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# The Representation of Women in Early Soviet Political Art

VICTORIA E. BONNELL

When the Bolsheviks seized power from the Provisional Government in October 1917, the party numbered no more than 240,000 people in a country of some 145 million. Transformed overnight from a revolutionary party to a ruling party, the Bolsheviks were eager to establish the legitimacy of the new party-state and disseminate their ideas to a large, overwhelmingly rural population. No consensus existed about the revolutionary events, or indeed, about the major issues in the country's political, economic, and social life. Through mass propaganda, the Bolsheviks sought to establish the hegemony of their interpretation of the past, present, and future—their own master narrative—and to inculcate among the population new categories for interpreting the world around them.

By November 1918, the party had put in motion a campaign to alter mass consciousness and generate support for the Bolshevik cause in the Civil War. Lenin and other leaders understood that the success of this effort depended on the creation of compelling visual symbols and rituals designed to reach people—many of them illiterate or semiliterate—who were accustomed to the elaborate pageants and visual imagery of the Old Regime and Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the Bolsheviks turned their attention to visual propaganda.

Political posters and visual displays for holiday celebrations provided the most important means for reaching large numbers of people. The first posters appeared in August 1918, when the Civil War was getting under way. Over the next few years, some four hundred and fifty organizations and institutions produced more than three thousand different posters (the total number of copies was in the millions)

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<sup>1</sup> On this subject, see Richard Wortman, "Moscow and Petersburg: The Problem of Political Center in Tsarist Russia, 1881–1914," in Sean Wilentz, ed., *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual, and Politics Since the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1985), 244–71.

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which were displayed mainly in urban centers and among soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Celebrations of May Day and the October Revolution provided further occasions for elaborate visual displays in the form of building decorations, banners, and placards.

The new political art attracted many outstanding artists who placed their talents at the service of the Bolsheviks at a time when the Civil War was polarizing the country and mass mobilization had become an urgent matter.<sup>3</sup> They brought enthusiasm to the task but there was no consensus among them or among officials in the cultural sector or among the viewers, for that matter, concerning the kinds of visual symbols, images, and styles of representation that were appropriate for the new Soviet state. Artistic freedom was at its height and visual propaganda had not yet come under centralized jurisdiction and control. For a brief period, political art became a terrain for experimentation and contestation over the most effective and appropriate ways to convey the Bolshevik message, and sometimes, also, over the content of the message itself.

Artists drew on a rich repertoire of cultural styles for visual propaganda. A gifted group of avant-garde artists took part in the early May Day and November 7 celebrations, where they created futurist and cubist visual displays and posters. Other artists used visual allegories and symbols derived from the neoclassical and religious traditions to express Bolshevik ideas and appeals. Winged horses, chariots, hydras, St. George, and even angels appeared in early Soviet political art.<sup>4</sup> Some, such as the creators of the ROSTA windows,<sup>5</sup> had recourse to the popular Russian folk art style of the *lubok* (illustrated broadside),<sup>6</sup> while others applied a

<sup>2</sup> B. S. Butnik-Siverskii, *Sovetskii plakat epokhi grazhdanskoi voyny 1918–1921* (Moscow, 1960), 19, 23; Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster* (New Haven and London, 1988), 40, 62, 109.

<sup>3</sup> Leading artists such as M. Chagall, K. S. Malevich, and El Lissitzky contributed to the new political art; a number of highly gifted satirical artists and illustrators also joined the ranks of Bolshevik political artists, such as A. Apsit, D. Moor, and V. Deni. On the role of individual artists in this period, see White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, chaps. 2–4.

<sup>4</sup> There are many examples of posters and visual displays with these images. A notable example is V. Fridman's 1920 poster, "Da zdravstvuet krasnaia armiia," showing a Red Army soldier astride a winged horse. A copy of this poster can be found in the Russian and Soviet Poster Collection at the Hoover Archive, Stanford University. Henceforth, citations of posters from this source will be designated by the prefix RU/SU. See RU/SU 2099A for Fridman's poster. See also the anonymous 1920 poster, "Gramota—put' k kommunizmu" (RU/SU 7), which shows a half-naked man in Roman sandals astride a red winged horse. He holds a book in one hand and torch in the other. Examples with hydras and St. George are discussed below. Many instances can also be cited from holiday celebrations. See also note 23 below for additional evidence on this point. An anonymous panel entitled "Slava" (Glory) produced for the first anniversary of the revolution in Petrograd featured angels blowing a horn. See V. P. Tol'stoi, ed. *Agitatsionno-massovoe iskusstvo: Oformlenie prazdnestv 1917–1932*, Tablitsy (Moscow, 1984), nos. 107–9.

<sup>5</sup> ROSTA windows (so named after the Russian Telegraphy Agency Rosta) were first produced in the fall of 1919. These posters, which hung in storefronts and public buildings, were originally hand-produced on short order to communicate ideas and information during the Civil War. Later they were duplicated by cardboard stencils. Stephen White estimates that the Moscow ROSTA collective alone produced about two million poster-frames during the Civil War. See his excellent discussion of ROSTA in *The Bolshevik Poster*, chap. 4.

<sup>6</sup> According to Jeffrey Brooks: "The lubki were lively illustrations similar to European broadsides. They had short texts, usually at the bottom of the picture, and were often the first printed materials to enter the homes of the common people." Many peasant cottages were decorated with a selection of *lubok* prints. See Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (Princeton, 1985), 62, 63, 66.

realistic style of representation that incorporated elements drawn from popular culture, religion, and the classical myths.

The earliest images of the new Bolshevik male heroes—the worker, the peasant, and the Red Army soldier—were created in the latter, realistic style. These were the new icons of Soviet Russia—standardized images that depicted heroes (saints) and enemies (the devil and his accomplices) according to a fixed pattern (the so-called *podlinnik* in art of the Russian Orthodox Church). During 1919, iconographic images of male heroes were widely circulated by means of visual propaganda.

The ease and rapidity with which political artists generated icons of male heroes did not apply to their female counterparts. In fact, it is striking to notice how few images of women—any kinds of images—appear in Soviet political art before 1920. When they did appear, women were represented either as allegorical figures (symbolizing such abstract concepts as “freedom,” “liberty,” “knowledge,” “art,” or “history”) or they were shown as nurses or victims of the White Army.<sup>7</sup> Prior to 1920, few images of peasant women and women workers were incorporated into visual propaganda. Lenin’s plan for monumental propaganda exemplifies the general pattern. It aimed at creating forty statues of heroic figures; only two of them were to be women.<sup>8</sup>

The sparseness of female imagery in early Bolshevik political art is notable because it represented a departure from some of the major visual traditions in prerevolutionary Russia. Images of women were central to the system of representation in religious icons (the Mother of God). Folk art, or more specifically the *lubok*, included images of many different mythical and realistic female figures.<sup>9</sup> In the commercial, charitable, and educational posters that proliferated in Russia after the turn of the century, pictures of elegant and attractive women, often reminiscent of film stars, were widely used to promote movies, journals, society balls, theatrical productions, soap, perfume, and other products.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, Tsarist political posters, produced between 1914 and 1917 as part of the country’s first mass propaganda campaign, emphasized scenes of male combat. Women were seldom depicted and when they were, they appeared as allegorical figures or participants in the war effort.

Like tsarist political art of the First World War, Bolshevik Civil War posters conjured up an overwhelmingly male world. Prior to 1920, women, when they were represented, appeared mostly in the guise of allegorical figures. It was only in early 1920 that artists created distinctive representations of the woman worker and the

<sup>7</sup> “Ranenyi krasnoarmeets,” 1920 (anonymous), RU/SU 1243; “Otstupaiia pered krasnoi armiei bogovardeitsy zhgut khleb,” 1919 (Apsit) RU/SU 1286 and White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 30, fig. 2.17; “Grazhdane! delaite sebe protivokholernye priviki,” 1920, (S. Ivanov), *The Soviet Political Poster*, 32; “Den’ ranenogo krasnoarmeitsa,” 1919 (Apsit), in White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 30, fig. 2.16.

<sup>8</sup> The two women were Sofiia Perovskaia and Rosa Luxemburg.

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of the diverse representations of the Mother of God, see Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NY, 1983), 76–80. Representations of female figures—both mythical and real—were extremely common in the *lubok*. See *Lubok. Russische Volksbilderbogen. 17. bis 19. Jahrhundert* (Leningrad, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> See N. I. Baburina’s study, *Russkii plakat vtoraiia polovina XIX-nachalo XX veka* (Leningrad, 1988), for many examples of this phenomenon.

woman peasant. Some female allegories continued to appear throughout 1920 and into 1921, but more and more often, images of women workers and peasants, dressed in clothing familiar to contemporaries, replaced the graceful figures in classical attire symbolizing “freedom” and “knowledge.” Instead of allusions to the classical age of Roman Republicanism, viewers were invited to visualize a society populated by industrious women workers and robust peasant women, building socialism alongside their male counterparts.

This essay analyzes the changes that occurred in the representation of women between 1918 and 1921. These changes, more than any other aspect of political art, provide insight into the emerging Bolshevik discourse on power. Although figures of women appeared far less frequently than male heroes of the new regime, their presence serves as an important indicator of the official orientation toward hierarchical relationships. Gender images are intrinsically about issues of domination and subordination,<sup>11</sup> a major problem in Civil War Russia where traditional hierarchies had been discredited and new ones were not yet established. The transformation of female imagery corresponded to the ascendancy of a new Bolshevik visual language which gave expression to the party’s conception of collective identities based on class and gender.

### ALLEGORICAL AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN

Some of the first images of women produced after the Bolshevik Revolution functioned as allegories.<sup>12</sup> A major source of inspiration for female allegorical figures was the neoclassical tradition transmitted by the French Revolution. The Bolsheviks paid close attention to French revolutionary history; it served as a key element in their master narrative of the world historical struggle for liberation and a source of symbols and images for expressing new political ideas.

In revolutionary France, the key images were Marianne—the “feminine civic allegory,” and Hercules—the emblem of the radical Republic and the sansculottes. They were often accompanied by symbols such as the Phrygian cap, the fasces, and an altar, which further accentuated associations with the Roman Republic.<sup>13</sup> During the French Revolution, these images and symbols provided representations of the

<sup>11</sup> As Joan Wallach Scott has put it: “Gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. . . . [It] is one of the recurrent references by which political power has been conceived, legitimated, and criticized” (*Gender and the Politics of History* [New York, 1988], 42, 44, 48).

<sup>12</sup> An allegorical image refers “to another simultaneous structure of events or ideas, whether historical events, moral or philosophical ideas, or natural phenomena.” Myth and fable are frequently used for allegorical purposes. The important thing about visual allegory is that the meaning of the image does not depend on the surrounding context; the meaning of the allegorical sign is determined exclusively by semantic (i.e., paradigmatic), rather than by the syntactic (i.e., syntegmatic), relations. Allegory is not inherent in the image but depends on the competence of the viewer. Only viewers conversant with the association between an image and an idea or conception will appreciate the complexity of meaning. See Alex Preminger, ed., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, 1974), 12; and Boris Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon* (Lisse, 1976), 15.

<sup>13</sup> The Phrygian cap or bonnet was worn in ancient Rome by freed slaves; the fasces was a bundle of rods with an ax blade projecting, carried by Roman magistrates as a badge of authority.

new political order, giving shape to the experience of power. They also served as a focus for struggles over contested issues.<sup>14</sup>

Allegorical images remained important in France throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Representations of Marianne continued to be produced, but with variations corresponding to political conditions.<sup>16</sup> In addition, there were numerous civic monuments, sculptures, and paintings that presented syncretistic allegorical figures, such as “the republic.” Syncretistic images drew on no single mythological referent (for example, Hercules), but incorporated a combination of “attributes or elements from traditional representations of Faith, Truth, Martyr-Saint, Prophetess, and Romantic Heroine.”<sup>17</sup>

During the 1905 revolution, political artists seeking to represent abstract ideas such as “freedom” and “history” (*svoboda* and *istoriia*—both feminine nouns) created syncretistic allegorical images of women in the neoclassical style.<sup>18</sup> A drawing by D. I. Shatan, “Zakliuchenie soiuza” (The Conclusion of a Union), which appeared in the left-wing Odessa journal *Svitok* in 1906, shows a stately female figure in a long red garment and what appears to be a Phrygian bonnet shaking hands with a worker while conspicuously holding a palm frond in her left hand. In the French tradition, the “martyr’s palm” was conventionally associated with Victory; the figure’s Phrygian bonnet signified that the woman was a champion of liberty.<sup>19</sup> Similar images appeared in nineteenth-century France symbolizing “the republic.”<sup>20</sup> Shatan’s drawing was intended to communicate certain ideas to an audience accustomed to “reading” visual allegory. As a style of representation, neoclassicism was, of course, thoroughly familiar to educated Russians. It was the common idiom in architecture and civic sculpture of eighteenth-century Russia and had been revived after the 1905 revolution.<sup>21</sup>

Following the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy, female allegory was again invoked as a means of expressing abstract ideas. On May Day 1917, a procession in Petrograd included a neoclassical representation of “freedom” as a woman. She

<sup>14</sup> See discussions in Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984); Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789–1880* (Cambridge, England, 1979); and Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> On French allegorical sculpture, see Peter Fusco, “Allegorical Sculpture,” in Peter Fusco and H. W. Janson, eds., *The Romantics to Rodin: French Nineteenth-Century Sculpture from North American Collections* (Los Angeles and New York, 1980). Fusco writes (p. 60), “Allegorical sculpture entered the nineteenth century as part of an academic tradition of moral and propagandistic expression that for centuries had been vital to civic, court, and sacred life.”

<sup>16</sup> This is extensively discussed in Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle*.

<sup>17</sup> Fusco, “Allegorical Sculpture,” 65.

<sup>18</sup> V. V. Shleev, ed., *Revoliutsiia 1905–1917 gg. i izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1977–1989), 2:11; 3: 39, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Fusco, “Allegorical Sculpture,” 65; see particularly fig. 60, Jean-Pierre Cortot’s “Immortality,” 1835; Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> On this subject see William C. Brumfield, “Anti-Modernism and the Neoclassical Revival in Russian Architecture, 1906–1916,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 48 (December 1989): 374.



stood in front of the State Duma building, dressed in classical garb and holding a broken chain in her hands. The following year, also on May Day, Petrograd citizens viewed the figure of a woman in a Roman tunic, with a torch in her right hand, standing on a chariot drawn by horses. Similar displays were incorporated into the May Day celebration in 1919 and the November 7 processions in 1918 and 1919.<sup>22</sup> May Day and November 7 celebrations in these years incorporated a multiplicity of symbols and rituals drawn from the classical vocabulary, including chariots, altars, torches, winged horses, and Greek choruses (part of the *instsenirovki* or theatrical reenactments of historical events).<sup>23</sup>

Female images of “freedom” and “liberty” also appeared in political posters and monumental sculpture. A Petrograd poster created by L. Radin in February 1919, “Smelo, tovarishchi, v nogu!” (Boldly, Comrades, March in Step!), featured a woman in classical dress and a headdress suggestive of a Phrygian cap. She holds a rifle in her right hand and a flag in her left (Fig. 1).<sup>24</sup> The depiction of the female figure bears strong resemblance to Eugene Delacroix’s painting of 1830, “Liberty Leading the People at the Barricades,” including the partially bared breast and the combination of rifle and flag.<sup>25</sup>

The Soviet version of “liberty” is considerably less assertive than her French counterpart. She is surrounded by the debris of the old order, rather than dead bodies, and, very significantly, two strapping workers flank her on either side. Insets around the periphery of the poster show scenes featuring workers, including one with a peasant and a worker shaking hands. The images and composition are indicative of the attempt in 1918–1919 to synthesize quite different styles and semantic systems of visual representation. Whereas the neoclassical female figure carried associations (for educated Russians) with Roman republicanism, the images of workers and peasants suggested a political ideology that foregrounded the concept of class rather than citizenship.

During the first postrevolutionary years, female syncretistic images also appeared in posters as representations of such abstract ideas as “art,” “history,” and “knowledge.”<sup>26</sup> They wore flowing white dresses and belonged to the same visual vocabulary of symbols as their French counterparts. The allegorical style carried over to monumental sculpture as well. In 1918–1919, Nikolai Andreev and D. Osipov created an obelisk in Moscow, “The Soviet Constitution,” which included a statue of

<sup>22</sup> A. S. Gushchin, *Izo-iskusstvo v massovykh prazdnestvakh i demonstratsiakh* (Moscow, 1930), 11, 12. For other examples, see Elizabeth Waters, “The Female Form in Soviet Political Iconography, 1917–1932,” in Barbara Evans Clements, B. A. Engel, and Christine D. Worobec, eds., *Russia’s Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991), 229–30.

<sup>23</sup> For examples, see Tolstoi, ed., *Agitatsionno-massovoe iskusstvo*, 25; *ibid.*, “Tablitsy,” nos. 88, 102, 106, 114; and James Von Geldern, “Festivals of the Revolution, 1917–1920: Art and Theater in the Civil War,” unpublished manuscript.

<sup>24</sup> The title of the poster derives from a revolutionary song. See *Muzei revoliutsii*, A26382; and RU/SU 1272.

<sup>25</sup> See Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle*, 39, for a reproduction of the Delacroix painting.

<sup>26</sup> For examples, see Tolstoi, ed., *Agitatsionno-massovoe iskusstvo*, “Tablitsy,” no. 128; and RU/SU 1372. In addition, many other classical images appeared in posters during this period. Most popular were winged horses and chariots. See Tolstoi, “Tablitsy,” nos. 102, 106, 114.

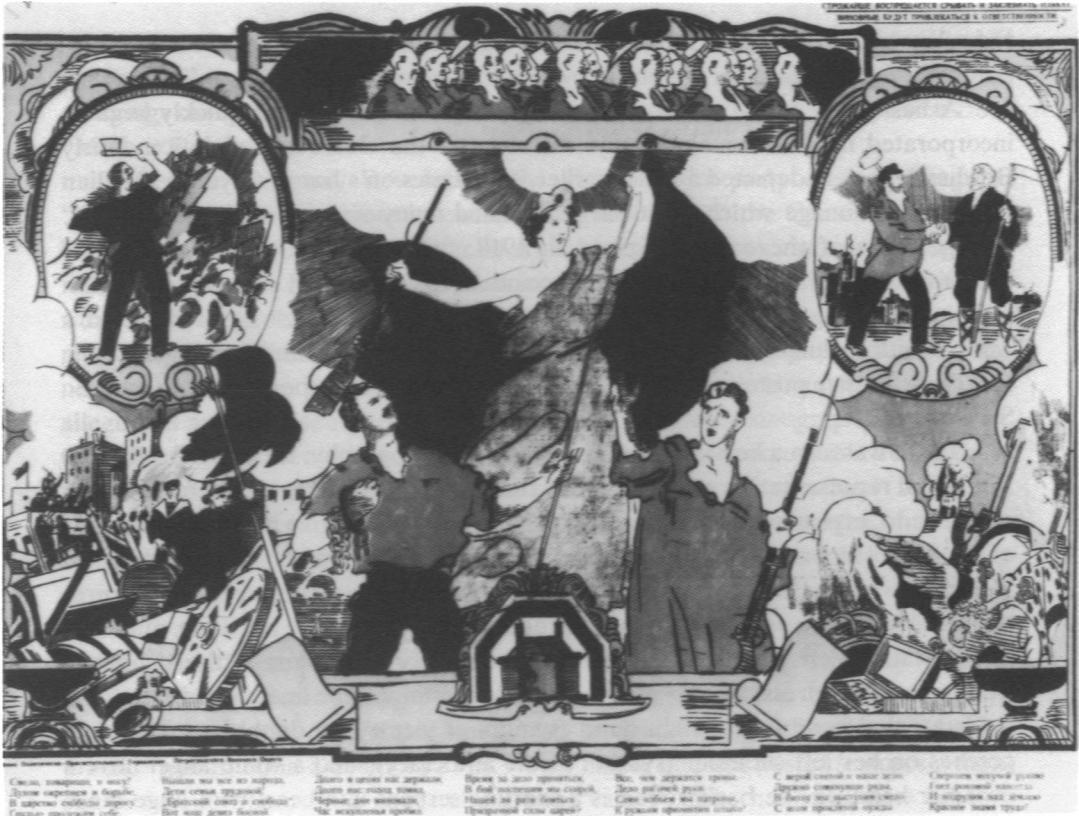


FIG. 1. L. Radin, "Smelo, tovarishchi, v nogu!" (Boldly, Comrades, March in Step!), February 1919

a woman representing freedom. She was dressed in classical garb, with ample breasts and exposed legs, her right arm raised as though pointing toward the sky.<sup>27</sup>

The French tradition of political iconography provided only one important source for allegorical images in the immediate postrevolutionary period. A second source of inspiration was the indigenous Russian tradition in religious and autocratic art. In old regime Russia, allegorical images—both male and female—played a major part in the pageantry and symbolic system of both the autocracy and the church. The most central image, which provided a "cultural frame" for organizing political narratives under the old regime,<sup>28</sup> was that of St. George (Georgii Pobedonosets). The legend of St. George was depicted in religious iconography, folk art, and in the political art of the tsarist government.<sup>29</sup> During the

<sup>27</sup> Mikhail Guerman, *Art of the October Revolution* (New York, 1979), 280–81.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the concept of a "cultural frame" and its application to France, see Hunt, *Politics*, 87ff. The image of a rider on horseback—reminiscent of St. George—became the emblem of the city of Moscow in the fourteenth century and later was incorporated into the coat of arms of both Moscow and the Russian Empire. See S. A. Tokarev, ed., *Mify narodov mira* (Moscow, 1987), 1:275.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the legend of St. George and its representation in icon painting, particularly the Novgorod school, see Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 137. Examples of this image in folk art can be found in *Lubok: Russische Volksbilderbogen*, 75, 76.



First World War, the tsarist government used the image of St. George in its political propaganda.<sup>30</sup>

A basic part of the visual vocabulary, images of St. George quickly became incorporated into the revolutionary lexicon after the October Revolution. Early Bolshevik posters depicted a male worker, sometimes on a horse, slaying a reptilian monster—an image which must have reminded many viewers of the story of St. George. One of the earliest posters in 1918, “Obmanutym brat’iam” (To Our Deceived Brothers), was created by Alexander Apsit, an artist who was trained in religious painting and was well attuned to symbolic imagery.<sup>31</sup> Apsit depicted a worker with a club slaying a hydra, whose multiple heads include one resembling the Tsar’s. Other posters, holiday displays, and stamps incorporated references to St. George.<sup>32</sup>

There was also a key female figure in tsarist iconography: the image of Russia. The visual representation of Russia as a woman corresponded to the word *rodina* or motherland, etymologically connected to the verb *rodit’*, to give birth.<sup>33</sup> At the time of the Russo-Japanese war, the government issued posters which featured images of “Russia” as a female figure. A poster entitled “K voine Rossii s Iaponiei” (Concerning the War of Russia with Japan), produced in April 1904 not long after the surprise attack on the Russian fleet by Japanese forces at Port Arthur, shows a woman in a long dress, a chain mail shirt, and an ermine cape lined in red satin. She holds a palm frond in her right hand (symbol of victory), a double-headed eagle perches on her left shoulder (symbol of the autocracy), and a white angel hovers over her head. In the background is a snarling serpent-like beast with huge fangs and Oriental features.<sup>34</sup> She is the female counterpart of the medieval Russian warrior.

During the First World War, female images of Russia once again made an appearance in political art. There were several variations. Some posters depicted a woman in her middle years, wearing a dress in the style of the ancient noblewoman, the *boiaryna*; in others, “Russia” was represented by a beautiful woman in a sarafan and a traditional Russian headdress (*kokoshnik*).<sup>35</sup> A third variant is illustrated by the poster “Rossiia—Za pravdu” (Russia—for Truth). A youthful, determined woman is depicted wearing a medieval warrior’s helmet and chain mail shirt; she

<sup>30</sup> A poster issued in November 1914, “Drakon zamorskii i vitiaz’ russkii,” showed a medieval knight in armor wielding a sword and shield against a multiheaded winged hydra (RU/SU331). See also RU/SU 1096, RU/SU 682.

<sup>31</sup> RU/SU 1546 and White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 34, fig. 2.22.

<sup>32</sup> The following year for the second anniversary of the revolution, Boris Zvorykin created a poster, “Bor’ba krasnogo rytsaria s temnoi siloiu,” portraying a worker on horseback holding a shield (inscribed with a hammer and sickle) in one hand and a hammer in other, poised to slay the enemy around him (RU/SU 1285 and White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 35, fig. 2.24). In 1920, the leading Bolshevik poster artist Viktor Deni represented Leon Trotsky as St. George slaying the dragon of counterrevolution (White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 7, fig. 1.6). A postage stamp issued in 1921 featured a worker kneeling on a slain dragon (Guerman, *Art of the October Revolution*, no. 360).

<sup>33</sup> For a recent discussion of the mythological antecedents of “Mother Russia,” see Joanna Hubbs, *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Tsentral’nyi Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (TsGALI), f. 1931, op. 1, ed. khr. 21.

<sup>35</sup> Baburina, *Russkii plakat*, 162; RU/SU 151.

carries a sword in her right hand and a shield with the image of St. George in her left hand. She stands on a slain hydra with two heads and black wings; slain soldiers, charging cavalry, dirigibles and explosions surround the serenely victorious "Mother Russia."<sup>36</sup>

After the February Revolution, the liberal Kadet party used an image of "Mother Russia" to promote its cause during elections to the Constituent Assembly. A black and white Kadet poster by A. F. Maksimov shows a woman in a sarafan riding a horse. She holds a sword aloft in one hand and a shield inscribed with the word *svoboda* (freedom) in the other.<sup>37</sup> Whereas the Kadets appropriated the female imagery of "Mother Russia" derived from tsarist iconography, this option was not available to the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks did not hesitate to utilize other allegorical and representational images from Old Regime iconography (such as St. George), but representations of "Mother Russia" proved unacceptable during these years because of the party's emphatically internationalist perspective.<sup>38</sup> It was not until the country entered the Second World War that female images of "Mother Russia" began to appear in Soviet propaganda. Between 1941 and 1945, a number of memorable posters were issued resurrecting the traditional image of Mother Russia in a new guise—a stately, matronly woman, sometimes pictured with a small child in arms. These posters made explicit reference to the *rodina*, thereby reaffirming the prerevolutionary link between word and image.

A striking symbolic female image can be found in Apsit's poster, "International," published in December 1918.<sup>39</sup> This highly unusual poster features a monstrous female figure on a pedestal marked "capital." She has huge bare breasts, fangs, the tsarist crown and a serpentine tail. Men with hammers are tearing down her pedestal and attacking the monster. To my knowledge, this is the only instance of "capital" (a masculine noun in Russia) represented as a woman and indeed, the only instance of a Bolshevik poster with a distinctively female monster. The image probably has most in common with the folk art tradition of the *lubok*, where women were sometimes associated with the devil and presented as schemers and liars.<sup>40</sup>

The emphasis on allegorical and symbolic representations of women in visual propaganda lasted only a few years.<sup>41</sup> There was considerable pressure from offi-

<sup>36</sup> RU/SU 1008.

<sup>37</sup> RU/SU 245.

<sup>38</sup> I have located only one poster in which the Bolsheviks used female imagery to represent "the nation." This poster, issued in 1919 or 1920, portrays Bessarabia as a female, her arms in chains, surrounded by a serpentine monster with a crown, representing Romania. Armed soldiers are poised to liberate her. The poster was published by the Department of Soviet Propaganda, under the Executive Committee of the Odessa Soviet of Workers' Deputies (Muzei revoliutsii, Z100834).

<sup>39</sup> RU/SU 2282 and White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 33, fig. 2.21.

<sup>40</sup> O. Balgina, *Russkie narodnye kartinki* (Moscow, 1972), 131. Lynn Hunt discusses an engraving from 1793 that bears some resemblance to Apsit's unusual poster. The engraving, entitled "The French People Overwhelming the Hydra of Federalism," shows Hercules poised to club a "monster of federalism" whom some contemporary observers considered half-woman and half-serpent (Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class*, 97).

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of this phenomenon, see G. L. Demosfenova, A. Nurok, and N. Shantyko, *Sovetskii politicheskii plakaty* (Moscow, 1962), 38–43.

cials, critics, and others to adopt a different vocabulary that would be more comprehensible to a working class audience. A resolution of the Moscow Soviet in March 1919, in the aftermath of the May Day celebration, declared that workers could not make sense out of symbolic and allegorical images or the futurist art of the avant-garde. Henceforth, all artistic affairs in Moscow were to be conducted with the close participation and direct control of the Moscow proletariat. The Executive Committee of the Petersburg Soviet passed a similar resolution in April 1919.<sup>42</sup>

As late as May Day 1921, there were still occasional posters with symbolic female figures, such as Sergei Ivanov's "Da zdravstvuet prazdnik trudiashchikhsia vsekhn stran!" (Long Live the Holiday of Toilers of All Countries) which depicted a woman in a white flowing dress and long blond hair, floating through the air and strewing roses to a demonstration below.<sup>43</sup> An unusual example of the influence of art nouveau, this poster probably owed some of its inspiration to Isadora Duncan who was visiting Russia at that time.<sup>44</sup> But fanciful representations of young nymphs were a rarity by then and women in long white garments as well as classical symbols such as chariots and altars had nearly disappeared.

As the Civil War drew to a close, Soviet propaganda artists turned their attention from classical themes toward the concrete visualization of social categories and concepts. Instead of images drawn from a mythical, classic, literary, or religious context, they devised images that spelled out in graphic terms the class content of abstract ideas and the specific class attributes of social groups. "Capital" no longer appeared as a serpentine monster but as a fat man with a top hat and cigar. Heroes and enemies were henceforth represented with distinct visual markers, such as the worker with hammer and anvil, the peasant with a sickle or the cigar-smoking capitalist.<sup>45</sup>

Writing in the mid-1920s, Viacheslav Polonskii, an eminent literary scholar and historian, put forward a critique of the type of allegorical and symbolic representation that had enjoyed popularity during the Civil War years. He argued that the prevalence of allegories and symbols was a consequence of the "bourgeois consciousness of those artists who came from the bourgeois class, bringing with them, together with technical skills, an alien approach to the interpretation of agitational

<sup>42</sup> Tolstoi, ed., *Agitatsionno-massovoe iskusstvo*, 22, 23.

<sup>43</sup> RU/SU 1371 and White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 107, fig. 5.42.

<sup>44</sup> I am grateful to William C. Brumfield for this insight.

<sup>45</sup> For different perspectives on the disappearance of allegorical representation, see the essays by Elizabeth Waters and Francois-Xavier Coquin. According to Waters, "the Bolsheviks, who had come to power at a time when this particular artistic device was losing its force and in a country where it had never been strong, were not likely to resist the trends toward non-allegorical representation, particularly since their ideology foregrounded the factory and industrial work and privileged the public over the private" ("The Female Form," 5–7). My disagreements with Waters are two-fold. First, I see the trend away from allegory as a direct consequence of the dissemination of Bolshevik ideas; second, it was the profound linkage between allegory and the concept of citizenship that discredited this form of representation and led to the adoption of new images more consistent with the Bolshevik emphasis on class. Coquin, by contrast, argues that allegorical images lost favor because they failed to communicate ideas succinctly to the poster viewer. I do not disagree with this argument, but consider it only part of the explanation. See Francois-Xavier Coquin, "L'affiche révolutionnaire Soviétique (1918–1921): Mythes et réalités," *Revue des études slaves* 59, no. 4 (1987): 726.

lithography.” Eventually the Bolsheviks were able to free themselves from bourgeois influence, from allegory and symbolism, and to “adopt themes [for posters] that are simple, close and comprehensible to the spectator to whom the poster is directed.”<sup>46</sup> The shift described by Polonskii, from the classical language of visual imagery to the vernacular, was most strikingly evident in the changing representation of women.

Female images representing “freedom” and other abstract categories had become increasingly discordant with the dominant message imparted by the Bolsheviks. Implicit in the allegorical image of “freedom” and others like it was the notion of citizenship, associated with the Roman Republic and the French revolutionary tradition. Citizenship, in this tradition, was a universalistic concept which accorded all members of the polity a right to political participation. But in Soviet Russia, where the Bolsheviks had proclaimed a Dictatorship of the Proletariat, citizenship was far from universal and entire categories of the population suffered automatic disenfranchisement because of social origin or occupation under the old regime. Citizenship as an ideal was inconsistent with the realities of the Soviet system and with Bolshevik ideology. For the Bolsheviks, the key idea that explained history and the contemporary world was not citizenship but class.<sup>47</sup> Class was the epistemological center of Marxism-Leninism and by early 1920, the Bolsheviks had made it the center of their system of visual representation as well.

### THE BOLSHEVIK WOMAN WORKER

The most important image in the visual lexicon, which remained part of the standard iconography until 1930, was that of the proud worker, who represented the victorious proletariat and the party that had led it to power. The visualization of the worker emphasized his class attributes: he was almost invariably a blacksmith, generally depicted in a standing position, often with a moustache (but significantly, not a beard, an attribute of the patriarchal peasantry), Russian shirt, leather apron and boots. He sometimes held a hammer in his right hand; elsewhere he holds the hammer poised to strike at the anvil. This image appeared occasionally during the 1905 revolution.<sup>48</sup> In the fall of 1917, at the time of elections to the Constituent Assembly, Bolsheviks in Kharkov put out a poster prominently featuring the blacksmith-worker.<sup>49</sup>

The figure of the blacksmith enjoyed no special status in Bolshevik iconography at the time of the October Revolution but gradually acquired centrality in the course of 1918. By the beginning of 1919, a fixed image had become established and

<sup>46</sup> V. Polonskii, *Russkii revoliutsionnyi plakat* (Moscow, 1925), 29, 30, 75. An earlier article by Polonskii appeared in *Pechat' i revoliutsiia*, kn. 2 (April-June 1922), 56–77.

<sup>47</sup> According to the first Soviet constitution of July 1918, rights of citizenship were extended only to those who “earn their living by production or socially useful labor, soldiers, and disabled persons.” Excluded explicitly were persons who employed hired labor, rentiers, private traders, monks and priests, officials and agents of the former tsarist police.

<sup>48</sup> For examples of this image in 1905, see Shleev, ed., *Revoliutsiia 1905–1907 godov i izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo*, 1:18, 2:102, 3:6.

<sup>49</sup> RU/SU 1262. The poster is signed “Gubernskii komitet kommunisticheskoi partii bol'shevikov Ukrainy.”

was recreated subsequently with the consistency characteristic of religious icons. The blacksmith was a polyvalent image, with a rich tradition.<sup>50</sup> As portrayed in Bolshevik political art, he was meant to be a distinctly urban worker, juxtaposed to the bearded peasant in bast shoes. The figure combined both skill and brawn, sometimes emphasizing the dignity and poise of the skilled worker, sometimes his physical power.

Soviet artists did not generate an image of the female counterpart of the male worker until 1920. In that year, three important posters appeared depicting women workers whose external appearance and occupation replicated in essential respects the male worker-icon. One of these posters, “1-oe Maia vserossiiskii subbotnik” (May 1 All-Russian Voluntary Workday), was by the well-known poster artist, Dmitri Moor—a master of the medium whose posters were highly influential. His poster, prepared for May Day 1920, depicts a man and a woman working at an anvil; she is holding a piece of hot iron with a pair of tongs, his hammer is raised to strike it. Behind them are other workers, a railroad train, and a factory. Except for her skirt and hair style, the woman in the picture replicates the man’s appearance. Both exude physical prowess, but the roles are unmistakably gender-marked, indicating male domination. Some thirty thousand copies of the Moor poster were produced, quite a substantial edition in these years.<sup>51</sup>

Two other influential posters with this kind of image of the female worker appeared in 1920. Nikolai Kogout’s poster, “Oruzhiem my dobili vraga” (We Finished Off the Enemy with Weapons) also appeared in 1920 (see cover) in an edition of 50,000.<sup>52</sup> Like Moor, Kogout depicted a man and woman working together at an anvil; they have similar attire and prowess but again she is represented in a subordinate position as the blacksmith’s helper. A third poster, “Chto dala Oktiabr’skaia revoliutsiia rabotnitse i krest’ianke” (What the October Revolution Gave Worker and Peasant Women), features a woman worker wearing a blacksmith’s apron, with a hammer in hand and a sickle at her feet (Fig. 2). She gestures with her right hand toward buildings marked “maternity home,” “library,” “women workers’ club” and so on. Twenty-five thousand copies of this poster were printed, also a large edition.<sup>53</sup> All three posters, especially the last two, were widely reprinted at the time. The image was soon disseminated throughout the country and appears, for example, in a poster produced in Kiev for International Women’s Day in 1921.<sup>54</sup>

The posters presented something new in the visual lexicon: an image of the Bolshevik woman worker, the female counterpart of the previously all-male van-

<sup>50</sup> On the background, see Raymond Grew, “Picturing the People: Images of the Lower Orders in Nineteenth-century French Art,” in Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, eds., *Art and History: Images and Their Meaning* (Cambridge, England and New York, 1988); E. J. Hobsbawm, “Man and Woman in Socialist Iconography,” *History Workshop*, 6 (Autumn, 1978), 121–38.

<sup>51</sup> Moor’s poster is reproduced in *The Soviet Political Poster* (Middlesex, England, 1985), 28. See also Butnik-Siverskii, *Sovetskii plakat*, p. 184, no. 437.

<sup>52</sup> RU/SU 1280. For a reproduction, see *The Soviet Political Poster*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> The poster was issued in October 1920 (RU/SU 866). For publication details, see Butnik-Siverskii, *Sovetskii plakat*, p. 217, no. 736.

<sup>54</sup> “8-oe marta vseмирnaia prazdnik zhenshchin” features a woman worker in a blacksmith’s apron and a female peasant with a sickle (RU/SU 532).





FIG. 2. Artist unknown, “Chto dala Oktiabr’skaia revoliutsiia rabotnitse i krest’ianke” (What the October Revolution Gave Worker and Peasant Women), October 1920

guard of the country’s working class. What is surprising is that nearly two-and-a-half years had passed before the Bolsheviks presented a visualization of the politically conscious female worker, the *rabotnitsa*. Prior to that time, there were very few realistic representations of women of any kind.

The only antecedent of the heroic woman worker that I have located is a poster produced by the All-Russian League for Women’s Equality during the fall 1917 elections to the Constituent Assembly.<sup>55</sup> The League, a non-Bolshevik organization which agitated primarily for women’s suffrage, distributed a handsome poster featuring a rather haughty-looking woman holding a piece of hot metal on an anvil,

<sup>55</sup> The League was registered in 1907; it became active at the end of 1909, mainly on behalf of women’s suffrage. Before 1917, it attracted about one thousand members, making it the largest feminist organization in Russia. After the February Revolution, it organized one of the first mass demonstrations in Petrograd. On March 20, some forty thousand women marched to demand suffrage for women in elections to the Constituent Assembly (Richard Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860–1930* [Princeton, 1978], 220–24, 291–93). For the poster, see RU/SU 18.

with a male worker about to strike it with a hammer. The image is so similar to the one later generated by Soviet artists in 1920 that one wonders whether they appropriated it from this source or devised it independently.

The choice of image for the *rabotnitsa*—the blacksmith's helper— must have been surprising for contemporaries looking for realistic or typical representation. The factory woman was not, in itself, a novelty, since nearly one-third of the industrial labor force was already female by the outbreak of the First World War, and many thousands entered factories between 1914 and 1917. A World War I poster put out by the tsarist government during a fund-raising drive for war bonds pictured a woman worker standing demurely in front of a lathe.<sup>56</sup> This was rather unusual since relatively few women were employed as lathe operators; most could be found in the textile or food-processing industries. But the Bolshevik image of a woman as a blacksmith's helper must have been even more baffling since virtually no women could be found in the "hot shops," as smelting shops were called. Similarly, women did not hold positions as blacksmiths' helpers in small artisanal establishments or in rural areas. This type of work was seldom, if ever, performed by women.

On the other hand, the Civil War years did mark the entry of women into areas previously considered exclusively male enclaves. Nearly seventy-four thousand Soviet women were involved in actual combat during the Civil War (about two thousand were casualties), and, according to Richard Stites, "the defeminizing element among revolutionary women, dating from nihilist days, displayed itself in dress style and in the emulation of 'military' virtues."<sup>57</sup> Certain activist Bolshevik women could be seen clad in clothing previously reserved for men: soldiers' tunics, leather jackets, pants, boots, greatcoats.<sup>58</sup> A female blacksmith's helper may not have seemed more far-fetched to some observers than a woman dressed in men's military clothing.

Depending on one's point of view, then, the image of the woman worker may have been perceived as more or less relevant to the practical world. But as in the case of all symbols, contemporaries may have "read" the image not literally, but primarily on a symbolic level. Slavic folklore contained many references to the blacksmith who was thought to possess "concealed sacred abilities." Wedding songs spoke of the blacksmith as hammering out the wedding crown, the ring, the wedding itself. There were also references to the blacksmith hammering out a tongue = language = speech. A blacksmith had god-like features and could perform heroic feats.<sup>59</sup>

The supernatural attributes of the blacksmith were readily carried over into Bolshevik propaganda. A popular revolutionary song was entitled "My—kuznetsy"

<sup>56</sup> RU/SU 1220.

<sup>57</sup> Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 322.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 320–22 and note 11.

<sup>59</sup> On these points, see V. V. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov, "Problema funktsii kuznitsa v svete semioticheskoi tipologii kul'tur," in *Materialy vsesoiuznogo simposiuma po vtorichnym modeliruiushchim sistemam I* (5) (Tartu, 1974), 87–90. The sacred attributes of the blacksmith were not only celebrated in Slavic folklore but can be found in many popular traditions in Indo-European culture.

(We Are Blacksmiths). Composed in 1912 by a factory worker, Filip Shkulev,<sup>60</sup> the song was sung after the February Revolution and especially during the Civil War. Its effectiveness was due, in large measure, to the skillful combination of popular mythology and political ideology. The first stanza sets forth the miraculous powers of the blacksmith:<sup>61</sup>

Мы—кузнецы, и дух наш молод,  
Куем мы счастья ключи.  
Вздымайся выше, наш тяжкий молот,  
В стальную грудь сильнее стучи,  
Стучи, стучи!

Мы светлый путь куем народу,  
Мы счастье родине куем. . .  
И за желанную свободу  
Мы все боролись и умрем,  
Умрем, умрем!<sup>62</sup>

The characteristics of the blacksmith, mythologically the exclusive prerogative of males, were now extended visually, in Bolshevik posters, to women. The woman worker was presented visually as a replica of the male. She derived her special powers and aura from an association with the male worker. The analogical counterpart of the blacksmith, she acquired his symbolic attributes. In this way, and only in this way, women in this system of signification acquired heroic status.

Posters presenting male and female versions of the heroic worker deliver another message if viewed from a gender perspective. The addition of the *rabotnitsa* to the image of the victorious proletariat served to amplify and reinforce the theme of the hegemony of the working class, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. On one level the posters represent the worker's mythological power to refashion the world, to hammer out happiness and freedom. On another level, the juxtaposition of man and woman in these images conveys a relationship of domination: the male blacksmith is clearly the superordinate figure, the woman is his helper. Male domination was visually connected in this way to proletarian class domination.

The female blacksmith, who makes a dramatic appearance in 1920, drops out of sight during the early NEP years. It was only during the second half of the 1920s that heroic female workers, bearing resemblance to the Bolshevik *rabotnitsa* of 1920, occasionally reappear in political posters. Adolf Strakhov's well-known poster of a woman worker holding a red banner, produced in Kharkov for International Women's Day in 1926, is the most powerful image of a woman worker during

<sup>60</sup> Shkulev was born in 1868, the son of poor peasants. At the age of fourteen, he lost his right hand in a factory accident. He wrote a number of songs; this was his most popular (*Sovietskie pesni* [Moscow, 1977], 14–15); *Russkie revoliutsionnye pesni* (Moscow, 1952), 127.

<sup>61</sup> *Antologiya Sovetskoi pesni, 1917–1957*, (Moscow, 1957), 1:27. The text of the song can also be found in the two sources in note 60.

<sup>62</sup> We are blacksmiths, and our spirit is young/ We hammer out the keys to happiness/ Rise ever higher, our heavy hammer/ Beat in the steel breast with greater force, beat/ Beat, beat!!! We are hammering out a bright road for the people/ We are hammering out happiness for the motherland/ And for the sake of cherished freedom/ We all have been fighting and shall die/ Die, die!

the NEP period.<sup>63</sup> Women were in low profile in political posters during these years just as they were in political life more generally.<sup>64</sup> The party firmly resisted efforts to create an independent women's liberation movement in Soviet Russia—a movement which might have given gender predominance over class. Only women's organizations operating under direct party auspices gained acceptance, albeit partial, from the party leadership.<sup>65</sup>

Between 1918 and 1924, not a single woman held a seat on any of the leading party organs (the Central Committee, Orgburo, Politburo, and Secretariat). In 1924, only 8.2 percent of the party's membership was female; most of them were urban women. A similar pattern can be discerned in the governmental sector. By 1926, only 18 percent of the deputies to the city Soviets and 9 percent of those to the rural Soviets were women.<sup>66</sup>

Despite an increase in female membership in the Communist Party toward the end of the 1920s, reaching 13.7 percent of the total in October 1929,<sup>67</sup> the overall position of women in Soviet political life did not change significantly. A few months later, however, a very major transformation took place in the representation of women, placing female images for the first time in the very center of the emerging Stalinist iconography.<sup>68</sup> A *direct* correlation cannot, therefore, be established between female presence in political life and political art. There was, to be sure, some connection between the images that were produced and the political and social context. But the connection cannot be reduced to the presence or absence of women in Soviet politics. A complex relationship existed between political realities and gender images in Soviet Russia, a situation illustrated by the representation of the peasant woman.

## REPRESENTATION OF THE PEASANT WOMAN

At the time of the October Revolution, Russia was an overwhelmingly peasant country. About four out of five people lived in the countryside; more than half of them were women. The Bolshevik party's social base was primarily among urban groups and to a lesser extent, among soldiers (most of them peasants drafted into the army) in Petrograd and at the front. It could claim very little support from the vast rural population, as demonstrated by the results of the election to the Constituent Assembly which took place soon afterward.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Strakhov's poster is reproduced in *The Soviet Political Poster*, no. 49 and White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 120, fig. 6.3.

<sup>64</sup> "Raskreposhchennaia zhenshchina—stroï kommunizm!", *The Soviet Political Poster*, 49. For another example, see *ibid.*, 48.

<sup>65</sup> The Zhenotdel, a Party organization, was established in late 1919. For a discussion of its history, see Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 329–45.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 326, 327.

<sup>67</sup> T. H. Rigby, *Communist Party Membership in the U.S.S.R. 1917–1967* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1968), 361.

<sup>68</sup> For further discussion of this point, see my forthcoming study, *The Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Art 1917–1953*.

<sup>69</sup> The elections to the Constituent Assembly, held several weeks after the Bolshevik seizure of power, disclosed that the rural electorate supported the Socialist Revolutionary Party, which received 58 percent of the total vote. The Bolsheviks won 24 percent of the total.

The Bolsheviks' lack of support in the countryside reflected, to a considerable extent, the party's ambivalence toward the peasantry. Both at the level of theory and practice, the Bolsheviks viewed peasants with suspicion and caution, at the same time recognizing the necessity for some kind of alliance with the vast rural population. The party hastened to proclaim a "dictatorship of the proletariat and the poor peasantry" and even middle peasants were thought to be suitable, though unstable, allies for the new regime.

From the very outset, Soviet political art depicted this alliance in visual terms as a coming together of two men: the blacksmith worker with his hammer, leather apron, and boots, and the bearded peasant with his scythe, bast shoes, peasant blouse, homespun pants. 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 with slight modifications, depending on geographic location and the ingenuity of the artist.<sup>70</sup> Dozens of posters with this picture appeared during the Civil War, beginning with Apsit's famous poster for the first anniversary of the revolution in November 1918, "God proletarskoi diktatury. Oktiabr' 1917-oktiabr' 1918" (A Year of Proletarian Dictatorship. October 1917-October 1918).<sup>71</sup> The poster, one of the very first visual evocations of the new regime, pictured a male worker, with a blacksmith's hammer, apron, and a rifle across his back, facing a bearded peasant in bast shoes holding a red flag in one hand and a scythe in the other. In the foreground are the debris of the old order—a crown, shield, broken chains; in the background—an industrial scene and a long procession of people carrying red flags. A stylized sun is above them.

Male peasants appear in Soviet posters from 1918 onward, but female peasants are encountered infrequently prior to 1920. In some respects, this pattern marks a continuation of the predominantly male representations in posters produced by the tsarist government during the First World War. On the other hand, peasant women appear often in traditional Russian folk art of the *lubok*.<sup>72</sup> During the First World War, the tsarist government attempted to use traditional Russian folk art in the service of war propaganda. A poster prepared by Contemporary Lubok, a publishing house established by the Russian government that commissioned and produced posters in the popular *lubok* style, depicts a smiling peasant woman, with bast shoes and big breasts, impaling an Austrian soldier on a pitchfork.<sup>73</sup>

When the talented Russian artist, Boris Kustodiev, created a massive display on the theme of labor for Ruzheinaia Square in Petrograd at the time of the first anniversary of the revolution, he included a panel labeled "The Reaper," showing a young female peasant with a cherubic face and a sickle. This was one of a very few representations of a female peasant in 1918–1919. Another panel, however, was labeled "Abundance." It presented a hefty female peasant with a basket of fruit on

<sup>70</sup> For regionally distinctive versions see RU/SU 1760 from Georgia and RU/SU 868 from Kazan'.

<sup>71</sup> RU/SU 1760. For reproductions, see *The Soviet Political Poster*, no. 2 and White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 27, fig. 2.12.

<sup>72</sup> See V. Denisov, *Voina i lubok* (Petrograd, 1916); and *Lubok. Russische Volksbilderbogen*.

<sup>73</sup> RU/SU 61A, artist unknown. This poster is reproduced in Denisov, *Voina i lubok*, 36.



her head. During these early years, there was a powerful tendency to allegorize women, as noted earlier, even in a display that for the most part emphasized realistic representations of occupations (other panels portrayed a male carpenter, shoemaker, baker, and tailor).<sup>74</sup>

Although there were occasional images of a peasant woman in 1918 and 1919, it was only in early 1920 that Soviet artists began to create posters with a distinctive image of the female peasant that was subsequently reproduced. The image incorporated into 1920 May Day posters borrowed heavily from the style used to represent peasant women during the First World War in *lubok*-style posters such as the one described above. The well-known May Day poster by Nikolai Kochergin, “1-oe Maia 1920 goda” (May 1, 1920), exemplifies the carry-over of the image to Soviet political art (Fig. 3).<sup>75</sup> His poster shows three figures in profile striding confidently over the debris of the old regime (crown, insignia, etc.). A male worker with a hammer over his shoulder is surrounded on one side by a bearded male peasant with a scythe and on the other (in the foreground) by a buxom peasant woman. She wears a kerchief, a Russian blouse and a skirt with an apron, and carries a sickle. The poster is a classic example of early Bolshevik iconography.

The full-figured peasant woman makes an appearance in other posters in the course of 1920 and afterward.<sup>76</sup> Unlike the image of the woman worker, which can be found only in a highly symbolic and positive context, the representation of the peasant woman showed up in a variety of visual situations. Sometimes the image was incorporated into posters in a satirical mode. In these instances, the representation of the female peasant had negative connotations. Examples of the latter type can be found in posters created for the ROSTA windows, a unique form of satirical political art that combined “the functions of poster, newspaper, magazine and information bulletin.”<sup>77</sup>

A famous poster by the satirist Mikhail Cheremnykh, “Istoriia pro bubliki i pro babu” (Story of the *bubliki* and the *baba*), tells the story of a *baba* who refuses to give a *bublik* (bagel) to a Red Army soldier going off to fight the Poles (Fig. 4). Soon afterward “the Pole sees the fat, white woman in the crowd. In a flash she’s eaten up, she and her *bubliki*.”<sup>78</sup> The image in Cheremnykh’s poster is quite similar to the one presented by Kochergin, only here the female peasant exemplifies many

<sup>74</sup> Guerman, *Art of the October Revolution*, nos. 187–93. The set included also a rendering of “labor,” presented as a young man in a blacksmith’s apron, standing beside a brick chimney. It is, of course, noteworthy that the artist selected artisanal occupations rather than those typically found in a factory setting. For contemporaries, the term “worker” encompassed a broad range of occupational groups.

<sup>75</sup> RU/SU 2087; also in White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 62, fig. 3.33.

<sup>76</sup> The poster, “Da Zdravstvuet proletarskii prazdnik 1-oe Maia” by Ivan Simakov, produced for May Day 1921, incorporates an image of the female peasant virtually identical to the one produced a year earlier by Kochergin (RU/SU 1373). Simakov created another May Day poster in 1923 that repeats the same image (see RU/SU 1375).

<sup>77</sup> White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, 62, quoting the Soviet author Viktor Duvakin, introduction to V. V. Maiakovskii, *Groznyi smekh. Okna satiry ROSTA* (Moscow, 1938), v. White estimates that the Moscow Rosta collective alone produced about two million poster-frames during the Civil War (ibid., 109).

<sup>78</sup> This poster is reproduced in White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 71, fig. 4.7, and Guerman, *Art of the October Revolution*, nos. 41, 42.



FIG. 3. N. Kochergin, "1-oe Maia 1920 goda" (May 1, 1920), May 1920

of the negative attributes the Bolsheviks perceived in this segment of the rural population—ignorance, political stupidity, blind self-interest, and petty bourgeois greed. By surrounding the image with a certain type of narrative, Cheremnykh created a *baba*.

*Baba* can be used to connote a peasant woman or all adult females.<sup>79</sup> For politically conscious women and men of the postrevolutionary era, the word—and the visual image associated with it—had acquired distinctively pejorative connotations, signifying the wretched, brutal, and patriarchal world of the peasant wife who was subordinated to husband, priest, and police. When someone proposed outlawing the word *baba* at the First All-Russian Congress of Women in November 1918, the audience roared its approval.<sup>80</sup>

The dual use of the peasant woman image described above correlates with the Bolsheviks' profound ambivalence toward the peasantry more generally. The fact is

<sup>79</sup> For a discussion of the term, see Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 330; Lynne Viola, "Baby buntz and Peasant Women's Protest during Collectivization," *The Russian Review* 45, no. 1 (January 1986): 23.

<sup>80</sup> Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 330.



FIG. 4. M. Cheremnykh, “Istoriia pro bubliki i pro babu” (Story of the *bubliki* and the *baba*), 1920

that there was no unambiguously heroic symbolic image of the female peasant, comparable to the *rabotnitsa*. Even the image of the proud peasant woman in Kochergin’s poster probably could not erase the associations with the *baba*, so much disliked by politicized women. A radical break with this imagery and pattern of association does not come until 1930, when the drive for crash collectivization got fully under way. Only then did Soviet artists generate an entirely new and unambiguously heroic representation of women in the countryside: the picture of the young, aggressive, energetic and hardworking collective farm woman, with understated

breasts and slender appearance, leading fellow peasants on the road to collectivization. In short, the very opposite of the *baba*.

### CLASS AND GENDER IN POLITICAL ICONOGRAPHY

What explains the kinds of images that were incorporated into early Soviet political art? As we have seen, Bolshevik visual propaganda began by representing women in an allegorical style, but by 1920 a new set of female images had been created that depicted women as workers and peasants. This shift, part of a broader trend away from allegory, marked the ascendancy of the ideology of class over the ideology of citizenship in visual propaganda.

During the immediate postrevolutionary years, a period of bitter contestation over the meaning of things, the Bolsheviks sought to establish the hegemony of their interpretation of history and politics. They had to create images consonant with a distinctively Bolshevik ethos, but these images also had to resonate with the cultural repertoires of the artists, officials, and viewers. Cultural repertoires were, of course, highly diverse and they incorporated elements from many different sources. Some of the earliest Soviet artists drew extensively on Western European traditions of political art, from which they appropriated various symbols and allegorical images. But only a small stratum of educated Russians could “read” these symbols and allegories, at least in their full implications. For a party that aimed at reaching broad strata of the population with its message, these kinds of images left much to be desired.

By the end of the Civil War, Soviet artists had created new images, far more accessible to ordinary people. The new images of the female worker and peasant also drew on mythology—the mythology of popular culture. Mythical elements from folklore and the popular idiom were fused with contemporary political ideology to create a special visual language for apprehending the unprecedented experiences of revolution and civil war. It was the combination of popular mythology and political ideology that gave Bolshevik propaganda its persuasive power.

The new worker and peasant icons—both male and female—functioned as symbols in visual propaganda. Unlike images drawn from the neoclassical repertoire, they did not require access to special knowledge from classical antiquity and mythology. But they were symbols nonetheless—symbols of the heroic groups that had, according to the Bolshevik master narrative, made the October Revolution and laid the groundwork for achieving socialism. The image of the blacksmith was meant to capture some elements of what it meant to be a male worker or, in the case of his female helper, what it meant to share in the glory of being part of the chosen class. In contrast to the type of imagery introduced by the Bolsheviks in the 1930s, these representations of workers and peasants were not intended to be prescriptive or to serve as models for conduct. They had a different function. Their purpose was to give visual meaning to a worldview which foregrounded the concept of class and class conflict and defined gender in terms of class.

Class and gender provided the two principal coordinates of the new visual language in Soviet Russia, interacting and reinforcing each other in ways unanticipated by those who created and disseminated political art. But it was class, rather than gender, that provided the fundamental conceptual framework for the Bolshe-

viks. In the context of Marxism-Leninism, gender distinctions occupied a distinctly secondary position.

Iconographic images of workers and peasants served not only to remap the social and political world but also to represent gender relationships. The *rabotnitsa*, an analogue of the male worker, exhibited the same iconographic attributes of proletarian class position. Yet there was an important difference. She labored as the blacksmith's helper, holding the hot metal on the anvil = altar, while he fashioned it into a new object = world. She assisted in the creation; he was the creator. He was the blacksmith-priest of the folk tradition; she was a reflection of his radiant aura. Gender domination and class domination were inextricably linked through this visual imagery.

The peasant woman encapsulated in the 1920 May Day poster by Kochergin conveyed a complex message. She was pictured as striding, alongside a male peasant and worker, toward the bright future. She gained a place alongside other heroes of the revolution, but only conditionally. In this and other posters with similar imagery, the visual syntax conveyed a subtle message: the peasant woman could appear in combination with men or a woman worker, but not alone. Her position in the pantheon of heroes depended on a relationship of contiguity (metonymy). Moreover, the image of the female peasant conjured up associations with the *baba*, a term with negative political connotations for many contemporaries. The representation of the peasant woman, like Bolshevik policy toward peasants generally, suffered from deep ambiguities and confusion.

When Theodore Dreiser visited the Soviet Union in the mid-1920s, he observed: "Banners and above all posters in vast numbers provided visual information with a minimum of words for illiterates and the newly literate. Walls, vehicles, shop-windows covered with them made the streets a kind of semi-literate's library."<sup>81</sup> Images, like books, could be "read" in unpredictable ways. Pictures meant to emphasize class identity also conveyed, quite unwittingly, ideas about gender and gender relations. Regardless of official and artistic goals, political art contained heterogeneous messages. Posters and other forms of visual propaganda provided an intricate and influential form of political discourse for a society in which old assumptions had been shattered and new ones were still in the making.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted from *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (London, 1928), 90, by Roger Pethybridge, *The Social Prelude to Stalinism* (London, 1974), 160.