

A Timid Flock: Investigating Propaganda Under Stalin

By Crystal Dome, Evergreen State College

Richard Pipes, former director of Harvard's Russian Research Center, asserts in his book, *Communism: A History*, that "The Socialist utopia is an imaginary horizon, forever retreating the closer one approaches it."¹ In 1789, the French Revolution released the germ of a utopian ideal where humanity is reconciled with itself and in control of its destiny. In 1917, the Russian Bolsheviks felt that the October Revolution was the achievement of human liberation first announced by the French Revolution. Instead of human liberation, however, the Bolsheviks opened a Pandora's box on one of the most significant and ultimately brutal social experiments of universal history: the First Socialist State. Through the telescopic eye of time we are capable of seeing how far this experiment strayed from its perceived utopian shores. The rise and decline of the Communist idea, its human wreckage and aftermath, has given startling weight to Karl Marx's proclamation in the *Communist Manifesto*: "A specter is haunting Europe - the specter of Communism." It was indeed a dreadful apparition, not just for Europe, but for the world. Sad and mystifying, it has bequeathed a legacy of burning questions and threadbare answers.

Perhaps one of the more complex legacies is the idea of social engineering: the Bolsheviks envisioned the Soviet Union as a society that would be transformed through psychological remolding. From its conception, the Soviet regime aimed for ideological and political penetration into the private life of all Soviet citizens. Revolutionary fervor

¹ Pipes, Richard. *Communism: A History*. (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 84.

quickly coalesced into a mission to make not only a new socialist world order, but a new socialist man and woman fit for this world order. Propaganda was perceived as integral to contributing to the development of a “new” Socialist consciousness. It was the practical connection between revolutionary ideas and revolutionary reality. The use of propaganda to aid in revolutionary causes reflects the leaders’ abundant faith in the ability of an ideology to remold and reshape the human mind.

To better understand the approach of using psychological remodeling as a tactic for political hegemony, it is important to remember that the Bolsheviks began their reign in a period of bitter class struggle. The speed and surprise of the October Revolution left no time to educate the masses. As a result, Socialist ideals had to be swiftly implanted by means of propaganda. Bolsheviks understood that socialist ideas were of recent growth. This meant that revolutionary ideals had to be protected from weeds of doubt by vigorous assertion and mass coercion.² The lack of time for the regime to establish legitimacy meant that the masses had to be brought to accept Bolshevik authority through brutal coercion or the promise of a better life. Consequently, people were attached to the new order primarily through terror or emotional appeal.³

This dicey balance of oppression and emotional fervor necessitated the development of a total propaganda, in which virtually every area of state and individual activity was under Soviet influence. Economic determinism, leadership of the proletariat, and industrial organization were the preached articles of faith. These principles were

² Domenach, Jean-Marie. “Leninist Propaganda.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 15, no. 2, (Summer, 1951):265. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2746168> (30 March 2010). Woolsten, Howard. “Propaganda in Soviet Russia.” *The American Journal of Sociology*, 38, no. 1 (July 1932): 40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2767340> (30 March 2010).

asserted so impressively that they became controlling principles in the lives of nearly 8 percent of the world's population in less than ten years.⁴ As Soviet historian Jean-Marie Domenach points out, Marxism can be characterized by its power of diffusion: "It is a philosophy that can be propagated among the masses, first, because it corresponds to a certain state of industrial civilization; and, second, because it rests on a dialectic that can be reduced to an extreme simplicity without being substantially deformed."⁵ It is certain, however, that if Lenin had not given it a method of practical action, its success would not have reached so far and been established so quickly.

Lenin's fundamental contribution was the notion that if class consciousness was left to itself it would become entirely bound up in the economic struggle.⁶ It would become tangled in a "trade-unionist" consciousness, which would stunt the rise of true political consciousness. To avoid such a fate, class consciousness must be awakened, educated, brought into the battle in a larger sphere than worker-employer relations alone.⁷ According to Lenin, this task should fall to an elite group of professional revolutionaries, the conscious vanguard of the proletariat. It was the Communist party who should be the instrument of this relationship between elite and mass, between vanguard and proletariat. Lenin conceived of a dialectical corps of agitators who would indoctrinate and lead the masses. In this sense, propaganda - defined broadly as ranging from agitation to political action - became the means of transmission. It was the essential link of expression, at once highly rigid and infinitely flexible. Propaganda would be used to continually enlighten the masses, prepare them, and lead them gradually to join the vanguard in understanding

³ Woolsten, 37.

⁴ Woolsten, 37.

⁵ Domenach, 265.

⁶ Domenach, 265.

and eventually in action.⁸ It is from this mindset that Trotsky made his assertion: “We are accused of creating mass opinion, this reproach is inexact; we are attempting only to formulate it.”⁹

In Soviet and Soviet-inspired regimes, it is generally impossible to delimit the field of propaganda. Propaganda is only one aspect of a total program of action which encompassed education, industrial and agricultural production, and included all art, literature, and leisure.¹⁰ The Bolsheviks put all their efforts into an attempt to monopolize all channels of influence, welding them together into a single, official channel. The regime successfully managed to turn schools and the mass media into organs of propaganda, and attempted, although with a lesser degree of success, to supplant family and church with government-inspired institutions.¹¹ This resulted in a vast psychopolitical system which operated through press, radio, theater, films, local and factory bulletins, conferences, and meetings. In this sense, the entire life of the citizen became the object of propaganda. Psychological manipulation was considered integral to Soviet politics. It was felt that through the manipulation of public opinion Soviet influence could induce adherence to a set of values that govern activities underlying political behavior. Such a stance was indicative of the assumption made by Party leadership of the malleability of the human mind, and their considerable faith in the power of propaganda as a tool for reinforcing desirable perceptions.¹²

⁷ Domenach, 265.

⁸ Domenach, 265.

⁹ Domenach, 268.

¹⁰ Domenach, 272.

¹¹ Mikheyev, Dmitry. “The Soviet Mentality.” *Political Psychology*, 8, no. 4 (Dec., 1987) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/379099> (23 April 2010):503

¹² Feldman, David Lewis. “Ideology and the Manipulation of Symbols: Leadership Perceptions of Science, Education, and Art in the People’s Republic of China, 1964-1974.” *Political Psychology* 6, no. 3 (Sep., 1985) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3791081> (7 April 2010):452.

The inexhaustible wellspring of the Communist movement was Socialist ideology. Whether precariously held or dogmatically disseminated, Soviet ideology was used by the regime as a powerful device for influencing perceptions of appropriate social conduct. Like most ideologies, Communism consisted of a vast array of epistemological and axiological components which were disseminated in such a manner as to constructively shape perceptions of value.¹³ The Regime's influence on values and personal morality was essential to its survival. Although ideologies may be structurally held together by logic, they are psychologically maintained by moral fervor.¹⁴ If an ideology is to survive, it must have a strong moral component in which there are specific evils, villains, exploiters, usurpers: devils on the one hand, and a somewhat vaguer notion of salvation on the other.¹⁵ The moral foundation of Soviet ideology was exploited by Party leaders to effectively induce control.

The Soviet ideological system was far from static. It evolved through the years in-step with Soviet politics and its day-to-day realities, which were the driving force behind ideological revolution. Soviet ideology was comprised of two parts: a hard core of basic principles which persisted more or less unchanged from the beginning of the Soviet period, and several surrounding layers of doctrine which were subject to modification or accretion in accordance with the then-current dictates of Soviet policy.¹⁶ In the Soviet Union, the relationship between ideology and policy was one of mutual interaction. It was a two-way process in which theoretical conceptions affected the making of policy

¹³ Feldman, 442.

¹⁴ Feldman, 458.

¹⁵ According to R. Lane, author of Political Ideology: Why the American Man Believes What He Believes, Soviet ideology is a "forensic" political ideology. It is an ideology which is predicated upon the notion of the revolutionary reconstruction of society. (New York: Free Press, 1961). Author cited in Feldman, 458.

¹⁶ Tucker, Robert. "Stalin and the Uses of Psychology." World Politics 8, no. 4 (July 1956) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2008941> (30 March 2010):463.

and practical considerations affected the content of the ideology.¹⁷ All of this exemplified ideological flexibility. At the base of that flexibility, was an essential quality of the ideology itself: an almost mystical faith in the capabilities of the masses if they could be thoroughly indoctrinated and motivated.¹⁸ In Communism, people were thought of as the lumber and bricks in the building of the new world.

Propaganda was used to “concretize” elements of Soviet ideology in digestible form to the masses. Its dissemination demonstrated a unique philosophical adaptability which proved critical to its success. One of the most favorable aspects of Soviet ideology was that it was a doctrine broad enough to allow for its particular component themes to be emphasized differently during periods of sudden political change, and in accordance with the priorities of the leadership. Soviet propaganda was no different. It was predicated upon an assumption of psychological malleability, that simultaneously - and in apparent contradiction - insisted upon psychological rigidity as well. Once propaganda was felt to have achieved the desired psychological “transformation” of the masses, the next step would be to gear ensuing propaganda messages to reinforce an inflexible and unyielding commitment to the recent transformation.¹⁹ Thus, the same assumptions which were used by the Regime to assume the malleability of persons’ minds, and which encouraged an emphasis upon change, also assumed the psychological capacity of the propagandist to command dogged adherence to political ends.²⁰ Propaganda and ideology were both powerful factors in the shaping of Soviet policies and actions from the October Revolution to its dissolution in 1991.

¹⁷ Tucker, 459.

¹⁸ Feldman, 458.

¹⁹ Feldman, 458.

²⁰ Feldman, 458.

The most famous examples of Soviet ideology, propaganda and terror are typically associated with Joseph Stalin. Stalin's Draconian rule lasted from 1928 - 1953. It is important to note that however cruel, brutal, and terrifying life may have been under Stalin, he merely carried through the system laid down by Lenin. In Marx one finds all the ingredients for the later totalitarian state - class warfare, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the indoctrination schemes to remodel men's minds into a new socialist reality, central planning - however, it was in the hands of Vladimir Lenin, that these ideas were refined and formulated in ways that ended up creating the actual system of control, command, and terror which would become the foundation of the Soviet system.²¹ Officially, the Regime's intent was not to break men's will, but to soften, bend, and guide it. The end goal was a society comprised of a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the Party as its shepherd.²²

Stalin, therefore, inherited a sophisticated propaganda machine and he built on it. He spent the first part of his reign marginalizing his rival, Leon Trotsky, and a lot of this focused on Stalin presenting himself as the true heir to Lenin's legacy. Much of Stalin's mid-term propaganda was aimed at uniting people behind his first and second Five Year Plans. Upon assuming complete control in 1928, Stalin immediately put an end to the NEP (New Economic Policy) and embarked on a new course to radically reorganize industry and agriculture. Stalin intended to turn the USSR into a powerful industrial nation by means of a colossal restructuring of society. Propaganda at this time focused on vast production increases and massive construction throughout the country with an attendant emphasis laid on technology. Propagandists stressed the monumental and

²¹ Woolsten, 38.

²² Tucker, Robert. "Stalin and the Uses of Psychology." World Politics 8, no. 4 (July 1956): 455-483.

heroic aspect of the age, making heroes out of workers and legends out of laborers.

The sense of urgency rooted in the the Five Year Plans was astounding. The pace imposed suggested a race against time, slogans such as: “The Five Year Plan in four years,” “5-in-4,” and “2+3=4” were posted and shouted throughout the land. These magical, yet paradoxical, numbers spelled out in foot-high letters on Moscow housefronts the perverse optimism, unreality, and planned error of the Five Year Plans.²³ It was as if those responsible for the country’s destinies felt that they were running out of history and could only achieve their goals by conquering but time itself.²⁴ Eugene Lyons, an American reporter stationed in Moscow, noted how the ubiquitous Soviet hyperbole of this period betrayed the tragic absurdity of the Soviet scene. It was in these slogans, born in premature success, that he saw a country tobogganing toward horror.²⁵

What Lyons couldn’t have realized was the scope and speed with which his prediction would materialize. The second aspect of Stalin’s Five Year Plan incorporated the destruction of private farming and the creation of collectives where the peasants worked for the State. The idea of collective farms was seen as the revival of serfdom by peasants and was encountered with widespread resistance. To counter this defiance Stalin embarked on a bitter campaign to weed out the undesirable elements of the peasantry. A venomous propaganda campaign was employed against all those whom Stalin's regime considered alien and hostile to the new socialist order. Stalin singled out the richer peasants, labeled kulaks, as class enemies and stripped them of their homes and possessions, shooting those who resisted and deporting millions to Siberia and the Far

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2008941> (30 March 2010).

²³ Lyons, Eugene. *Assignment in Utopia*. (London: Harrap, 1938), 240. Cited in Tzouliadis, Tim. *The Forsaken*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 49.

²⁴ Lewin, Moshe. “Society, State, and Ideology During the First Five Year Plan,” in *Cultural Revolution in*

North. Unbeknownst to the citizenry, Stalin was creating the blueprint for political repression and persecution that would later become the hallmark of his reign.

The use of arrest, imprisonment, torture, and execution to create a climate of fear and to encourage adherence to Stalinist ideology reached its apex in the Great Terror of 1936-1938. A large-scale purge of the Communist Party was orchestrated by Stalin, taking countless innocent victims with it. Beginning in 1934, Stalin embarked on a bloody campaign to rid the Regime of its internal adversaries: spies, wreckers, saboteurs, and the proverbial class enemies. These ill-defined categories were used to ravage not only the Party, but the military and general population as well. Stalin's repeated slaughtering of the populace practically bled the country white, claiming untold millions of lives. In each case, propaganda played a key role inciting terror and fomenting hatred to further the economic, social, and political goals of the State.

Stalin's propaganda took a radically different approach in the years following the Great Terror. As WW2 loomed on the horizon, themes of Soviet propaganda shifted dramatically. Patriotic appeals began to overshadow the earlier themes of Communism and the class struggle, anti-religious themes soon disappeared, and satiric cartoons of Kulaks and Capitalists gave way to vicious attacks on Hitler and his henchmen. Propaganda focused on ancient notions of protecting mother Russia, the creation of hero-cults around resistance fighters murdered by the Nazis, and on demonizing the Germans.²⁶ The Soviet leadership realized that to survive, it would need to unite on a national front rather than an ideological one. Once again, propaganda was called to

Russia, 1928-1931 Sheila Fitzpatrick, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 41.

²⁵ Lyons, 240.

²⁶ Foss, Clive, Jim Lapidés. "Soviet Posters: Revolution by Design." International Poster Gallery, 1998. www.internationalposter.com/country-primers/soviet-posters.aspx

transform the values, attitudes, and behavior deemed necessary to mobilize the population in the interests of the state. This is not uncommon during times of warfare, but it is indicative of how Soviet propaganda was envisioned as the “invisible arm of the government” by its leaders.

Soviet propaganda was therefore intimately bound up with patterns of economic and political development. Changing orientations in propaganda revealed much about the broader redefinition of organizational and development priorities that progressed with the Communist state. One of the more peculiar aspects about this development, was that obvious reality became subordinated to ideological juggling and Party tensions. This meant that for the average Soviet citizen reality had to be viewed through distorted, Stalinist spectacles.²⁷ This was epitomized in 1932, when Stalin decreed that all art must conform to the doctrine of “Socialist Realism.”²⁸ It was a doctrine that rigidly required all portrayals of Soviet life to perpetuate and harmonize with the building of socialism. As a result, all forms of expression were mobilized to serve the state. Art, like life, was subordinated to the needs and dictates of the Communist Party.

Under this decree artists were expected to take a positive view of socialist society and to bear in mind the didactic use of art to develop social consciousness. The inculcation generated a mass of strictly controlled propaganda which asked for the full support and glorification of Party objectives and the new Socialist society. These requisites seldom coincided with the artists actual experiences and frequently undermined the artistic credibility of their works. The end product was a sea of blankly smiling workers and collective farmers looking out from the covers of books, paintings, and

²⁷ Lewin, 45.

²⁸ Lewin, 51.

posters. When John Steinbeck traveled through Russia in 1947 he responded with abhorrence to the intellectual repression of the USSR's artistic community: "I have been horrified by the creeping paralysis that is coming out of the Kremlin, the death of art and thought, the death of individuals - and the only creative thing in the world is the individual."²⁹ For Steinbeck, such a world was hard to reconcile. He viewed this as the last death-gasp of a society on its knees. For Stalin, this was simply one more example of the oft-quoted Russian proverb that "when you cut down trees the chips fly." It was just one more necessary evil in the building of Socialism.

Perhaps the most well known aspect of Stalin's propaganda is the megalomaniacal dimensions it took. Stalin was notorious for promoting himself as a godlike and infallible leader. He highlighted himself as the creator, father-figure, and great hero of socialism, relishing in such grandiloquent titles as: "Coryphaeus of Science," "Father of Nations," "Brilliant Genius of Humanity," "Great Architect of Communism," and "Gardener of Human Happiness."³⁰ Stalin even went so far as to rewrite Soviet history to provide himself a more significant role in the October Revolution, all the while insisting that he be remembered for "the extraordinary modesty characteristic of truly great people."³¹

Viewed through the methodology of power, Stalin's cult-of-personality had a calculated purpose. The blind adulation of the cult leader erased the notion of self as a free-thinking individual, and in its place created an acolyte.³² The intended psychological effect of Soviet "giganticism" was to create a feeling of awe which rendered the

²⁹ Steinbeck, John. *A Russian Journal*. (New York, Viking, 1948), 50-51. Cited in Tzouliadis, Tim. *The Forsaken*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 269.

³⁰ "Joseph Stalin: Cult of Personality." *Spiritus-Temporis*. 2005. <http://www.spiritus-temporis.com/joseph-stalin/cult-of-personality.html> (9 April 2010).

individual meaningless beneath the towering ubiquity of the Great Leader.³³ It is important to note that Stalinism was never based on fear alone, there were millions of Soviets who supported Stalin with genuine fervor. Stalin's success at turning the USSR into a powerful industrial nation caused many to see Stalin as a good man and as an achiever. (Stalin was, of course, always careful to emphasize this role.) In his memoirs, *Conversations with Stalin*, Milovan Djilas observes how Stalin was revered as more than just a leader: "He was the incarnation of an idea, transfigured in Communist minds into pure idea, and thereby into something infallible and sinless. Stalin was the victorious battle of today and the brotherhood of tomorrow." This was the fruit of Stalin's efforts: the deliberate fixation of individual dedication and complete loyalty to the all-powerful leader.

Stalin's exponential use of propaganda was instrumental in the consolidation of his control. Stalin relied heavily on visual propaganda to immortalize his leadership. The number of portraits, poster, pictures and statues used to represent Stalin during his reign were almost uncountable. His image appeared everywhere, in every context, and always greater than life. Steinbeck observed on his trip to Russia that: "His (Stalin's) portrait hangs not only in every museum, but in every room of every museum. His statue marches in front of all public buildings. His bust is in front of all airports, railroad stations, and bus stations. His bust is in all schoolrooms, and his portrait is often directly behind his bust. In parks, he sits on benches discussing problems with Lenin. . . .Every building carries monster portraits of him."³⁴ It was precisely this calculated omnipresence which

³¹ "Joseph Stalin: Cult of Personality."

³² Tzouliadis, Tim. *The Forsaken*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 304.

³³ Tzouliadis, Tim. *The Forsaken*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 304.

³⁴ Tzouliadis, Tim. *The Forsaken*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 270.

allowed Stalin to reach the heights he did.

Stalin's reign represented a unique, and ultimately brutal, process of state-guided social transformation. For as historian Moshe Lewin points out, "The state did much more than just 'guide,' it substituted itself for society. The state became the sole initiator of action and the controller of all important spheres of life. The process was thus transformed into one of 'state building,' with the whole social structure being, so to speak, sucked into the state mechanism, as if entirely assimilated by it."³⁵ In the Soviet system, propaganda was considered to be the sacred key to the creation of a society both socialist and modern. It was felt that propaganda had the power to mold the human mind, and to alter the values, attitudes, and behavior of the population. Thus allowing the Soviet state to create the future citizens needed for a modern socialist society. This correlated well with Stalin who viewed people as the little cogwheels of Communism: none had any value outside the use of the machine. In this way, Stalin distorted Lenin's ideas, because to Lenin -- and this was the whole meaning of his work -- Communism was to serve man, whereas under Stalin it appeared that man served Communism.

It is a complex and intricate fabric that weaves the Russian character. In the last century, Russia's body social has seen a series of cataclysmic events and in the midst of all the tragedy and upheaval it has shown an amazing capacity to recover. The pace and violence of the changes under Stalin were breathtaking. In a matter of a few years much of the previous social fabric, Tsarist and Soviet, was dispersed and destroyed.³⁶ With the destruction came the creation of new patterns, which, although they emerged very rapidly, became permanent. The scholar is astounded by the incredible intensity and

³⁵ Lewin, 41.

³⁶ Lewin, 42.

scope of the transformation of society, not to speak of the bewildering effects those years had on contemporaries. That a progressive ideology initially intended to enhance human freedom and to create higher forms of community, came to serve a police state is one of the peculiarities of the period and an important phenomenon to study.