfigured states.

In keeping with the relationship between transfiguration and divine illumination, in icons symbols of divine light signified a holy person’s transfiguration. Although the nimbus or halo was the most familiar such symbol, there were others as well. For instance, the most prominent holy subjects often were surrounded with a special shape known as a “glory.”¹⁸⁵ Typical shapes for a glory included a colored circle, a star, or a

181. Matt. 17:2 (Revised Standard Version).

182. Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 36.

183. *Ibid.*

184. *Ibid.*, emphasis in original omitted. Transfiguration was also understood to extend through humans to encompass the entire physical world, and that subject is addressed in chapter 5.

185. Rowland, “Blessed Host,” 36.

sunburst, but the shape could vary considerably. Although it was not uncommon for Jesus Christ to appear with a multicolored glory, white glories typically were used only for Christ. He often appeared in icons surrounded by an elaborate star-shaped glory with brilliant rays, especially in icons focusing specifically on the transfiguration gospel. In the transfiguration icon shown in figure 4.1, for example, Christ appears with a glowing white glory that incorporates rays of light and a five-pointed star. Glories were not mere stylistic or graphical devices used to highlight an icon's focal point. On the contrary, they conveyed important cultural meaning, symbolizing transfiguration and legitimation as matters of divine sanction.

In addition to divine light symbolizing heaven's sanction or sanctification of an icon's subject, other legitimizing symbols in icons were closely associated with the transfiguration gospel. According to Matthew's account, "a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.'"¹⁸⁶ This description relates visually in icons to a third legitimizing symbol—known as an *arc of heaven*—which signified God's divinely powerful presence and thereby bestowed God's implicit sanction on the icon's subject.

The arc of heaven, which typically appeared either at an icon's top center or at one or both top corners, usually was separated from the rest of the image by a layer of clouds. For additional legitimizing emphasis, the arc might include an image of Jesus Christ. At other times a hand, understood to be the hand of God, extended from the

186. Matt. 17:5.

cloud.¹⁸⁷ In the St. George icon shown in figure 4.2, the arc of heaven at the top center signifies heaven's sanction of St. George as he slays the evil dragon of paganism. The light extending from heaven to St. George flows from the adult Christ's halo, through the Christ child, to St. George on earth. Together, the divine light and the blessing symbolized by the arc of heaven both transfigure and legitimize St. George and his earthly actions.

Beyond transfiguring light rays, haloes, glories, and arcs of heaven, still other symbols in icons signified legitimacy. For instance, relational legitimacy was established when a particularly revered individual or other well-known holy figure, such as an Old Testament prophet, appeared along with the icon's main subject. In figure 4.3, the transfigured Christ appears surrounded by a radiant glory, but he also is flanked by two major Old Testament prophets, whose presence was noted in the New Testament gospel accounts of Christ's transfiguration. In this legitimating context, "Elijah appears as the representative of the prophets, and Moses appears as the representative of the law."¹⁸⁸ In addition to this icon's transfiguring light and its radiant glory, Christ's status is authenticated by the prophets' presence. Moreover, in a multilayer legitimizing effect, dual arcs of heaven confer divine legitimacy on the prophets. The image in its entirety bears heaven's sanction through the Old Testament prophets to Christ, whose transfiguring light then sanctifies the apostles and the glowing earth itself.

187. Orthodox doctrine accepted depictions of Christ on the grounds that God made himself manifest in human form. Because God the Father had not revealed his form to the world, however, it was not permissible to create his image; the arc of heaven thus was used to imply his presence.

188. "A Concise and Practical Dictionary of the Bible" (New York: Nelson-National, 1964), 22, in *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons).

Angels, as messengers sent by heaven, functioned as further legitimating symbols. The Virgin Mother's presence in an icon signified her special favor, as with *Church Militant* (fig. 2.2). At times, the Virgin Mother or angels were added to an arc of heaven, although they could appear anywhere in an icon. Returning to figure 4.2, heaven's sanction is reinforced by the angel—guided by the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove—carrying a martyr's crown to St. George.

Icons, then, provided a wealth of symbolic precedents that visually signified legitimacy and divine sanction as matters of sacred truth. These images' symbolic importance thus vastly exceeded their associations with specific transfigured individuals. In terms of the analytical framework established in chapter 2, transfiguration symbols signified complex networks of abstract categories replete with legitimizing meaning. Furthermore, because their symbolic meanings were established by cultural convention, transfiguration symbols' legitimizing functions could be transferred to other subjects—such as the revolution and its leaders.

4.2 Legitimizing Symbols in Posters

With respect to Russian Orthodoxy and Soviet posters, this transfer of meaning has not yet been adequately studied, particularly with regard to legitimizing symbols. Even Edelman, who otherwise argues so persuasively for the visual construction of political culture, overlooks the symbolic value of elements like lighting in political art. He suggests that art sometimes “enhances an ideology by endowing it with a compelling aura” or a “religious ambience” resulting from “mystical lighting,” but he also states flatly that this device “is conspicuously absent in modern secular and explicitly political art.”¹⁸⁹

189. Edelman, *From Art to Politics*, 51.

Much to the contrary, by focusing on the deeper symbolic meaning of light in visual metaphors for transfiguration and legitimation, it becomes apparent that symbolic lighting was translated unambiguously from Russian Orthodox iconography to certain Soviet posters.

A 1921 poster (fig. 4.4) by the celebrated graphic artist Dmitrii Moor could not be more explicit in this regard. As discussed in chapter 3, Moor himself acknowledged the influence of icons on his work. That symbolic influence is readily evident in this figure, even though stylistically the poster does not appear strongly “iconic.” In the poster’s upper frame, the wise men and the shining star symbolize the New Testament Christmas story. The star symbolizes not only the Epiphany but is a symbol of Christ himself.¹⁹⁰ The star’s light suffuses the elaborate imperial procession with legitimating light. Meanwhile, the combined institutional weight of tsar, church, and wealth crushes the mass of people under a road that appears as a slightly elevated wooden platform.¹⁹¹

In the poster’s lower frame, by contrast, a Red Army soldier gestures emphatically toward the five-pointed red star aglow against a red sun, whose golden rays transfigure the countryside. In this case, symbols of the tsar and his entourage are trampled by a group of soldiers and workers. Absent the context provided by transfiguration theology, one might be tempted to read this image more superficially, as

190. Appleton and Bridges, *Symbolism in Liturgical Art*, 96.

191. The image of people crushed beneath the platform is very likely a visual allusion to a barbarous incident recounted in the medieval Russian chronicles. In 1224, at the Battle on the River Kalka, Russian princes were defeated by invading Mongols (called Tatars in the chronicles). Following the battle, “the princes were taken by the Tatars and crushed beneath platforms placed over their bodies on the top of which the Tatars celebrated their victory banquet.” Serge A. Zenkovsky, *Medieval Russia’s Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*, Revised & enlarged edition (New York: Meridian, 1974), 195. In Moor’s poster, then, the tsarist regime is visually associated with the barbarous Tatars of Russian history, as the entourage’s Christmas “celebration” crushes the Russian people.

on its surface it conveys the fact of the people's triumph over oppressive institutions. Considered in the broader cultural context of Russian Orthodoxy, however, steeped as it was in symbols of transfiguration and salvation, the poster's meaning is much more profound.

First, the red star itself was adopted by the Bolsheviks as the emblem for the Red Army fighting the civil war that began in 1918. Stites describes a pamphlet from the civil war years that explains the red star's meaning as the "Light of Truth." In what Stites characterizes as "a religious-mythic tale of good and evil," the Red Army soldier fights to regain truth for the people.¹⁹² Depending on its context, the Bolshevik red star also came to symbolize "light, power, redness, and a locus of perfection."¹⁹³ Symbolically, the red star displaces the salvation promised by Christ with the salvation offered by the revolution.

Next, in Moor's poster the glowing red star appears against the sun. For centuries, sun imagery had been associated with Russian rulers.¹⁹⁴ In Christianity, the sun also symbolizes salvation. As the role of Russian grand prince became elevated to tsar, imperial imagery associated the tsar with the sun as a symbol of salvation, because the tsar protected the Christian promise of salvation by defending the Orthodox faith itself.¹⁹⁵ In the developing Bolshevik master fiction, depicting the red star against

192. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 85. The red star is "*pravda*", which Stites explains as "the people's truth and justice." For an extensive excerpt from the same pamphlet, see Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*, 70–72.

193. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 86.

194. On the tradition of solar imagery applied to Russian rulers, see Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, 39–40. Sun imagery might also be connected with pagan symbols and rites that survived in Christianity, but that analysis is outside the scope of this work.

195. On this evolution, see *Ibid.*, 35–43.

the sun reinforced the red star's power and legitimized the star's use as the new symbol of salvation.

In addition, the sun's golden rays illuminate the countryside and in doing so symbolize the physical world's transfiguration.¹⁹⁶ The red star combined with the sun's rays thus communicates that the deeply embedded Russian belief in the potential for salvific transfiguration remains intact, thereby providing a sense of continuity and order during a time of perilous uncertainty. In a dramatic re-centering, however, the source of that potential has shifted from the star symbolizing Christ as truth and salvation to the glowing red Bolshevik star, which has become the new symbol of legitimate truth, salvation, and power.

The white glory, which in icons was associated with Christ, also appeared in posters. For example, in another poster by Dmitri Moor from the Russian civil war period, a prominent white glory surrounds the Red Army soldier who towers over the White Army's Baron Wrangel (see fig. 4.5). As the area to the left is labeled "Don Cossack reservoir," the poster probably dates to 1920. At that time, the Red Army was rallying for a definitive battle in Southern Russia, near the traditional Don River homelands of the Don Cossacks fighting under Wrangel's leadership against the Bolsheviks. Without an understanding of the glory's icon-based cultural significance, its use in this poster could easily be overlooked or dismissed as an attention-grabbing graphic device. Understood as a traditional symbol of transfiguration and legitimation by divine light, however, the poster's white glory adds not just graphic weight but symbolic meaning. The Red Army soldier appears as a dominant fighting force who, by virtue of

196. The details of the natural world's transfiguration are discussed in Chapter 5.

his sanctioned position, is destined for victory over even the fearsome Baron Wrangel and the formidable Don Cossacks.

As a symbol of transfiguration and legitimation, the white glory conveys the same meanings in this poster as does the divine light in the St. George icon in figure 4.2. These symbolic meanings assume political significance in the poster by establishing important relational categories for the civil war. An apparently simple graphic device, when viewed in cultural context, thus becomes a source of emotionally powerful political meaning. By surrounding the Red Army soldier with a white glory, the poster positions the soldier as a savior and the revolution's defense as a continuation of the same eternal struggle between good and evil depicted earlier in *Church Militant*.¹⁹⁷

Lenin himself appeared surrounded by a striking white glory, in a commemorative poster created by Adolf Strakova after Lenin's death in 1924 (fig. 4.6). Absent the context provided by Russian Orthodox icons, it would again be all too easy to overlook the image's embedded meaning and to perceive the culturally significant white glory as little more than an arresting visual device. Context, however, compels a very different interpretation—one that links the poster's white glory to public perceptions of Lenin as a Christ-like savior, martyr, or prophet. Writing on the cult that emerged after Lenin's death, Tumarkin cites instances from as early as 1918 in which Lenin publically was eulogized in such terms.¹⁹⁸ Such early characterizations were prompted by an assassination attempt against Lenin in late August, 1918. Although Lenin survived that

197. For similar themes in workers' writings, such as the theme of revolution as a continuation of the struggle between good and evil or the theme of revolution as apocalypse, see Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*.

198. Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*, 83–84.

attempt on his life, Tumarkin documents similar characterizations and the reverential worship that persisted and gained further momentum following his death in 1924.

Despite the prominence and prevalence of transfiguration theology and its symbols in the prerevolutionary cultural field, detailed analyses of specific relationships between the underlying theological doctrine and Bolshevik posters are largely absent from the literature, at least in English. Unfortunately, scholars who focus on individual elements such as graphic design or lighting in icons but ignore the associated theology risk missing entirely the recycled elements' deep cultural significance and continuity of meaning. Even scholars who note visual similarities between icons and posters tend to stop short of probing their underlying cultural or theological meanings.

Andrew Spira goes farther than most authors in exploring specific links between icons and posters. For example, he notes that a certain poster based on an icon design depicts a new “sacred centre,” and he also points out that historical roots make certain figures seem “ancient, just, and inevitable.”¹⁹⁹ Discussing the influence of icons on Moor’s poster work, Spira goes so far as to point out that “Moor’s posters make use of icons in a subliminal way, subtly appropriating their communicative power but using it in an affirmative way to serve their own purpose—to create and support the communist ideal.”²⁰⁰ Despite introducing this relationship, Spira then stops short of delving into the specifics of that “communicative power” or exploring the ways in which old symbolic images functioned in their new Soviet context.

199. Spira, *Avant-Garde Icon*, 194.

200. *Ibid.*

For the most part, Spira focuses on visual similarities between icons and posters as artistic devices rather than as deeply rooted cultural symbols that transfer meaning among contexts. For example, he characterizes a particular icon style as a “diagrammatic design” for a 1919 poster and sees the poster’s red Soviet star operating as “a charismatic visual device.”²⁰¹ Surprisingly, he even asserts that icons were lacking in a “complex system of referential ideas [and] tended to have a minimum of narrative and symbolic content.”²⁰² To be fair, Spira’s intent was not to probe the Russian Orthodox origins of Soviet visual political meaning. Rather, he intended to establish a connection between Russian Orthodox icons and Russian avant-garde artists, and in this he succeeded admirably. Nonetheless, because symbols derive their importance from the conventional meanings they signify, focusing on the superficial presence of icon-like design elements in posters but ignoring underlying symbolic meanings leaves crucial analytical gaps.

4.3 Symbolism, Sources, and the Red Flag

The revolutionary red flag prominent in 1917 and thereafter bears special mention with regard to Russian Orthodox symbols that reemerged in the Soviet political context. As a revolutionary symbol, the red flag itself was ubiquitous; images of the flag also appeared repeatedly in other media, including posters. Factions competing for revolutionary political control in 1917 competed to claim the red flag as their faction’s rightful symbol, according to Figes and Kolonitskii.²⁰³ Those authors link the flag’s

201. Ibid.

202. Ibid., 78.

203. Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, 1. The discussion here of the red flag’s prominence in 1917 Russia is largely based on this source.

influence in Russia to its prior use in European revolutions, beginning with the French Revolution of 1789.²⁰⁴ An alternative interpretation, however, opens the possibility that the red flag's dominance as a legitimating revolutionary symbol in Russia was firmly rooted in Russian Orthodoxy.

Russia's political structure in 1917 was characterized by competition among diverse contenders for the leading post-revolutionary role, and "symbols acted as a code of communication, whose signals served to . . . generate authority for certain leaders."²⁰⁵ Highly prized symbols were strenuously contested among diverse political groups throughout 1917, and the red flag was perhaps the most highly contested symbol of all. In the 1917 February Revolution, the red flag had been the spontaneous banner of street demonstrators, who fashioned homemade red flags and improvised red banners. An official version of the red flag was also flown in 1917 by the Provisional Government. As support for the Provisional Government deteriorated, setting the stage for the Bolshevik takeover in the October Revolution, public enthusiasm for the red flag remained strong. When the Bolsheviks seized power, they acquired revolutionary symbols "such as the red flag that previously had been shared by all the Left, but which from this point on would be used to legitimize the Bolshevik regime as the sole heir and defender of the 'revolution'."²⁰⁶ The critical analytical question in this pertains to the red flag's symbolic significance, or, in other words, to its meaning.

204. *Ibid.*, 30.

205. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

206. *Ibid.*, 70.

Despite tying the concepts of both legitimacy and revolution to the red flag, for the most part Figes and Kolonitskii focus on the color red as a symbol of European revolution and neglect its consideration as a symbol with legitimizing meaning deeply rooted in Russian culture. The color's specific connotations in a Russian context are primarily relegated to a footnote, which first explains that the Russian word for the color "red" has an etymological association with the Russian word for "beautiful."²⁰⁷ The same footnote also touches on a connection between the color red and Russian Orthodoxy, pointing out that the "main religious festival, Easter, was called 'Red Easter', and at this time the priests wore red robes."²⁰⁸ This superficial approach is fairly typical in the literature, where the etymological connection between "red" and "beautiful" has become something of a cliché, often repeated but seldom analyzed for its deeper significance. This observation sometimes accompanies generalized statements regarding the link between the red flag and nineteenth-century European labor movements, the use of red in icons and posters as a recognizably "sacred" color, or the color's connections with life, blood, and aggression.²⁰⁹ Ultimately, Figes and Kolonitskii also resort to the conclusion that Russian socialists all shared a "symbolic tradition inherited from the European revolutionary movement and their own common subculture in the underground . . . and even the symbolic system which [the Bolsheviks] went on to

207. Ibid., 32.

208. Ibid.

209. See, e.g., Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 87.; Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 13, 32, 106; Ulf Abel, "Icons and Soviet Art," in *Symbols of Power*, 152–53. Victoria E. Bonnell, "Review: The Representation of Politics and the Politics of Representation," *Russian Review* 47, no. 3 (July 1988): 13, 32, 106, doi:10.2307/130593.

develop after October was largely based on this common socialist tradition.”²¹⁰ Figes and Kolonitskii are correct in their assertions regarding the magnitude of the red flag’s significance in the Russian revolutions, about the color red’s etymological associations, and about the color’s importance in Russian Orthodoxy. Nonetheless, by focusing primarily on the red flag’s revolutionary socialist significance and foregoing analysis of related symbols that were deeply embedded in Russian culture, they leave unexplored important Russian Orthodox foundations of revolutionary imagery—particularly imagery conventionally related to legitimacy.

In particular, icons of the Old Testament prophet Elijah (fig. 4.7 through fig. 4.11) offer a wealth of alternative analytical opportunities regarding legitimizing imagery. Red glories, for instance, were especially prominent in Elijah’s icons, in which the glories typically were shaped as a red circle, cloud, or banner. Regardless of the glory’s precise form, however, its meaning was consistent: the red glory not only symbolized God’s sanction of Elijah as a major prophet, it further signified Elijah’s divine connections by evoking the whirlwind and the fiery chariot drawn by fiery horses in which the prophet, according to the Old Testament, was swept up to heaven.²¹¹

Moreover, the details of Elijah’s fiery ascension provided further legitimizing symbols.²¹² Foremost among these was Elijah’s cloak or mantle, which symbolized the prophetic power given to Elijah by God. Prior to Elijah’s ascension, he rolled up his

210. Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, 188.

211. 2 Kings 2:11.

212. The Museum of Russian Archives in Clinton, MA graciously provided access to unpublished material on the symbolism of the cloaks or mantles of Old Testament prophets. The description here of such symbolism is largely based on that source.

mantle and used it to part the Jordan River, establishing his legitimacy as an Old Testament prophet on the order of Moses. As Elijah was taken up to heaven, his mantle—which in many icons also was red—fell behind to Elisha. In the Old Testament era, a distinctive cloak was recognized as a symbol of office; transferring one’s cloak, therefore, symbolically transferred one’s office to one’s successor.²¹³ The transfer of Elijah’s mantle to Elisha thus legitimized the latter as the former’s prophetic heir and as the new bearer of God’s power. Elisha then demonstrated that power had indeed been transferred by using the rolled mantle to part the Jordan’s waters himself, just as Elijah had done before him. Even today, “passing the mantle” retains its ancient symbolic meaning of anointing one’s legitimate successor.

In their totality, then, Elijah icons—with their proliferation of red glories and mantles—signified divinely sanctioned legitimacy for both the prophet and for his successor, with that legitimacy conveyed as a matter of sacred truth. In addition, the images provided a visual precedent for symbolically transferring legitimacy to one’s successor. On this basis, we can postulate that the legitimizing meaning embedded in Russian Orthodox icons of Elijah played a far greater role than has previously been documented with regard to the red flag’s ubiquity, spontaneous public popularity, and symbolic importance in revolutionary Russia.

Five additional points support this argument. First, as a major Old Testament prophet, Elijah and his ascent to heaven were prominent subjects in Russian Orthodox icons; images of Elijah thus were familiar legitimizing elements in the 1917 Orthodox cultural frame. Next, red glories were such prominent features in Elijah’s icons that they

213. See, for example, transfer of the office of high priest from Aaron to Eleazar in Numbers 20:26.

became the most dominant identifying feature and the visual key to the icons' subject and meaning. The series of icons shown in figures 4.7 through 4.11 illustrates this effect. Third, not only was Elijah's status legitimized with red glories, his typically red mantle specifically symbolized succession—a critical political issue in 1917 Russia. Fourth, this analysis is also consistent with the well-documented public characterizations, even prior to his death, of Lenin as a prophet.²¹⁴ These characterizations speak not just to reverence for Lenin but to perceptions of his legitimacy and leadership.

Finally, similar imagery is evident in a multitude of Soviet posters in which Lenin appears against a red glory.²¹⁵ Figure 4.12, for example, shows a tapestry signifying “legitimate succession” in a socialist context. With this sequence of images, Lenin was visually positioned as the ideological heir of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Variations on this image also appeared in numerous posters, banners, and other forms, and eventually Stalin was included in the succession. Conceptually, this is no different from the many transfiguration icons in which Moses and Elijah appeared as legitimating figures with Christ. Compared with the range of posters in which this Lenin image appears, the tapestry image is somewhat anomalous, in that it shows the three central figures surrounded by a profusion of red flags. In most posters with similar succession

214. See Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, 254.; Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*, 82–84.

215. For example, in certain posters promoting electrification, Lenin was pictured against a red circle or a red wedge. As permission to reprint those posters was not available, the reader is invited to view them on the Internet by visiting www.google.com, selecting “images” and entering “Lenin” and “electrification” as search terms. By changing the search terms to “Lenin” and “poster” one will also find a range of posters that superimpose Lenin on a red flag, as well as on red stars, circles, banners, wedges, and a multiplicity of other red shapes similar to red glories in Elijah icons. An electrification poster with the red circle is also reprinted in David King, *Red Star Over Russia: A Visual History of the Soviet Union from the Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (New York: Abrams, 2009), 197.

images, the figures appear together on a single red flag, on a banner, or—as the Russian Orthodox would have it—on a red glory.

* * *

Familiar symbols from Russian Orthodox icons were culturally imbued with substantial legitimating meaning, signifying divine sanction as a matter of sacred truth. When such symbols were transferred from the context of Russian Orthodoxy to Soviet political posters, they signified the revolution's legitimacy as a source of salvation and of its leaders as rightful rulers.

Although the presence of such symbols sometimes has been noted by other authors, those reappearing in posters have usually been interpreted as mere stylistic or artistic devices. Rigorous analysis of these symbols as culturally meaningful signs requires exploring their meanings in a Russian Orthodox context. Such analysis exposes the operation of such symbols as longstanding cultural idioms used to transfer legitimating meaning from Russian Orthodoxy to the Soviet political context.



Figure 4.1 Transfiguration of Jesus Christ.

Russian icon, date uncertain. Image courtesy of Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, MA.



Figure 4.2 St. George Fights the Dragon of Paganism.

Russian icon, date uncertain. Image courtesy of Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, MA.



Figure 4.3 Transfiguration of Jesus Christ.

Russian icon, ca. 15th century. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Public domain photograph of original art. Source:

http://www.belygorod.ru/img2/lkona/Used/218qrek_preobrazhenie.jpg

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Preobrazhenie.jpeg>, accessed January 11, 2014.



Figure 4.4 Christmas.
Dmitrii Moor, artist. Bolshevik poster, 1921. (Banner on lower left: Long Live Worldwide Workers' Army!) New York Public Library. Image ID#416714. Permalink: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?416714>. Used by permission of New York Public Library.



Figure 4.5 Wrangel is Still Alive – Show Him No Mercy.

Dmitrii Moor, artist. Bolshevik poster, ca. 1920. New York Public Library. Image ID#1216145. Permalink: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1216145>. Used by permission of New York Public Library.

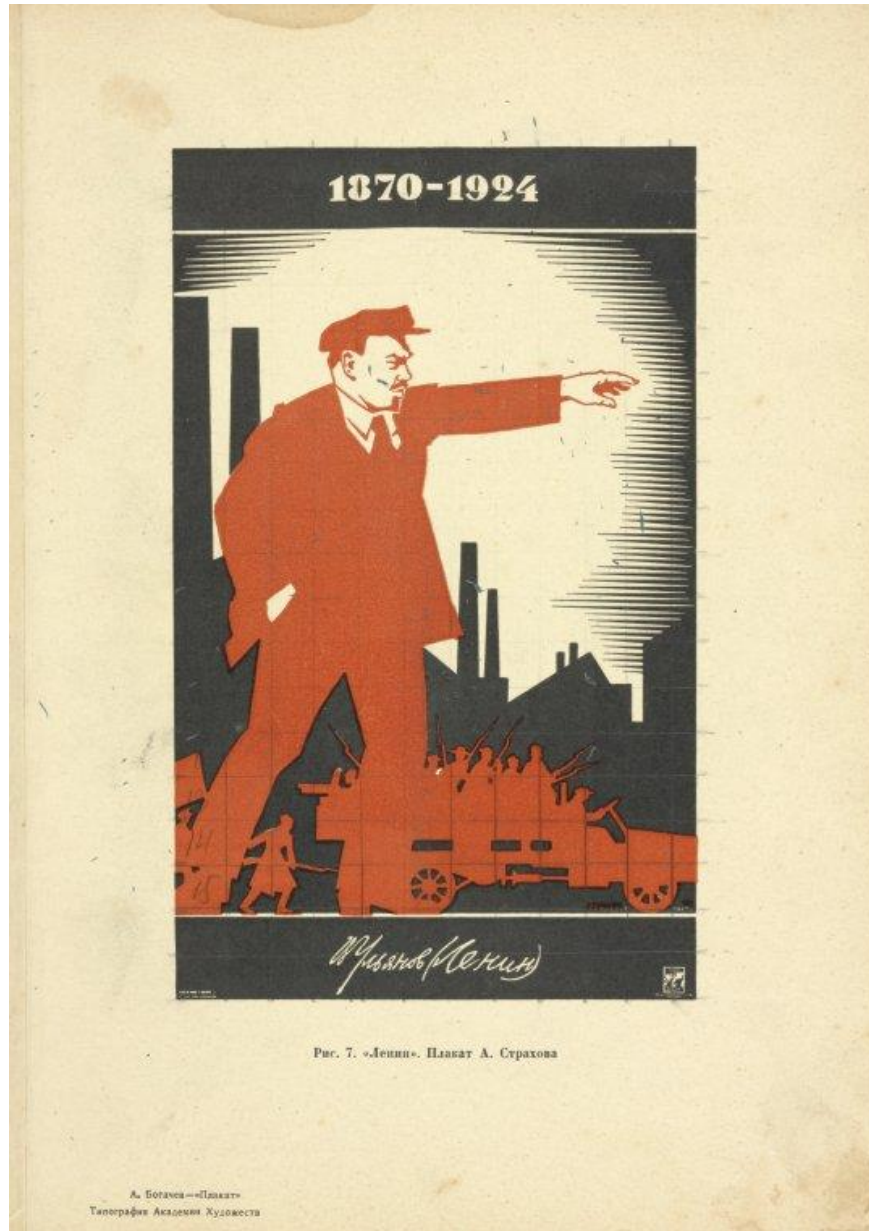


Рис. 7. «Ленин». Плакат А. Страхова

А. Ботачев—«Плакат»
Типография Академии Художеств

Figure 4.6 Lenin: 1870-1924.

Adolf Strakhova, artist. Bolshevik poster, ca. 1926. New York Public Library. Image ID#1691867. Permalink: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1691867>. Used by permission of New York Public Library.



Figure 4.7 Fiery Ascent of Prophet Elijah.

Russian icon, 17th century. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph by author with permission of Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, MA.



Figure 4.8 Fiery Ascent of Prophet Elijah.

Russian icon, date uncertain. Image courtesy of Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, MA.

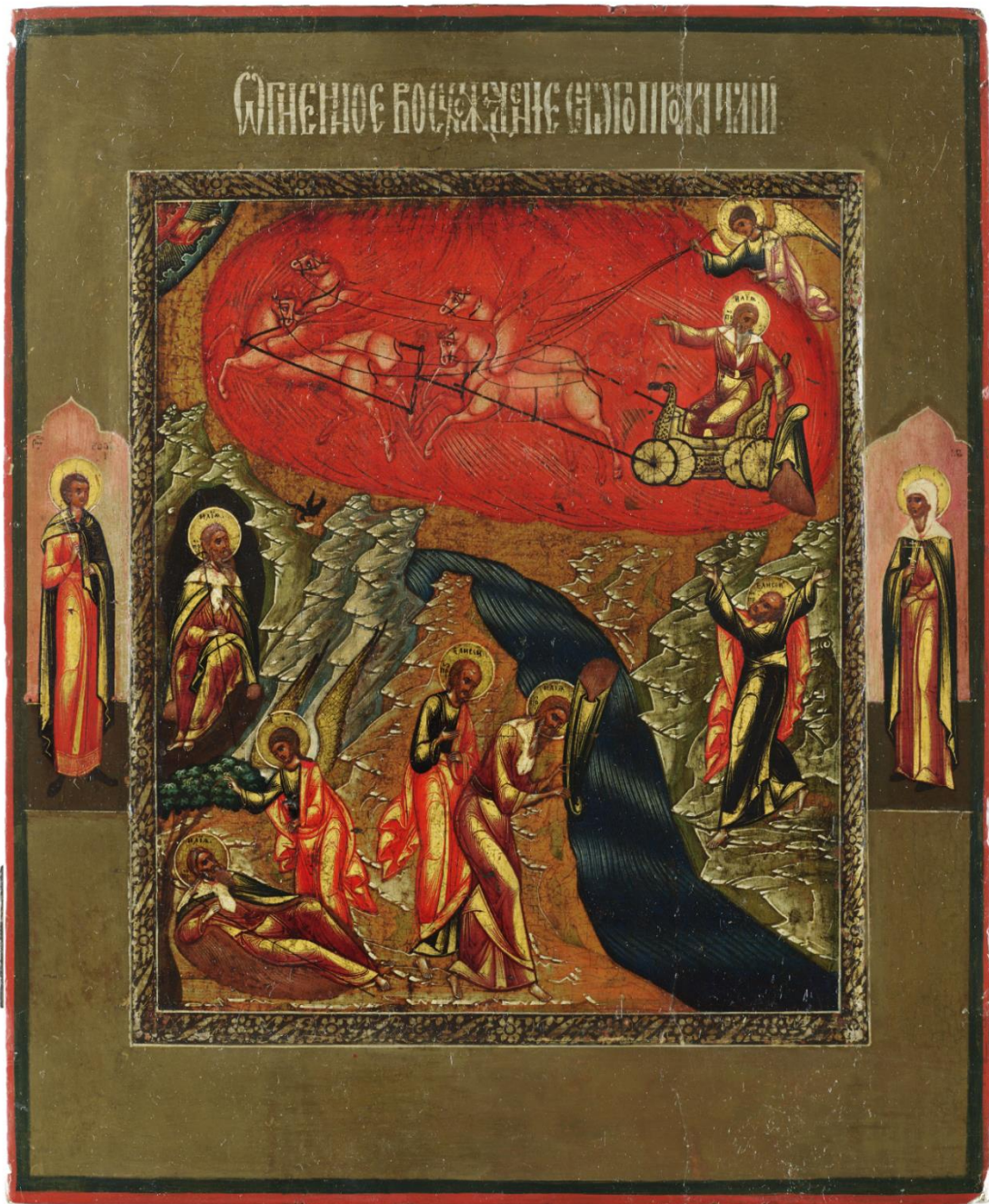


Figure 4.9 Fiery Ascent of Prophet Elijah.

Russian icon, date uncertain. Image courtesy of Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, MA.



Figure 4.10 Fiery Ascent of Prophet Elijah.

Russian icon, date uncertain. Image courtesy of Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, MA.



Figure 4.11 *Fiery Ascent of Prophet Elijah.*
Russian icon, date uncertain. Image courtesy of Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, MA.



Figure 4.12 Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin.

Public domain photograph of tapestry located at Stasimuseum, Berlin.

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wandteppich_Engels_Marx_Lenin_anagoria.JPG

[G](#). Accessed January 31, 2014.

5 IDEALIZING NEW HEROES

Heroes are essential to political master fictions. Heroic archetypes help legitimize leadership, create communal identity, and model desirable social behaviors. In both Russian Orthodoxy and Soviet Russia, images were vital to the process of establishing heroic archetypes. Russian Orthodox saints fulfilled many heroic functions in tsarist Russia, but the revolutionary regime needed to construct its own heroic ideals, which initially centered primarily on workers and soldiers. Notwithstanding this substantial change in subject matter, important heroic archetypes from Russian Orthodox icons remained intact and reemerged in Soviet political posters. In both contexts, the recycled archetypes conveyed politically important abstractions.

This chapter focuses first on a Russian Orthodox visual archetype we call *saintly brothers* then examines that archetype's reappearance in posters of Soviet *comrades*. *Saintly brothers* were recycled in some of the earliest Soviet political posters and even in posters produced as late as 1950. Transferring the underlying archetypal meaning from the old to the new context established the heroic abstract category *comrades* and emphasized the idealized bonds among those whose combined sacrifices were essential to Soviet goals. Images based on icons of *saintly brothers* thus gave visual meaning to an important revolutionary concept and concomitantly modeled new expectations for citizens of the communist state.

5.1 Archetypal Saintly Brothers

Two prominent pairs of *saintly brothers* in Russian Orthodox iconography were Saints Cyril and Methodius, and Saints Boris and Gleb. Cyril and Methodius were revered in Russian Orthodoxy for introducing Christianity to the Russians' Slavic ancestors. Cyril was also honored for adapting the Greek alphabet to create a written

Slavonic language and for a vernacular scripture translation that aided the brothers' evangelical efforts.²¹⁶ Boris and Gleb were sons of Prince Vladimir the Great, the ruler who adopted Eastern Orthodoxy for what eventually became the Russian nation. After Boris and Gleb were canonized in 1026 as the first Russian saints, their icons were used to strengthen Russian national identity.²¹⁷

These and other pairs of *saintly brothers* appeared repeatedly in icons with a characteristic compositional form that helped visually convey their fraternal relationship. This strongly vertical and symmetrical form typically was used when brothers were an icon's subject, and one brother rarely appeared without the other. *Saintly brothers* icons thus provide an example of visual symbols that appear in form as well as content; it is crucial that such compositional forms not be overlooked as mere stylistic devices.

Cyril and Methodius appear in this *saintly brothers* form in figure 5.1, in which the brothers also are visually related by complementary details in their clothing, such as color, trim type, and cross style. The complementary aspects of these extra-personal elements help visually convey the abstraction of their brotherhood, while certain other visual details highlight the specific contributions of each to the faith. On the image's left, Cyril gestures toward the book he holds, which indicates his role in producing the Slavonic scripture translation. Because that translation helped Cyril and Methodius evangelize the Slavs, Cyril also crushes the serpent symbolizing paganism under his feet; Methodius offers his blessing to the countryside he helped evangelize. Meanwhile, Christ's presence in the arc of heaven overhead legitimizes the pair's sainthood and

216. This early alphabet evolved into that now known as "Cyrillic." See Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Russian and Slavic Myth and Legend* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1998), 56.

217. Abel, "Icons and Soviet Art," 145.

further unites them visually as brothers in his service. In total, this icon of specific historically important men also provides an archetypal model for their abstract relationship as *saintly brothers* in Christ.

Cyril and Methodius were the subjects of icons for centuries, and their link with Russia's heritage was still recognized in the early twentieth century. The World War I Russian poster in figure 5.2 demonstrates that Cyril and Methodius were still known and that their historical importance was understood as recently as 1915. In this poster, the *saintly brothers* urge Russians to assist their fellow Slavs in Serbia and Montenegro. This image alludes to its subjects' saintliness and to the Russians' Slavic roots, lending both historical weight and moral authority to the poster's emotional appeal for Slavic solidarity. Notably, this poster retains the iconic visual composition traditionally used to depict *saintly brothers*—it strongly foregrounds two visually balanced, vertically symmetrical men. The image's appearance in 1915 confirms that paired images of *saintly brothers* were active in the Russian cultural frame for both artists and the public shortly before the 1917 revolution.

The same *saintly brothers* archetype appeared in icons of Boris and Gleb, highly venerated saints whose icons signified multiple meanings in Russian Orthodox culture. As Vladimir's sons, they belonged to the category "saintly princes."²¹⁸ As martyrs, they were also known as "passion sufferers" or "Christlike princes;" their martyrdom stemmed from their passive surrender to political assassins, which was believed to emulate Christ's own sacrifice.²¹⁹ Of particular value for revolutionary purposes, Boris

218. For the cult of saintly princes, see Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*.

219. *Ibid.*, 7, 14.

and Gleb icons evoked the abstraction *self-sacrifice*, because sacrifice was a key element in the myth of the Christlike princes.²²⁰ Cherniavsky observes that the crucial element in the medieval Russian myth of the passion-suffering saintly princes “is not so much the *identity* of prince and Christ; it is, rather the *translation* of Christ and his passion into the prince and his suffering.”²²¹ This same dynamic was still at work centuries later, as images of Boris and Gleb were translated into posters modeling the Soviet regime’s requirements for heroic sacrifice from revolutionary *comrades*.

The vertically symmetrical form of the *saintly brothers* archetype was typical of Boris and Gleb icons. Although the pair occasionally appeared on horseback or with their father, they most frequently stood together side by side (fig. 5.3 and fig. 5.4). As with Cyril and Methodius, their paired relationship was visually emphasized with complementary color and details in their clothing. The color inversions for different clothing parts visually unify the pair in figure 5.3, while they are unified with nearly identical clothing colors in figure 5.4. As additional extra-personal elements, both wear swords that allude to their historical political and military roles as princes; each also holds a martyr’s cross symbolizing their Christ-like passion suffering. Given their brotherhood, their martyrdom, their sacrifice, their longstanding association with national identity, and their prominence in Russian Orthodoxy, Saints Boris and Gleb provided a ready archetype for *saintly brothers*. Beginning with the very earliest Bolshevik posters, artists visually translated that iconic archetype into revolutionary *comrades*.

220. *Ibid.*, 14.

221. *Ibid.*, 17 emphasis added.

5.2 Archetypal *Comrades*

As a form of greeting not based on social class distinctions, *comrade* expressed an egalitarian ideal and camaraderie in revolution. The term originally described fellow soldiers who shared a sleeping chamber, giving the term its connotations of close proximity and common purpose.²²² After the 1789 French Revolution, the term gained currency among the European antibourgeois, who used it to avoid more conventional titles. The term later was embraced by nineteenth-century socialists and communists who eschewed traditional bourgeois forms of address. In Russia, *comrade* was initially adopted by members of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia before coming into common usage, first during the 1905 Revolution and then during the tumult of 1917.²²³

Just as brotherhood implies a reciprocal bond as well as a biological relationship, the abstraction *comrade* is more than a form of address implying egalitarian social relationships. As an idealized archetype, *comrade* also implies a social bond—a partnership forged in revolution. According to Stites, for some workers the term “possessed great bonding significance.”²²⁴ As an abstraction, *comrade* also connotes the sense of brothers bound in common purpose, and that meaning has an old and enduring visual parallel in Russian Orthodox iconography. The visual cultural idiom for *saintly brothers* was ideally suited to demonstrate personal sacrifice and to model new social bonds among *comrades*. Not surprisingly, the *saintly brothers* archetype

222. For the term’s adoption in a revolutionary context, see Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, 61.

223. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 134.

224. *Ibid.*

frequently recurs in Soviet posters with various combinations of industrial, agricultural, and railroad workers, as well as miners, soldiers, or sailors.

Archetypal *comrades* based on *saintly brothers* appeared in the earliest Bolshevik political posters. A prominent example was produced in 1918 to celebrate the first anniversary of the October Revolution (fig. 5.5). In that poster, the dominant pair—a blacksmith and a peasant—echo the traditional vertical and symmetrical composition of *saintly brothers*. As differentiating extra-personal elements, the two figures hold the tools of their trades: the blacksmith's hammer and the peasant's scythe. As unifying extra-personal elements, they also hold tools of revolution: a rifle for the blacksmith and a pike for the peasant. Moreover, just as the crushed serpent of paganism signified the evangelism of Cyril and Methodius, the deposed autocracy's symbolic debris signifies the blacksmith's and the peasant's roles as *comrades* in revolution: at their feet lie double-headed eagles, an imperial shield, the tsar's crown, and broken chains.

With the *comrades* bond established visually, further visual details idealized the new roles. First, the parade approaching the *comrades* has the appearance of a religious procession honoring a saint's feast day. Indeed, scholars of revolutionary ritual have noted the similarities between early revolutionary festivals and celebrations marking religious holidays.²²⁵ This anniversary poster, which was produced in connection with a revolutionary festival, provides a visual instance of this link. Next, a young mother holds an infant aloft to the *comrades* in the very manner of one seeking a saint's blessing. This seemingly simple and spontaneous action by the young mother thus symbolizes the *comrades'* elevation as secular saints. Just as Christian saints were

225. See, e.g., Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*.

believed to intercede on behalf of devout supplicants through icons, an intercessory function was visually ascribed to the poster's *comrades* as secular saints. In the process, idealized archetypal meaning was transferred from *saintly brothers* to *comrades*.

In her extensive study of Soviet posters, Victoria Bonnell notes the dominant pattern of two males that appeared in the earliest Bolshevik posters, but she does not link that form to icons of canonized brothers. Bonnell observes that early Soviet political posters depicted the alliance between worker and peasant with images of two men—the worker-blacksmith and the male peasant—and in this regard she points to the same 1918 anniversary poster analyzed here (fig. 5.5). This poster was created by Alexander Apsit, who had been trained as an icon painter. Although Bonnell mentions Apsit's icon training, she does not explore specific ways in which that training might have influenced his poster work.²²⁶ She focuses primarily on the poster's blacksmith image, and she notes that Apsit's father was a blacksmith.²²⁷ She suggests that this poster's plethora of red symbols might have religious connections, but she draws no specific parallels with icons. More generally, Bonnell mentions "color symbolism," the "frontal view," and "perspectival distortions of the background" as "devices common to religious icons [that] were applied to Soviet political posters."²²⁸ As a trained icon painter familiar with *podlinniki*, however, Apsit surely would have been well versed in the traditional

226. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 11.

227. *Ibid.*, 26.

228. *Ibid.*, 32–33.

compositions used for pairs of *saintly brothers*. More critically, the symbolic importance of these *podlinniki*-controlled forms would not have been lost on Apsit.

In her analysis of this Apsit anniversary poster (fig. 5.5), Bonnell focuses on the blacksmith image to an extent that nearly excludes the peasant. She notes the peasant's presence but largely ignores his significance, except to suggest that images of peasants drew their visual importance only from their proximity to the blacksmith-worker. For Bonnell, the blacksmith was the sole embodiment of the revolution's worker-hero, and only he possessed the "exceptional status" that allowed him to stand alone.²²⁹ She states that the blacksmith image "resonated" with religious and several other types of art, but beyond this general claim, she does not explain the dynamics of that resonance.²³⁰ Overall, her observations with regard to links between posters and religious art tend more toward suggestions of general connections than toward structured evidentiary analysis—an approach that is not atypical in the literature. Frank Kämpfer characterizes such general allusions to a relationship between posters and religious icons as the icon-cliché ("*Ikonen-Klischee*"); this he describes as a "cliché of nearly mythic proportion" that reduces mention of the relationship between icons and Soviet art to little more than a platitude.²³¹ The important questions of *how* and *why* and *to what effect* posters were related to religious images largely are left unasked and unanswered.

229. For Bonnell's analysis of this poster, see *Ibid.*, 26–28.

230. *Ibid.*, 29.

231. Frank Kämpfer, "Review: Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 47, no. 3 (January 1, 1999): 410–413. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41050407>, accessed February 8, 2014. My translation.

Bonnell ties repetitive depictions of workers in posters to the fact that Bolshevik ideology centered on the proletariat, arguing that “it was critically important to establish in public discourse the heroic position and collective identity of the working class.”²³² She then suggests that the earliest Bolshevik political posters presented an idealized worker to establish the “heroic position and role of the worker . . . [and bring] an image of the new worker-heroes to the population at large.”²³³ Bonnell is correct as far as she goes—the Bolsheviks needed to propagate a new ideal, and idealized images of workers appeared frequently in posters. What her analysis omits is the influence of longer term cultural archetypes on the new ideal types—in other words, the persistence of underlying cultural meaning despite more superficial change.

The blacksmith image on which Bonnell focuses as the ideal worker was frequently repeated for about a decade. Bonnell finds it noteworthy that “despite the absence of centralized coordination in poster production, virtually identical images of the worker-blacksmith and the male peasant were recreated over and over again . . . [and dozens] of posters with this picture appeared during the Civil War.”²³⁴ She nonetheless stops short of linking this seemingly spontaneous phenomenon to the availability and persistence of a preexisting archetype, other than briefly mentioning the blacksmith’s presence in mythology and folklore. She asserts instead that Apsit’s blacksmith image itself “quickly assumed archetypal status.”²³⁵

232. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 2.

233. *Ibid.*, 22.

234. *Ibid.*, 79.

235. *Ibid.*, 26.

On the contrary, specific comparisons of posters and icons suggest that the rapid emergence and repetition of similar worker images in posters had roots in the age-old traditions of Russian Orthodox iconography. Moreover, the influence of those traditions on Bolshevik artists—particularly on trained icon painters such as Apsit—would have more than compensated for the absence of centralized poster coordination at this early stage. Arguably, the blacksmith-peasant pairing Bonnell describes appeared early and often because there existed a *saintly brothers* archetype that had been familiar for centuries. For both artists and viewers, the older archetype held deep cultural meaning that symbolically conveyed the politically essential but abstract bond between *comrades*. In addition, through the myth of saintly princes such as Boris and Gleb, *saintly brothers* reinforced a model of self-sacrifice that could be conceptually linked to revolutionary Russia's salvation.

Analyzing the blacksmith-peasant pairing in terms of its broader cultural dynamics—as the transfer of archetypal meaning from *saintly brothers* to *comrades*—allows us to perceive how the category- and identity-building elements of icons could be transferred to other comrade-like pairings as the political need arose. This transfer also reveals how the *comrades* archetype functioned as a recycled visual morpheme, or as a persistent unit of underlying meaning that was superficially extended and modified as needed. We thus can detect the archetype's subtle shifts over time, as certain groups or their representatives were elevated as secular saints. As a result, we are more able to discern the process by which icon-based images helped construct Soviet political meaning.

This dynamic was particularly evident during the civil war (1918-1921) that followed the Bolsheviks' seizure of power. Many posters from that period evoked secular "saints" and depicted their intercessory unity as crucial to revolutionary Russia's salvation. These idealized heroes appeared repeatedly as archetypal *saintly brothers*. For example, a 1920 poster (fig. 5.6) combines another blacksmith with another peasant as *comrades* who visually dominate the image. The poster's caption reads "Only the close union of workers and peasants will save Russia from destruction and hunger." This caption emphasizes Russia's reliance on the *comrades'* unity as well as on their intercessory efforts. With joined hands, the blacksmith and peasant gesture toward the combined products of their labors: on the left, workers load grain into a waiting train; on the right, workers load another train with iron tools. The engines of both trains face the residential and industrial areas stretching to the horizon, indicating the extent to which Russia's salvation depends on the *comrades'* combined intercessory labors. Bonnell's analytical precept—the peasant's subordination to the blacksmith—is not evident. Much to the contrary, the image's symmetry and its central figures' joined hands emphasize the egalitarian bond of *comrades*.

Although this poster specifically models the cooperation and contributions required from these two occupational groups, the poster also accomplishes a much more crucial political task. By linking these *comrades* to the deep cultural meaning of *saintly brothers*, the poster imbues the labors of both worker and peasant with complex religious meaning that connects their personal sacrifices to Russia's salvation—just as the iconic forms of Boris and Gleb had done for centuries. In archetypal terms, the

newly sanctified *comrades* are merging visually with the ancient myth of the passion-bearing *saintly brothers*, in whose iconic form the *comrades* appear.

A similar example appeared in 1925, with a brightly colored poster (fig. 5.7) proclaiming that Soviet rule was based on “the unbreakable union of peasants and workers.” The prominent central figures—a peasant and a blacksmith—function as a paired unit that dominates a procession of banner-waving celebrants typical of a saint’s feast day. Moreover, the sun—a traditional symbol of salvation—appears prominently, just as in figure 5.5. Again, the concept *comrades* is visually linked with Russia’s salvation.

Although cooperation between workers and peasants remained crucial, other groups also required elevation to the status of intercessory secular saints, especially during war. As an important categorical meaning, therefore, the *comrades* archetype also was extended to occupations beyond the blacksmith and the peasant. In another poster from the civil war years (fig. 5.8), two miners laboring together are paired in a mirror image. Their visual similarities resemble iconic treatments of *saintly brothers*, but because of their occupation they are depicted in a miner’s crouch.²³⁶ The poster’s caption reads “Everything for Miners!” and reinforces the critical need for coal to support the Bolshevik war effort. Meanwhile, there are subtle but significant shifts in the poster’s lower image. While still largely symmetrical, that image is less mirrored; miners exchange a cart labeled “coal” for a cart labeled “products” hauled by other workers. By virtue of their symmetry, the workers with their carts retain their visual status as linked

236. A visual precedent exists in icons of saints associated with particular occupations or activities. For example, the *saintly brothers* Florus and Lorus, the patron saints of horses, often appear in their icons on horseback.

pairs, but an important complexity has been introduced. Consistent with the Soviet political narrative and the civil war's demands, the social bond's basis has shifted from the miners' shared occupation to interdependence. In other words, the workers have been redefined as model *comrades*, whose cooperative interdependence is paramount to revolutionary Russia's salvation.

The blacksmith's brief symbolic lifespan argues further against designating it an archetype. Despite Bonnell's characterization of the blacksmith image in posters as archetypal, she also notes that the blacksmith as the worker's personification largely was abandoned after about 1930.²³⁷ The *saintly brothers/comrades* archetype nonetheless persisted, lending credence to its deeper roots as an underlying cultural idiom. In a Russian poster from about 1950 (fig. 5.9), even Stalin and Mao appear together in this form, while the caption speaks to their bond: "Let the Unbreakable Friendship and Cooperation between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China Live and Grow Stronger."²³⁸ Focusing on the longer term cultural idioms rather than more transitory manifestations reveals the depth and persistence of Russian Orthodox influences in Soviet political art.

To summarize, four elements support the argument that archetypal *saintly brothers* from Russian Orthodox icons were recycled in posters to transfer culturally important visual meaning and to model Soviet *comrades*. First is the *prima facie* visual evidence of the compositional form of early Bolshevik posters calling for the union of peasants and workers, compared with icons featuring well-known and highly revered

237. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 34.

238. Just as saints in religious icons might carry a book or a scroll symbolizing sacred scripture, Mao carries a book whose title translates simply as "Lenin."

saintly brothers. Second, this iconic composition became dominant in posters nearly immediately and was frequently repeated for pairings of male workers and peasants; captions extolled their union and exhorted them to save revolutionary Russia. The spontaneity and rapidity of the form's appearance and its repetition in posters suggest a connection to an underlying cultural idiom rather than a novel revolutionary invention. Third, some of the earliest artists to employ such compositions in the Bolshevik context previously were trained in or are known to have been influenced by Russian Orthodox icon painting. Finally, the *saintly brothers/comrades* archetype combines deep continuity of meaning with superficial change in appearance; that this occurs over a period of decades imparts credence to its function as a persistent cultural idiom. In short, the prevalence, the immediacy, the extensibility, and the longevity combine to link the underlying *saintly brothers* archetype from Russian Orthodox iconography to the model for Soviet *comrades*.

5.3 Female Comrades

Both the etymology and the iconography of *comrades* were overwhelmingly male, drawn as they were from traditions of soldiering or *saintly brothers*. Although some female saints appeared in icons, religious iconography with female subjects was overwhelmingly dominated by images of the Virgin Mother. Her icons primarily emphasized aspects of motherhood, such as tenderness. When women did appear in icons, they generally lacked the visually paired form of *saintly brothers* whose meaning lent itself so readily to the abstraction *comrades*. Yet the Soviets needed to engage all citizens to achieve their state-building objectives. Not surprisingly, then, what initially appeared in posters as a male visual archetype was soon extended to incorporate women as *comrades*.

Analyzing female images in terms of cultural archetypes resolves some of the ambiguities and concerns Bonnell identifies about depictions of women in early Soviet political art. Reading posters as examples of Skocpol's "cultural idioms in transition" reveals how Soviet artists struggled to adapt traditional iconography to women's roles in the Soviet state. This struggle underlies Bonnell's observation that early Bolshevik imagery depicting women was more varied than images of men from the same time period.²³⁹ The greater variety in female images reinforces the argument that the more uniform male *comrades* imagery relied on an existing iconic archetype. As a Russian Orthodox archetype comparable to *saintly brothers* did not exist for paired women, Bolshevik artists were more obliged to experiment visually than they had been for men. This was especially true with respect to politically important categories of male origin, such as *comrades*.

Bonnell analyzes a 1920 poster by Nikolai Kogout (fig. 5.10) in terms of gender. She concludes that the male and female roles are "unmistakably gender-marked, indicating male domination" and that the woman is "represented in a subordinate position as the blacksmith's helper."²⁴⁰ Noting the lack of women who actually worked in this occupation, Bonnell also speculates that "the Bolshevik image of a woman as a blacksmith's helper" must have baffled "contemporaries looking for realistic or typical representation."²⁴¹ Based on her analysis of this and two other posters, she describes the female helper as a "replica" of the male blacksmith, with the dominant male

239. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 80.

240. *Ibid.*, 75.

241. *Ibid.*, 76.

functioning as the source of the subordinate female's status.²⁴² With respect to this replication, Bonnell concludes: "In this way, and only in this way, women in the Bolshevik system of signification acquired heroic status."²⁴³ In contrast, a fundamentally different interpretation emerges when Kogout's poster is analyzed as a shift in the *saintly brothers* idiom—a shift that signifies both males and females as *comrades*.

Several indicators support this alternative interpretation. The first is the man's size relative to the woman's. In traditional icon painting, a figure's relative size signifies its importance. The two figures in this poster are conspicuously symmetrical, which is typical of *saintly brothers*. To accomplish this symmetry, the man's body is curved in a way that deemphasizes his height relative to the woman's. Although his arms are raised overhead, his head reaches slightly below hers. The woman's forearms are bulky and muscular, as are the man's; her grip and her intense focus mirror the man's intensity and are visibly equal to her task. Next, the man and the woman visually function as a paired unit, which also is typical of *saintly brothers*. The two images are linked as one by the curve of the blacksmith's apron, which flows visually into the line formed by the woman's right arm. Their other mirrored curves combine to create what appears as a single, continuous, unified image—an image thus more evocative of bonded *comrades* than of male domination.²⁴⁴ Furthermore, the central curve of their combined image visually cradles and supports the mid-ground workers assembling a train. An idealized

242. Ibid., 77.

243. Ibid.

244. This is not to argue that male domination or female subordination were not characteristics of the Bolshevik Party or the Soviet state. The key point here is that this image is better understood as the recycling of a familiar cultural idiom to define new social roles than as signifying the reflected glory of the blacksmith-worker as the "only" way in which Soviet women could be depicted heroically.

industrial infrastructure of smoking factories, massive iron bridges, and electrical distribution facilities appears in the background. Bonnell provides only a partial translation of the poster's caption: "*With Weapons We Defeated the Enemy.*" The full caption, however, provides a more complete picture and supports this alternative interpretation: "*With Weapons We Defeated the Enemy, With Our Labor We Will Have Bread. To Work, Comrades!*" With its caption exhorting *comrades* to shift their energies from war to work, the totality of this image evokes a new Soviet world that all *comrades*—both male and female—are called upon to build together.

In a final example, a World Women's Day poster (fig. 5.11) from the civil war period demonstrates the underlying *saintly brothers* cultural idiom shifting to an archetypal depiction of two women. The worker on the left gestures toward the silhouettes of working factories behind her, while the peasant holds her sickle and a bundle of grain. The two stand together in the symmetrical iconic form of *saintly brothers*; complementary details in their dress visually link the pair, just as they did with Saints Cyril and Methodius or Saints Boris and Gleb. Their joined hands further signify their bond as *comrades*. The sun—a traditional symbol of Christ and salvation—is centrally positioned overhead, in precisely the manner of a legitimizing arc of heaven. As a shifting cultural idiom, the image's superficial details have changed, but its underlying cultural meaning is intact.

* * *

The *saintly brothers* archetype provided a politically useful model for Soviet *comrades*. The iconic archetype's recycling in posters reveals the transfer of its meaning to *comrades* and also illuminates an important shift in the cultural idiom itself.

A visual archetype that began with fraternal pairs shifted to emphasize the interdependent bond required between different types of workers. In addition, the originally male archetype expanded to accommodate females as well as males in the category *comrades*. Despite these more superficial shifts in content, the critical underlying meaning remained constant: *saintly brothers/comrades* images evoked the archetypal bond between each pair and concomitantly idealized personal sacrifice for Russia's salvation.



Figure 5.1 *Saints Cyril and Methodius.* Russian icon, date unknown. Image courtesy of Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, MA.



Figure 5.2 Saints Cyril and Methodius.

Appeal for aid to Slavs in Serbia and Montenegro. Russian poster, 1915. Political Poster Collection, Poster ID# RU/SU-1062, Hoover Institution Archives. Courtesy of Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University.



Figure 5.3 Saints Boris and Gleb.

Russian (Novgorod) icon, ca. 14th century. Public domain photograph of original artwork. [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/df/Boris and Gleb %28icon%2C XIV c%29.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/df/Boris_and_Gleb_%28icon%2C_XIV_c%29.jpg), accessed October 2, 2013.

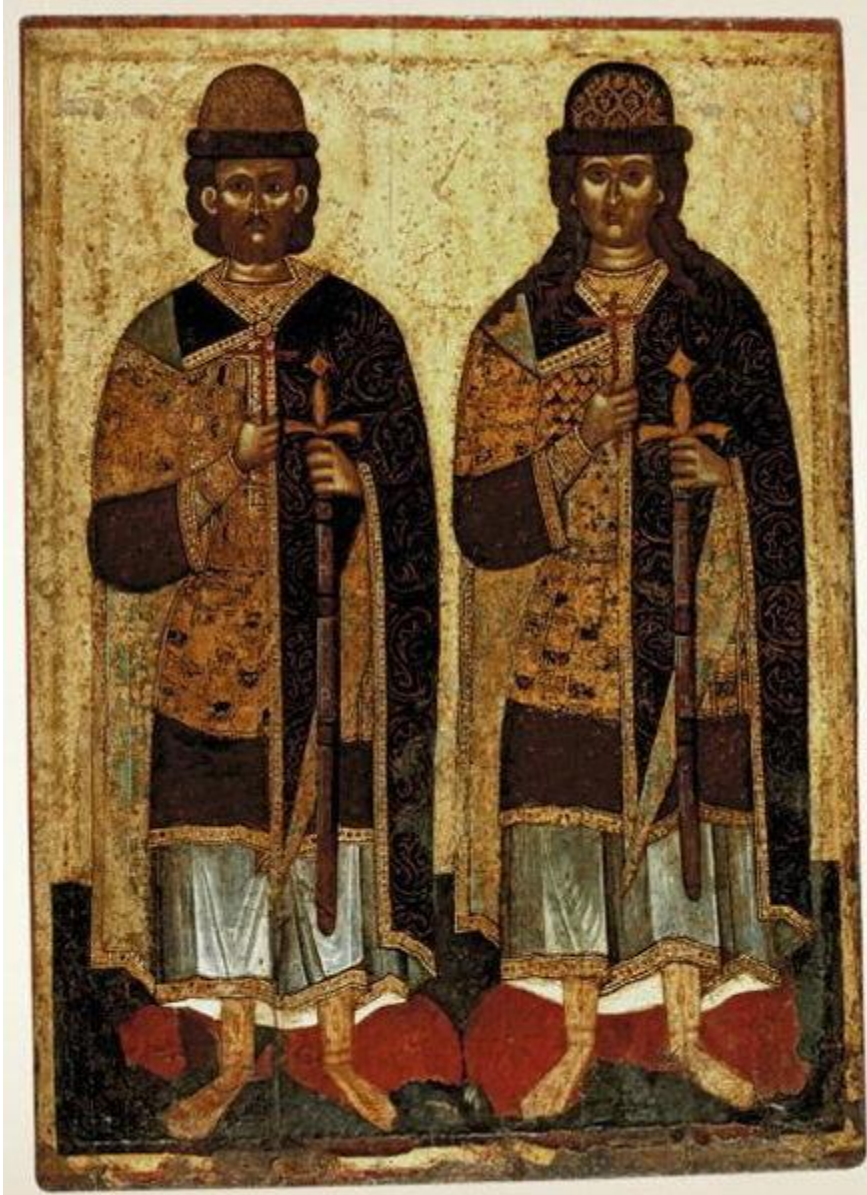


Figure 5.4 Saints Boris and Gleb.

Russian (Pskov) icon, ca. 14th-15th century. Public domain photograph of original artwork.http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Boris_and_Gleb_%28Pskov,_14.15th_c._GTG%29.jpg, accessed October 2, 2013.



Figure 5.5 *The Year of Proletarian Dictatorship, October 1917-1918.* Soviet propaganda poster by Alexandre Apsit. Universal History Archive/UIG, Bridgeman Images.



Figure 5.6 Only The Close Union Of Workers And Peasants Will Save Russia From Destruction And Hunger.

Russian poster, 1920. New York Public Library. Image ID#1216185. Permalink: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1216185>. Used by permission of New York Public Library.



Figure 5.7 Soviet Rule Is Based On The Unbreakable Union Between Peasants And Workers!

Soviet Poster, 1925. New York Public Library. Image ID#1569243. Permalink: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1569243>. Used by permission of New York Public Library.



ВСЕ ДЛЯ ШАХТЕРА!

Штык наш попрежнему остер,
Кирка рабочая готова.
Красноармеец и шахтер
— Советов пламенных основа.

Бежала с визгом шушера,
И поддавала ходу, ходу.
Теперь кирку вонзать пора
В Донбасса черную породу.

Раздвинул красный горизонт,
Не ждите отдыха, герои:
Совет нас всех Донецкий фронт,
Зовут и шахты, и забой.

Мечту об отдыхе давай!
Вы рожу видите ль Европы?
Она бурмочет с миной злой:
— Забой не легче, чем окопы...

Забой не легче,— спора нет,
Не привыкать рабочим людям.
В боях добились мы побед,
В забоях—новые добудем.

Кто генералом раслугал
И всю антантовскую свору,
Кто красным фронтам помогал,
— Поможет красному шахтеру.

Советской верные звезды,
Там рубят твердый пласт на горки
Шахтеры—до колен в воде,
По целым дням не видя корки.

Работы тяжелее нет,
Но помнит труженика об этом:
— В моем труде—тепло и свет,
А без него—конек Советам...

Не слышно жалобы пустой:
Шахтер—гордец, не раб, не пария.
Помочь шахтеру—долг святой,
Его исполнит пролетарий.

Запомнит пусть рабочий класс,—
И прочия помнить не мешает:
— Теперь Донбасс, один Донбасс
Судьбы республики решает!

Топливо хлынуло, идет...
Дрожит разлуха на пороге...
Донецкий фронт подмоги ждет,
И не напрасно жлет подмоги.



Figure 5.8 Everything for Miners!

Russian poster, ca. 1918-1921. New York Public Library. Image ID#1216151.

Permalink: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1216151>. Used by permission of New York Public Library.



Figure 5.9 Let the Unbreakable Friendship and Cooperation between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China Live and Grow Stronger.

Poster depicting Joseph Stalin (1879-1953) and Mao Tse-tung (1893-1976) shaking hands, c.1950 (colour litho), Russian School, (20th century). Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, France / Archives Charmet / Bridgeman Images.



Figure 5.10 *With Weapons We Defeated the Enemy, With Our Labor We Will Have Bread. To Work, Comrades!*

Soviet Poster, ca. 1921. Political Poster Collection, Poster ID: RU/SU 1280, Hoover Institution Archives. Courtesy of Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University.



Figure 5.11 March 8th – World Women’s Day.

Double-page poster with appeal to female workers and peasants in both Russian and Ukrainian languages, ca. 1917—1921. New York Public Library, Digital ID#1216216. Permalink: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1216216>. Used by permission of New York Public Library.

6 UTOPIANISM, MIRACLES, AND WORLDVIEW

The Soviet master fiction promised massive social change, linking a miraculous socialist utopia with ambitious plans for revolutionizing industry and agriculture with technology. Neither utopian vision nor belief in miracles, however, was unique to the revolution.²⁴⁵ Both had deep cultural roots as tenets of Russian Orthodoxy, which tied miracles and transfiguration to the utopian perfectibility both of humans and of the physical world. Faith in miracles and utopian transfiguration as ever-present possibilities stemmed from the Orthodox belief that holy persons actively mediated in worldly affairs, with icons serving as conduits for their intercession. Moreover, icons provided symbolic precedents for visually expressing miracles and utopian change as matters of sacred truth. These longstanding visual traditions and enduring beliefs added cultural credence to the Soviet utopian vision and its expression in political posters.

In this chapter, we first will briefly consider utopianism and miracles in their prerevolutionary cultural context. We then will focus on images of the physical world's transformation, first as visualized in Russian Orthodox icons and then in Soviet posters. Finally, we will reflect on the connections both in icons and in posters between visual perspective and an overarching worldview—particularly as perspective and worldview pertain to ideas regarding the individual's place in society.

6.1 Utopianism and Miracles in Cultural Context

The belief in utopian perfectibility as an achievable earthly ideal formed a vital strand of Russian Orthodoxy. Russia has been called “a breeding ground” for Christian

245. This is not intended to suggest that there was just one utopian vision. As Richard Stites has shown, the details of revolutionary utopian visions varied across social milieux. See Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*.

utopians, where the “mystical foundation of the Russian faith and the messianic basis of its national consciousness combined to produce in the common people a spiritual striving for the perfect Kingdom of God in the ‘Holy Russian land.’”²⁴⁶ Key beliefs underlying this utopianism included the perfectibility of humanity and of the everyday world in accordance with an ideal form.²⁴⁷

Religiously rooted utopianism also underlay the Russian perceptual practice aptly described as “seeing into being.”²⁴⁸ In terms of our analytical framework, “seeing into being” relates to the act of seeing as a subjective, culturally based visual practice rather than as a physiological phenomenon.²⁴⁹ “Seeing” as a Russian cultural practice was influenced before and after the revolution by the “recurrent and powerfully effective idea that it is possible to depict what exists just out of reach, just out of sight, [an idea that] was a central feature of Orthodox and Soviet iconography.”²⁵⁰ The belief that “being” could be manifested through “seeing” was consistent with the Orthodox view that saints actively mediated between the spiritual and the material worlds using icons as channels between the two. This Orthodox cultural foundation helps explain the proliferation of Soviet images that focused on the desired state of affairs—the transfigured Soviet state that was to be—rather than on images realistically representing any specific or transitional moment in time.

246. Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 308.

247. Kivelson and Neuberger, “Introduction,” 7.

248. *Ibid.*, 6.

249. See chapter 1 for a more extended discussion of “seeing” in this sense.

250. Kivelson and Neuberger, “Introduction,” 6.

The profound Russian Orthodox faith in the sacred truth of miracles was an important aspect of the prerevolutionary cultural field, and this belief persisted after the revolution. The belief that icons connected the viewer and the physical world to the realm of divine grace further supported the notion that miracles could be worked by “seeing” them into “being.” Belief both in miracles and in the miraculous properties of icons endured over centuries. The sixteenth-century *Domostroi*, for example, repeatedly describes icons as “miracle-working” or “miraculous.”²⁵¹ During the revolutionary events of 1917 and the ensuing years of civil war, public discourse included many references to miracles. In public perception, the revolution was expected to produce “not only social and political changes, but a Miracle—rapid and universal purification and ‘resurrection.’”²⁵² Participants or observers sometimes conflated the revolution itself with the Easter miracle.²⁵³ Contemporary observers also hailed the fact that Lenin survived the 1918 assassination attempt against him as a miracle.²⁵⁴ This widespread and enduring faith in miracles provided a cultural foundation for the belief that rapid utopian transformation would accompany the revolution.

As the persistent belief in miracles demonstrates, the cultural context in which Soviet posters were produced and viewed included a deeply held conviction that lived

251. Carolyn Johnston Pouncy, ed., *The “Domostroi”: Rules for Russian Households in the Time of Ivan the Terrible*, trans. Carolyn Johnston Pouncy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994). See Index, 262, for multiple references to miracle-working icons. See chapter 2 in this work for more information on the *Domostroi*.

252. For workers’ perceptions of the revolution as a “miracle,” see Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, 254.

253. See Orlando Figes and Boris I. Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 42–44, especially with regard to events early in 1917.

254. Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*, 85.

reality could be transformed to achieve a utopian state. Faith in the achievability of a miraculous utopian vision thus was a critical element of the mental models or paradigms with which viewers would have perceived post-revolutionary political images. Such mental models exist within what Geertz calls the cultural frame or what Victor Turner refers to as cultural fields, which he defines as “the abstract cultural domains in which paradigms are formulated [and] established.”²⁵⁵ Culturally rooted mental models are critical, according to Turner, because “social actions of various kinds acquire form through the metaphors and paradigms in their actor’s heads.”²⁵⁶ The social action most pertinent to this discussion relates to the personal sacrifice demanded of Soviet *comrades* laboring to bring the Soviet utopian vision to fruition.

Appreciating the paradigms through which viewers would have perceived utopian ideals in Soviet posters requires decoding the visual expression of transformative change in icons. As Moshe Lewin so succinctly states, “nothing escapes the work of a cultural filter as long as the filter is more or less intact.”²⁵⁷ In early Soviet Russia, sacred images embodying Russian Orthodox utopian beliefs were key components of the cultural filter, even for many avowed revolutionary atheists.²⁵⁸ The presence and persistence of these beliefs supported the Soviet master fiction’s credibility regarding the utopian socialist future. That credibility was rooted in the mental models of Russian

255. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 17.

256. *Ibid.*, 13.

257. Lewin, *Making of the Soviet System*, 16.

258. For more on the use by workers of religious metaphorical and symbolic language, see Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, 230. and Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 101–23.

Orthodoxy, which held out miraculous utopian transformation as a real and ever present possibility.

6.2 Utopianism in Icons

In Russian Orthodox belief, icons directed divine grace not only to humans but to the entire material world. Utopian transformation of the physical world was believed possible because transfiguration extended through sanctified individuals to incorporate their surroundings. Billington suggests in this regard that “the debilitating bleakness of the [Russian] environment created a need to believe not just in human salvation but in a transformation of the entire natural world.”²⁵⁹ Icons signified the potential for such idealized change, and they were “placed everywhere as the revelation of the future sanctification of the world [and] of its coming transfiguration.”²⁶⁰ Icons reminded their viewers that “the beauty of the visible world lies not in the transitory splendor of its present state, but . . . in its coming transfiguration . . . as a possibility to be realized by man.”²⁶¹ The possibility of transforming the physical world to a utopian state thus was firmly rooted in Russian Orthodox transfiguration doctrine, and icons visually expressed this belief.

Light in icons symbolized the natural world’s transformation, just as light signified the transfiguring sanctification of individuals. The divine light radiating from a holy subject’s sanctified center was believed to transfigure the surrounding physical world as well. Holy individuals in icons thus mediated the world’s transfiguration, “for an attribute

259. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, 52.

260. Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 44.

261. *Ibid.*, 35.

of holiness is the sanctification of all the surrounding world with which a saint comes into contact.”²⁶² Christ’s inner light transforms the landscape in figure 4.1, in which the mountains and the trees’ centers glow with ethereal light. In figure 4.3, Christ’s multi-colored glory suffuses the entire setting with divine light. Through transfiguring light, “all the visible world represented in the icon changes, [and] becomes the image of the future unity of the whole creation—the kingdom of the Holy Spirit.”²⁶³ This explains why icons’ key landscape features, such as the hills in figure 4.9 and figure 4.11, typically appeared with lighted edges. These lighted areas symbolized the natural world’s miraculous transfiguration.

For a viewer not attuned to Orthodox symbolism, these light patches in icons might be overlooked as the chiaroscuro “highlights” typically used with shadows to add visual depth to a “realistic” or representational image. Icons contained no shadows, however, because shadows suggested an external light source. In icons, “Divine Light permeates all things, so there is no source of light, which would illumine objects from one side or another; objects cast no shadows, for no shadows exist in the Kingdom of God.”²⁶⁴ Viewed through a Russian Orthodox cultural filter, lighted areas in icons symbolized the material world’s utopian transfiguration with the light of divine grace. The abundance of such symbols in icons provides ample evidence that utopian visual metaphors were key features of the prerevolutionary Russian cultural field.

262. *Ibid.*, 40.

263. *Ibid.*

264. *Ibid.*

Visual conventions in icons differentiated the manmade or built environment from the countryside. Cities or towns were signified in icons by an “architectural ensemble” dominated first and foremost by church domes, while the natural world was primarily indicated by small jagged mountains called “icon hillocks.”²⁶⁵ As with other symbols, the importance of the architectural ensemble and icon hillocks lay in the conventional meaning each signified—town and nature, respectively. As symbols with conventional meanings, these features bore little resemblance to any specifically identifiable built or natural environment, nor was that considered necessary. A cluster of church domes in an icon denoted a city (see fig. 4.2); details identifying a specific city were not considered important.²⁶⁶ Stylized icon hillocks symbolized nature more as a concept than as a specific place (see, e.g., fig. 4.1 and fig. 5.1). Architecture or landscape in icons denoted that a holy subject had an historical connection with a place and time, but this denotation did not bind nor limit the image to either an identifiable space or a particular time.²⁶⁷

Nonlinear time rather than sequential time was the norm for icons. Parts of a story that would be sequential in a linear narrative thus appeared simultaneously in an icon. For example, Elijah sometimes was shown dropping his mantle to Elisha while Elisha was shown already clothed in the same mantle (see fig. 4.8). In transfiguration icons, the appearance on earth of Old Testament prophets in connection with a New

265. Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, 13.

266. If a particular event in an icon was linked to a specific city, other elements provided the necessary visual information. For example, in icons of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, palm branches identify the event and its location.

267. See Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 40.

Testament story also expressed simultaneous or nonlinear time. In this regard, icons functioned in a manner analogous to myth. According to Levi-Strauss, one must “apprehend [myth] as a totality and discover that the basic meaning of the myth is not conveyed by the sequence of events but . . . by bundles of events even though these events appear at different moments in the story.”²⁶⁸ The key point is that icons evoked a totality of meaning rather than capturing an identifiable moment in time, which is more typical of representational art. The tradition of a non-linear, bundled approach to time in icons helps explain how political posters evoking the future Soviet miracle could have been perceived by ordinary Russians as an imminent reality that could be “seen” into being.

To summarize, the Russian Orthodox belief in transfiguring utopianism encompassed the entire material world. The physical world’s miraculous transformation, therefore, was an ever present possibility in the prerevolutionary cultural field. Icons visually expressed this possibility primarily through conventions of light and other standardized images. This cultural context, with its profound belief in transformative miracles as sacred truth, helped impart credibility to the Soviet master fiction’s utopian ambitions. This context also helps explain the future orientation of many Soviet posters, in which conventional symbols evoked the imminent transformation of industry and agriculture.

6.3 Utopianism in Posters

Many Soviet posters visually expressed a transformed future, although in keeping with the iconic tradition, that future was not bound to either a particular space or

268. Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, 45.

a particular time. Anatolii Lunacharskii (1875-1933), an intellectual and Bolshevik leader responsible for culture and education in the Soviet regime's early years, promoted artistic focus on the desired future state and encouraged Bolshevik artists to represent the present in terms of what it was to become.²⁶⁹ This future-oriented approach gained further impetus in 1918 when Lunacharskii appointed advocates of artistic theories known as Futurism to head the Graphic Arts Section of the Commissariat of Education.²⁷⁰ Futurism placed special emphasis on "the need to 'organize' the 'psyche' of the masses by means of art; [and to] focus on an ever-changing and future reality, instead of on static pictures of life."²⁷¹ Futurist theory also distinguished the "becoming" future, which Futurists construed as "real reality," from the "being" present, which Futurists dismissed as "pseudo reality."²⁷² Despite Futurists' avowed rejection of more traditional art, Futurist emphasis on the "becoming" future was consistent with the engrained utopianism of Russian Orthodox sacred art. Both the Orthodox iconic tradition and the Futurist influence, then, help explain the early and persistent emphasis in Soviet posters on modeling a utopian future rather than representing existing or "realistic" conditions.

In Bonnell's view, Lunacharskii's approach "marked a fundamental shift from a symbolic representation of the past and present to a new mode of visual representation

269. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 38, 105.

270. Robert A. Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920's* (Northwestern University Press, 2000), 151.

271. *Ibid.*, 155.

272. See *Ibid.*, 189–191.

which depicted the present not as it actually was but as it should become.”²⁷³ This statement overlooks the utopian cultural context in which Soviet poster art was embedded, as it ignores utopianism’s alignment with Russian Orthodox transfiguration doctrine and its visual antecedents in Russian Orthodox icons. Lunacharskii’s guidance to artists was neither a “fundamental shift” nor a “new mode of visual representation,” nor did it abandon symbolism. On the contrary, Lunacharskii’s future-oriented approach was consistent with centuries of Russian Orthodox visual traditions, traditions that were more evocative than representative. Visions of a utopian future had long been integral to the Russian Orthodox “sacred gaze,” to use David Morgan’s term.²⁷⁴ This sacred gaze coupled faith in divine intercession with habits of perception that construed sacred images as vehicles for miraculous utopian change. “Seeing into being”—or, as the Futurists might have put it, “seeing into becoming”—underlay the utopian symbolic continuities between icons and posters.

While Orthodox utopianism envisioned a world transfigured by divine grace, the Soviets imagined a future transformed by technology. Modernizing technology presaged social change in the Soviet vision, premised on “the belief that material abundance and social harmony would come as a result of the radical modernization . . . [and] rapid industrialization of all sectors of the economy.”²⁷⁵ The Soviets might have envisioned a

273. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 38.

274. See Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*.

275. Mark Bassin, “The Morning of Our Motherland: Fyodor Shurpin’s Portrait of Stalin,” in *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture*, ed. Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 215.

different path to the utopian future, but otherwise Soviet credalism was not unlike Russian Orthodoxy with respect to the prospect of the world's transformation.

In keeping with the regime's emphasis on transformative technology, Soviet posters standardized certain images that idealized industrial and agricultural modernization. These standardized images functioned as the secular analogs of the conventional church domes and icon hillocks in icons. Whether in icons or posters, such standardized elements functioned as "boilerplate" images that helped construct conventionally consistent cultural meaning. A deep appreciation of iconography's symbolic traditions, therefore, also helps expose the underlying visual structures through which posters conveyed the Soviet utopian vision. Moreover, exploring poster images in connection with icons reveals continuity of symbolic meaning as well as continuity in images. This continuity is particularly evident in posters conveying the totality of the *Soviet miracle*.²⁷⁶

In images of the *Soviet miracle*, the clustered church domes of Russian Orthodox iconography gave way first and foremost to smokestack silhouettes arranged in a *smokestack horizon*. The *smokestack horizon* does not identify a specific industrialized Soviet city but signifies the entire Soviet industrial complex. Crucially, the *smokestack horizon* represents industrialization not as it physically existed at any specific time or place but as the totality of an idealized industrial utopia. A very early instance of the *smokestack horizon* appeared in Apsit's 1918 poster of the October Revolution's first anniversary (fig. 5.5). Apsit's training as an icon painter would have familiarized him with

276. Given the emphasis on miracles in the Russian Orthodox cultural frame, the term *Soviet miracle* is used here to mean the idealized Soviet utopian totality premised on rapid and transformational technological change.

conventional architectural ensembles, such as multiple church domes. By replacing church domes with the *smokestack horizon*, Apsit introduced an important element widely adopted thereafter in posters evoking the *Soviet miracle*. In another instance, Dmitrii Moor—the Bolshevik graphic artist who acknowledged the influence of icon painting on his work—also included the *smokestack horizon* in his Red Army civil war recruiting poster (fig. 6.1). With its visually simple addition of the *smokestack horizon*, Moor’s poster symbolically positioned the *Soviet miracle* as the *raison d’être* for the Bolshevik war effort.

Verbal metaphors of the time echoed similar industrial themes. Visiting Moscow in 1927, Walter Benjamin observed a concerted Soviet emphasis on rapidly deploying modern technology. According to Benjamin, it was “made clear to every Communist that the revolutionary work of this hour is not conflict, not civil war, but canal construction, electrification, and factory building.”²⁷⁷ During the 1920s, the factory also emerged as a dominant theme in Soviet literature.²⁷⁸ In poetry by workers, furthermore, factories became the new cathedrals: “Thrusting into the heavens / Huge smokestacks exhale incense to the new god-man.”²⁷⁹

Industrial themes in other genres had visual parallels in posters. Figure 5.11, discussed previously with respect to the *comrades* archetype, is also replete with images of industrial infrastructure. The built environment in this image echoes Benjamin’s description of the “revolutionary work of the hour.” The caption reminds

277. Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, 207.

278. See Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil*, 319.

279. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, 269.

comrades that the war is over and that it is time for everyone to work. The “becoming” industrial utopia features electrical distribution facilities, a steel railroad bridge, and a storage tower alongside working factories with cathedral-like windows, a construction crane, and a railroad locomotive that is literally under construction—all framed by the *comrades* whose labor would produce this utopian *Soviet miracle*.

With respect to the *smokestack horizon*, the presence or absence of smoke made enormous symbolic difference. Without smoke plumes, industrialization’s potential remained unrealized. In the miners’ poster (fig. 5.9), for example, not a single plume appeared on the *smokestack horizon*. This suggested that failure to support miners’ efforts to deliver coal would halt the entire Soviet industrial complex on which the Bolshevik war effort depended. Conversely, the huge stylized plumes Apsit included in his 1918 anniversary poster (fig. 5.5) symbolized thriving modern industrial production. Further, figure 2.2 sums up the significance of factory smoke with its caption: *The Smoke of Chimneys is the Breath of Soviet Russia*. Smoke even forms the bright white glory surrounding Lenin in figure 4.6, thus visually endowing factory smoke in posters with the symbolic weight of transfiguring light in icons.

Beyond the smokestack horizon, Apsit’s 1918 anniversary poster (fig. 5.5) introduced other important images that soon became standard elements in other posters. Apsit’s poster replaced stylized physical symbols familiar from icons with symbols of the *Soviet miracle*. For example, icon hillocks gave way to grain images: bales of harvested grain scattered throughout the countryside symbolized the Soviet ideal of agricultural abundance. In the same poster, a massive sun—a traditional Christian symbol of salvation—dominates field and factory. Grain motifs symbolizing

agricultural plenty and the sun symbolizing Soviet-style salvation soon appeared in other early posters. Sacks and piles of grain are prominent in figure 5.6, and oversized heads of grain dot the countryside in another poster by Dmitri Moor (fig. 6.2). Based on its caption, this poster's ostensible purpose was to compare the miseries of life in the tsar's army with the better lot of Red Army soldiers. Nonetheless, Moor's poster conveys the Soviet utopian vision with conventional symbols of the *Soviet miracle*—images of abundant grain in the fields and a large building labeled “granary,” working factories arrayed as a *smokestack horizon*, and an enormous salvific sun.

Some of the conventional symbols Apsit established persisted in Soviet art for decades. *The Morning of Our Motherland*, a 1950 painting by Fyodor Shurpin (1904—1972), contains what Mark Bassin identifies as “four key transformist motifs . . . [of] standard socialist realist iconography.”²⁸⁰ Two of these motifs—industrialization signified by a row of factories and electrification of the countryside signified by either pylons or hydroelectric dams—had already appeared in posters no later than 1920, and their utopian cultural meanings remained consistent between then and 1950.

Utopian symbols thus reinforced the Soviet master fiction and visually evoked a transformed future. Constantly repeating these symbols might also have been a strategy for reconciling the often gross disparities between idealized communism and actual living conditions. As Bassin points out, visually depicting the “glorious communist future . . . was critical, not least because so much of the lived reality of the USSR stood in utter contrast to the conditions of material abundance . . . that socialism was

280. Bassin, “Morning of Our Motherland,” 215–216.

supposed to deliver.”²⁸¹ The challenge was to bring “radiant ideal and sober reality . . . into some kind of apparently logical perceptual correspondence.”²⁸² The enormity of this challenge helps explain the plethora of Soviet images depicting thriving industry and agriculture. These idealized images modeled what the *Soviet miracle* required of Soviet citizens and demonstrated the ends to which *comrades* labored.

The fact that daily life fell short of the miracle did not negate the images’ validity as utopian ideals, nor was the disparity necessarily incompatible with the Soviet master fiction’s credibility. The inconsistencies between lived and idealized Soviet life might seem obvious in hindsight or from a different cultural perspective. As Edelman reminds us, however, “logical inconsistency is no bar to psychological compatibility,” because symbolism helps people “adapt readily to conditions they have no capacity to reject or to change.”²⁸³ Rather, Edelman argues, encountering contradictions promotes rationalization, which creates an acceptance of the status quo.²⁸⁴ Nonetheless, as with other interpretive mental models, even rationalizing paradigms depend on a cultural context for their internal logic. The future-oriented images in Soviet posters—and the social actions of those who labored to bring the utopian vision into being—must be considered within their operative cultural frame, with its longstanding emphasis on transfiguration and imminent miracles as sacred truths. Furthermore, understanding

281. *Ibid.*, 214.

282. *Ibid.*, 214–215.

283. Edelman, *From Art to Politics*, 77.

284. *Ibid.* This dynamic arguably explains why one encounters such a plethora of food images embedded in Moscow’s public structures, where symbolic sheaves of grain appear in objects ranging from decorative carved stone to cast metal supports for bridge railings.

how contradictions between lived and idealized experience might have been reconciled in the Soviet cultural context requires two additional considerations. The first involves probing alternative systems of visual perspective for their underlying significance or meaning; the second involves relating that meaning to a paradigmatic worldview and to social action influenced by that worldview.

6.4 Visual Perspective and Worldview

Analyzing both icons and posters in the context of Russian Orthodoxy is critical, particularly because this context diverges significantly from that more characteristic of the modern West. One can begin to approach the contextual worldview associated with Russian Orthodoxy by focusing on the system of visual perspective that was typical of icons and that reappeared in Soviet posters. Visual perspective played a critical contextual and meaning-signifying role in both icons and posters—not merely as a matter of artistic technique, but in a culturally constructive sense conceptually linked to a broadly encompassing worldview.

The characteristic “look” of icons owes much to their system of visual perspective, and the iconic “look” of many Soviet political posters stems in large part from the perspectival conventions shared with icons. Spatial relationships are key among these conventions. In icons, for example, objects tend to diminish in size “in proportion to their proximity to the frame,” with the frame marking the image’s outer spatial boundary.²⁸⁵ This contrasts markedly with the Western system that emerged in Renaissance art and typified later representational painting, in which objects diminish in

285. Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, 36.

size “in proportion to their distance from the observer.”²⁸⁶ The Western system is known variously as *direct perspective*, *linear perspective*, *mathematical perspective*, or sometimes simply as *perspective*. These descriptions contrast with the system characteristic of icons, a system typically described as *reverse perspective*, *inverted perspective*, *indirect perspective*, or *distorted perspective*. These contrasting labels reveal an inherent bias, embedded in which are connotations of norm and deviance. Such connotations and the relative merits of each system have been the subject of strenuous and enduring artistic, mathematical, and philosophical debate.²⁸⁷ While the details of such debates lie outside the scope of this analysis, the bias evident in the terminology of perspective does serve to highlight why *reverse perspective* in icons and posters must be explored in terms of its relevant cultural field.

Each system of perspective is based on different assumptions regarding the viewer’s position in relation to the image. *Direct perspective* assumes a painting will be viewed from “a definite viewing position, a change in which (particularly the viewer’s approaching closer to the painting) may cause a distortion of the representation.”²⁸⁸ With their *inverted perspective*, icons were “designed to be viewed from a changing viewpoint: the images are constructed in such a way that they do not appear distorted” when viewed from different angles.²⁸⁹ Despite these differences in artistic technique and

286. Ibid.

287. See, for example, Pavel Florensky, “Reverse Perspective,” in *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler, trans. Wendy R. Salmond (London: Reaktion Books, 2002). See also Christopher S. Wood, “Introduction,” in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, by Erwin Panofsky, trans. Christopher S. Wood, Reprint edition (New York: Zone Books, 1996).

288. Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, 31–32.

289. Ibid.

the viewing experience, the fact remains that both are conventional systems.

Fundamentally, according to Uspensky, “inverted perspective, like direct perspective, is a conventional system for conveying the spatial characteristics of the real world on the plane surface of the picture.”²⁹⁰ The shift from three physical dimensions to two produces distortions in both systems, but in either case, culturally conditioned viewers tend to accept or overlook such inherent distortions.

If both direct and indirect perspective are simply conventional systems, why dwell on the difference? In short, visual perspective is critical because each system’s conventions are cultural conventions. Each system thus has deeper ties to other aspects of culture—including cultural construction of mental models that guide social action—than might be superficially apparent. In other words, the differences between direct and inverted perspective are not merely visual, stylistic, or artistic. Rather, a contextual worldview is embedded in perspective, and an image’s viewer is guided by that worldview in the social operation of seeing. Worldview thus is part and parcel of the cultural context in which the viewer discerns an image’s conventional significance or meaning. Whether in icons or in posters, then, the primary cultural importance of these perspectival conventions lies not in their artistic merits but in their associated worldviews.

The post-medieval Western worldview associated with direct perspective emphasized the individual. With the mathematics of perspective, “space was presented in exact relation to the beholder’s eye . . . everything was localized in place and time . . .

290. Ibid., 32.

[and] artists sought to depict individual personalities.”²⁹¹ As painters focused on imitating the real world, “painting became less symbolic, less an intimation of general or abstract truths, more a portrayal of concrete realities as they met the eye.”²⁹² Moreover, these artistic developments were linked to “a human-centered world and a new assertion of human individuality.”²⁹³ To summarize, three critical and mutually reinforcing components characterized Renaissance and later Western representational art: artistic striving for “naturalism” based on mathematical perspective that converged on an individual viewpoint, specificity in time and place, and a worldview idealizing the inherent dignity and worth of the individual.

In marked contrast with the Western system’s emphasis on the individual, the whole is paramount in the worldview linked to inverted perspective. A concrete object in an icon appears “not from one person’s individual point of view . . . but rather it is represented in the special microcosm of the icon, which is similar AS A WHOLE to the real world, and . . . does not depend upon an individual viewpoint of some sort.”²⁹⁴ With inverted perspective, the whole is the context from which individual painted elements draw their culturally conventional meaning and without which an individual element might have no discernible meaning at all. In icons, for example, the perspectival

291. Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization: Combined Volume*, 6th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 332.

292. R. R. Palmer, Joel Colton, and Lloyd Kramer, *A History of the Modern World*, 10th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 61.

293. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 332.

294. Uspensky, 35. In this regard, Uspensky draws on an essay by Pavel Florensky (written in 1920 but unpublished until 1967) to contrast the “religious stability of the common consciousness of a people” with the perception of an individual at a single point in time. For an English translation of Florensky’s essay, see Florensky, “Reverse Perspective.”

conventions for architectural ensembles and icon hillocks result in images of buildings or mountains “so conventionalized as to make it practically impossible to relate them to reality in isolation from the picture as a whole.”²⁹⁵ Outside the icon, icon hillocks might appear to be simply jagged lines. The lines in an icon that signify multiple church domes might appear out of context to be a simple series of curves. This emphasis on the image as a totality subordinates the “naturalism” of its individual parts to the whole:

[The] correlation between representation and reality is to be found not in the correlation of individual objects, but in the correlation of the *entire world* being depicted. What is correlated, first and foremost, is not some fragment of the picture with an object which corresponds to it in reality, but the *whole world* of the picture with the real world. The similarity of *the whole is of primary importance; the part is defined by its relation to the whole.*²⁹⁶

Because inverted perspective emphasizes the whole rather than individual parts, icons sacrificed the likeness of individual objects when necessary to maintain the integrity of the whole.²⁹⁷ In semiotic terms, with inverted perspective “the entire picture as a whole becomes a SIGN of the reality represented, and its individual fragments are correlated to [the objects they denote] not directly, but through the relation of both to the whole.”²⁹⁸ In essence, the entire image operates as a single unified symbol of the whole.

Symbolically evoking the whole contrasts starkly with Western naturalism’s emphasis on accurately depicting an individual viewpoint in a specific place at a specific

295. Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, 33.

296. *Ibid.*, 35. *Emphasis* in original.

297. *Ibid.*, 34.

298. *Ibid.*; EMPHASIS in original.

time. The icon symbolizes a totality—a totality unconstrained by an individual viewpoint, spatial boundaries, or linear time. With reverse perspective, multiple sides of a building might be shown simultaneously and in different colors, as the building might appear from different viewpoints or at different times. Likewise, individuals known to have lived at different historical times—such as Old and New Testament figures—appear simultaneously in icons without undermining the image’s status as sacred truth. This is possible because reverse perspective, with its multiple viewpoints, does not require isolating a particular moment in time. In more structural terms, direct perspective focuses on the synchronic, while reverse perspective tends towards what we might call a simultaneous diachronic. The icon thus evokes a totality continuous in both space and time. As a symbolic image evoking a complex network of abstractions woven into a cohesive and conventionally meaningful whole, the icon presents a view of the world in its entirety—in short, the icon presents a worldview. Similarly, with reverse perspective and other visual links to icons, Soviet posters also evoked a worldview unconstrained by space, time, or the inherent primacy of an individual point of view.

Whether in Russian Orthodox icons or Soviet political posters, the fundamental importance of inverted perspective lies not in its visual or artistic characteristics, which have been duly noted by many authors. Rather, as with the other symbols we have analyzed, perspective’s crucial importance in both icons and posters is tied to its underlying meaning. Put another way, to grasp the essential political import and cultural meaning of standardized utopian images in Soviet posters, one must focus on the paradigmatic worldview providing the context in which those posters were created and viewed. Therein lies the danger of attempting to correlate individual symbols with

discrete meanings apart from an image's overall meaning as a unified whole. For analytical purposes, it indeed has been necessary to focus initially on the meanings of individual symbols. The most profound meanings of such symbols, however, lie not in what they signify individually but in what they communicate collectively with respect to the contextual worldview in which they were deployed by artists and received by viewers.

A worldview that privileged the whole over the part underlay reverse perspective in both icons and posters. The emphasis in this worldview on an integrated totality creates a fundamental difficulty with attempts to describe the connection between icons and posters in terms of individual symbols, even when those descriptions are factually accurate. Certainly, "red" and "beautiful" share an etymological link in the Russian language. Granted, there are "perspectival" similarities between icons and posters. Unmistakably, we can see allusions to St. George in posters, and so forth. The culturally powerful meaning of such individual elements, however, lies in the totality of the worldview underlying and integrating these individual symbols. When fragments are isolated for analysis from their contextual whole, that worldview can elude comprehension just as surely as icon hillocks lose their symbolic meaning outside the icon.

Understanding the persistence of symbolic meaning recycled from icons to posters thus requires analyzing individual symbols in terms of the worldview in which individual symbols were contextually embedded and linked. The worldview signified by icons—and by political posters—was one in which eternal and sacred truths were conveyed through images and imminent transfiguring miracles could be seen into being.

This worldview was conceptually linked to a system of perspective whose meaning is not always readily apparent to viewers in whom the social operation of seeing has been conditioned by direct perspective and its associated worldview. Nonetheless, interpreting visual connections between icons and posters outside the locus of their encompassing worldview stymies deep analysis, yields superficialities that elide deep cultural meaning, and produces variations on the icon cliché.

* * *

With respect to a culturally constructed worldview governing both belief and behavior, perspective matters—and it matters a great deal. Uspensky suggests that perspective in icons “is connected not with the imposition of some sort of (personal) scheme of one’s own on the world being depicted, but with the acceptance and comprehension of realities (‘bits of existence’) as they are.”²⁹⁹ This notion returns us to Victor Turner’s observation that social actions are governed by their actors’ mental paradigms and begs the question of the ends to which such acceptance might lead. The question has particular relevance to the often fatal disparities between lived experience and posters propagating visions of the *Soviet miracle*. Utopian Soviet posters emphasized the totality of an idealized future, even though on the path to that future individual experience often diverged strikingly from the ideal. At the extreme, millions of individuals died of starvation or other privations while building a system that ostensibly would provide abundance for all—belying a willingness, just as in art, to sacrifice the part to a vision of the whole.

299. Ibid., 35.



Figure 6.1 *Have You Volunteered?*

Dmitrii Moor, artist. Red Army civil war recruiting poster. Russia, 1920. New York Public Library. Image ID#1216153. Permalink:

<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1216153>. Used by permission of New York Public Library.

ЦАРСКИЕ ПОЛКИ И КРАСНАЯ АРМИЯ



ЗА ЧТО СРАЖАЛИСЬ
ПРЕЖДЕ

Д. Моор, Москва

ЗА ЧТО СРАЖАЮТСЯ
ТЕПЕРЬ

Д. Моор, Москва

Figure 6.2 Tsarist Regiments and Red Army. Fighting the Old Way, Fighting the New Way. Dmitrii Moor, artist. Soviet Poster, 1925. New York Public Library. Image ID#1569186. Permalink: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1569186>. Used by permission of New York Public Library.

7 CONCLUSION

Soviet poster artists purposefully recycled images from Russian Orthodox icons to signify concepts essential to the new regime's exercise of power. Long before the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, icons had identified important individuals, symbolized abstract conceptual categories, and evoked an overarching worldview. Sacred icons thus provided a wealth of symbolic precedents that visually signified politically important concepts, such as legitimacy, heroism, and utopian transformation. Moreover, symbols familiar from religious icons elicited powerful emotions in ordinary Russians, whose cultural frame had for centuries been shaped by Russian Orthodoxy. Icon-based symbols held particular cultural influence because Orthodox doctrine treated icons as embodiments of sacred truth. Revolutionary artists, some of whom had been formally trained as icon painters, therefore were able to recycle a ready fund of Russian Orthodox symbols. When icon-based symbols reemerged in political posters, the deep cultural meaning of these symbols legitimized the revolution and its leadership, communicated new social ideals, and promoted the Soviet utopian vision of a world transformed by modern technology.

Other authors have suggested relationships between icons and posters, but these connections have largely been noted tangentially rather than subjected to structured analysis. Most authors alluding to such a relationship have limited their observations to superficial stylistic or artistic similarities and have stopped short of exploring the symbolic connections between icons and posters in terms of persistent cultural meanings. Consequently, the historiography has lacked detailed analyses of the dynamics by which Russian Orthodox images actively mediated Soviet political power.

Pursuing such analysis, however, exposes the operation of icon-based symbols as longstanding cultural idioms that effectively recycled culturally powerful meaning from Russian Orthodoxy to the Soviet political context.

The historiography has further lacked analyses of the specific theological meaning embedded in icons and recycled in Soviet political posters. Rigorous analysis necessitates exploring the symbols' theological meanings, because those meanings shaped how the Russian people would have perceived and responded to Soviet propaganda posters. Although the Soviet state officially denounced organized religion, the state's professed atheism did not erase religious idioms from the cultural frame. Indeed, the ubiquity of icons prior to the revolution and of posters thereafter offers the opportunity to observe cultural idioms actively shifting and intermingling as the new regime struggled to gain control of symbolic political culture. Analyzing this process reveals that Orthodox symbols that were widely perceived as sacred truth became important elements of the master fiction supporting the Soviet regime's exercise of political power.

Symbolic visual meaning and the dynamics of its recycling thus represent a critical but neglected area of inquiry for historians of Soviet political culture. This is particularly true for those seeking to understand how the political will of a nation might be harnessed to support a vision of revolutionary change. To begin addressing this gap in the historiography, this analysis has focused primarily on images and their meanings as longstanding cultural idioms, on the dynamics of their transfer from the Russian Orthodox to the Soviet context, and on the implications of that transfer for Soviet political power.

In both Russian Orthodoxy and Soviet Russia, images were vital to the process of establishing heroic archetypes that helped legitimize leadership, create communal identity for Soviet citizens, and model desirable social behaviors. Enduring symbols of legitimate authority validated the revolution and its leaders. Russian Orthodox saints, who had fulfilled many heroic functions in tsarist Russia, provided models for Soviet posters that elevated workers and soldiers as revolutionary heroes. Icons also visually expressed the imminence of miracles and utopian change as matters of sacred truth. These traditions and enduring beliefs added cultural credence to the Soviet utopian vision and to its expression in political posters. Moreover, the utopian Russian Orthodox belief in transfiguration encompassed the entire material world. This cultural emphasis on miraculous transformation, an ever-present possibility in the prerevolutionary cultural field, helps explain the future orientation of many Soviet posters. Orthodox utopian symbols thus reinforced the Soviet master fiction and visually evoked an agricultural and industrial future transformed by technology, despite the often gross disparities between idealized communism and actual living conditions. The future-oriented images in Soviet posters—and the social actions of those who labored to bring the utopian vision into being—must be analyzed within their operative cultural frame, with its longstanding emphasis on transfiguration and imminent miracles as sacred truths.

In that cultural frame, visual perspective played a critical contextual and meaning-signifying role. This role extended from icons to posters—not merely as a matter of artistic technique, but in terms of an encompassing worldview. Worldview shapes the cultural context in which a viewer discerns an image's conventional significance or meaning in the social operation of seeing. A contextual worldview relates

not merely to discrete or isolated symbols but also is embedded in perspectival conventions. Indeed, whether in icons or in posters, the primary cultural importance of perspectival conventions lies not in their artistic merits but in their associated worldviews.

With its inverted perspective, the icon presents a worldview in which the whole is paramount and in which the part derives its meaning from its relation to the whole. Icons' symbols—whether of sacred legitimacy, saintly heroism, or transfiguring utopianism—were embedded in a perspectival system that contrasts markedly with the Western system of perspective, which honors the individual. Like icons, many Soviet posters employed inverted perspective, which both elevates the whole and rejects the inherent primacy of an individual point of view. Posters recycling visual symbolism from icons thus produced powerful cognitive associations that shaped and reshaped viewers' perceptions through a political culture that transformed saints into soviets.

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