11-2017

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Recommended Citation

Masnov, James (2017) ""If I Pick Flowers:" Posters, Popular Culture, and Gorbachev's Reforms in the 1980's," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2017.070209

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol7/iss2/9>

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“If I Pick Flowers”:

Posters, Popular Culture, and Gorbachev’s Reforms in the 1980s

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In 1985, the new General Secretary of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, introduced sweeping reforms which altered the course and culture of Russia. His twin policies of “*glasnost*” (openness) and “*perestroika*” (restructuring) ushered in a liberalization of speech, the press, and the Soviet economy. The Soviet Union had suffered from economic stagnation for over a decade when Gorbachev took office, and lingering Stalinist-style abuses and intimidation against the population during the previous twenty years exacerbated an atmosphere of general hopelessness and pessimism. Gorbachev sought reform to strengthen the Soviet economy and inspire a renewed optimism. His policies of liberalization were not motivated by impulses to undercut or subvert Soviet communism, but as a means of modernizing and strengthening it. This paper will discuss the impacts *glasnost* and *perestroika* had upon the population, including both expected and perhaps unexpected ramifications of liberalization, based on a collection of public-service posters. The posters as primary sources offer valuable insight into the Soviet government’s desire to follow a new policy of transparency, and reveal the population’s desire to exploit the new policy of openness by addressing social ills in a public medium which had not been possible before.

Prior to an analysis of *glasnost*-era posters, however, a brief examination of the way social ills were presented and discussed publicly in the pre-Gorbachev era is important to highlight. This can be done by scrutinizing a state-sponsored poster from 1972 that tackled the issue of alcoholism. Anti-alcoholism posters were common throughout the history of the Soviet Union, going back to at least 1930. The difference in message and tone with the anti-addiction posters of the *glasnost* era, however, is striking. The 1972 poster frames the issue of alcoholism not as a public health matter, or of its damage to the family, but as an issue of Soviet citizens shirking their duty to work. The title of the poster, "Shame to the loafer and drunkard," makes this clear.¹ According to the Soviet Union of 1972, alcoholism was a threat to the state. Its interfamily and physical/mental health ramifications were not presented as the central issue.

Fig. 1 "Shame to the drunkard" (1972)

This was largely how social ills were dealt with in the Soviet Union in the pre-*glasnost* era, if they were attended to at all. More often than not, if concerns of society were a point of discussion in the Soviet Union, it was framed as a sin against the state. Often, however, concerns impacting the life of the population was simply not discussed at all, which the openness of

¹ "Shame to the loafer and the drunkard," Soviet Union, courtesy of the Wende Museum, Los Angeles, CA, 1972.

glasnost implicitly confessed. Whether public concerns dealing with alcoholism, divorce, etc. was something Gorbachev predicted would occur is not precisely known. Nevertheless, discussions regarding such matters were exactly what transpired. For the first time in the history of the Soviet Union, and to a great extent the entire history of Russia, free expression exploded into the public sphere in the 1980s and the most fundamental and important topics that mattered to the people of the Soviet Union came out into the open.

Drug addiction had not been discussed openly during the Soviet era until *glasnost*. In what could be interpreted as a polar opposite approach regarding dependency from the 1972 poster, a 1989 drug abuse poster, stating “Drug Abuse is Suicide,” framed the concern as being about individuals.² Gone were accusations of loafing and failing one’s obligation to the state. In its place was the image of a human figure trapped inside a syringe, with the head being crushed as the plunger—actually, the man’s feet—is pressed. The image is strong in its cleverness and simplicity, and underscores the impact of drug abuse on the actual addict versus the broader community or the state.

Fig. 2 "Drug abuse is suicide" (1989)

² "Drug Abuse is Suicide," *Making the History of 1989*, Item #82, <https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/82> (accessed June 12, 2017).

The different tact taken in the piece, versus the 1972 alcohol addiction poster, displayed the matter of drug abuse to be one of individual health, safety, and happiness. It emphasized that addiction touches upon the personal rather than the political or ideological. Whatever truth exists pertaining to drug addiction as a drain on the state in terms of resources, diminished production through diminished labor, etc., the “Drug Abuse is Suicide” poster spoke to the subject at the level of the individual person. The choice of utilizing the word “suicide” itself emphasized the individual psychology being promoted during *glasnost*. While it was hoped the Soviet Union would be strengthened through *glasnost* and *perestroika*, and therefore a stronger and more unified Soviet state would emerge, the underlying expression coming out of the openness of *glasnost* was the expression of the individual. Particular problems were suddenly being publicly wrestled with by particular members of society. People were now addressing issues through the language and advocacy of individuals rather than the collective. This was an altogether new aspect of Soviet life that was developing in the second half of the 1980s.

Among the largest domestic problems the Soviet Union faced for essentially the entirety of its history was divorce. Originally, in the early years of the Soviet Union, when it was still shining in the light of victory and success in its revolution and civil war, the Soviet Union sought to ease divorce for both sexes. No-fault divorce was not merely suddenly allowed, but was practically encouraged. Bourgeoisie notions of marriage with traditional gender roles, including the subservient role of women, were rejected and a new era in which men and women would be economic and social equals was facilitated, in part, through an easing of divorce in the early twentieth century.

The equality of women during the early decades of the Soviet Union was expressly tied to the aims of having women join the workforce. John Scott, an American who worked in

Magnitogorsk during the 1930s, underscored this fact in his memoir, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel*. Scott's memoir observes that there "was no unemployment in the Soviet Union. The Bolsheviks planned their economy and gave opportunities to young men and women."³ Professor of Law, Howard J. Berman, later noted the need for individual Soviet citizens to provide a function for the state. This informed the equalizing of women's roles. Berman remarked that the Soviet system was "highly mobilized, more highly directed, not only for military purposes but also for social and economic purposes. It is the idea of Soviet society that each person in it must have a place, a job to do."⁴ The disillusion of the family through divorce and gender equality was foreseen by a number of Marxist-Leninists as the aim of the Soviet state in the early years of the Soviet Union. In the place of family would be a vast community under the state. Perhaps, in time, the state itself would disappear as well and a true Marxist utopia would be realized.

The combination of easy divorce and the temporary outlawing of adoption in the early years of the Soviet Union was designed to strengthen the state through an emerging equality between the sexes. The encouraging of women and men to become educated and enter the workforce had unforeseen ramifications, however. Many children were abandoned, marriages were destroyed, no fault divorce encouraged many men to abandon their wives and pursue other relationships—marriages or not. The result was a chaotic atmosphere of indulgence and desertion. In a few short years, an epidemic of roaming bands of orphans—known as "bezprizorniki"—wandered the countryside and cities, a result of the many deaths of parents during World War I, the Russian Civil War, and the famine of 1921. Rampant cases of

³ John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1942), 4.

⁴ Harold J. Berman, "The Comparison of Soviet and American Law," *Indiana Law Journal* 34, no. 4 (Summer, 1959), 568 (accessed October 15, 2017).

abandonment and divorce exacerbated this problem during the early Soviet era. Wendy Z. Goldman, author of *Women, The State, & Revolution: Soviet Family Policy & Social Life, 1917 – 1936*, notes that *besprizorniki* resorted to begging, stealing, and con-artistry to survive in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Goldman states that the orphan population “joined gangs specializing as apartment burglars, bazaar crooks, garret thieves, railway pilferers, suitcase lifters, swindlers, cheats, and sharps. They perfected elaborate begging ruses and pickpocketing schemes, mimicking deformities, singing obscene ditties, and using smaller children and baby dolls to evoke sympathy among passersby.”⁵ Divorce was no small contributor to this abandonment of thousands of children.

The chaos caused by no-fault divorce, erasure of traditional gender roles, and the encouragement of women to enter the workforce was not the communist ideal which had been hoped for. As a result, the government eventually made divorce more difficult legally and the practice became, to some degree, culturally shameful. Women’s roles as workers were de-emphasized and their roles as wives and mothers were re-asserted, even as they continued to fill many jobs in factories and other settings.

Discussion of divorce essentially had always come from the top-down. It was a matter deliberated by the state when it felt the issue needed to be modified. Outside of the testimony of people in divorce proceedings, it was not a matter openly debated among the general public until the 1980s with the policy of *glasnost*. For the first time in the history of the Soviet Union, the issue of divorce—something that impacts individuals, families, as well as the broader culture—began to be discussed in an open and honest manner. The subject was addressed in a 1989 poster. The poster features side-angle, near-silhouettes of a man and woman facing away from each

⁵ Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, The State, & Revolution: Soviet Family Policy & Social Life, 1917 – 1936*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 77.

other. They are clearly a divorced, or divorcing, couple. They are almost completely in shadow and both look despondent. The father looks sick, perhaps from alcoholism, and the mother looks as though she is a victim of domestic abuse, bearing a bruise under her eye. Front and center of the poster is the image of a boy, looking straight ahead, in full color and well-lit—appealing to the viewer of the poster. The boy has sadness in his eyes. Above the boy is the text, which translates to “And what about me?”⁶

Fig. 3 "And what about me?" (1989)

The Soviet Union had seen high rates of divorce for decades, despite the state's negative proclamations regarding it and despite its supposed difficulty. The reality and the aims of the policies were at times divergent. Though divorces were meant to be made difficult through excessive paperwork and hoop-jumping, court records have shown that judges generally granted appeals for divorce. The realities of the high divorce rate could thus be discussed openly in the 1980s due to *glasnost*, and its impact on Russian children, similarly not discussed openly until the era of openness, is likewise stressed in the image of the poster.

⁶ "Divorce in the Soviet Union," *Making the History of 1989*, Item #18, <https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/18> (accessed June 12, 2017).

Perhaps one of the most surprising results of *glasnost* was the discussion in the late 1980s of the abuse of power of the Stalinist era. The new openness allowed not only the citizenry to speak more publicly and honestly about issues directly affecting them, but the Soviet Union also began to come to terms with its own history by openly castigating the leadership and policies of one of its most prominent former leaders. The myth of consistency and pride in all the state had done was shattered as state officials, artists, filmmakers, and citizens were finally free—in the late 1980s—to address the cruelty and violence Joseph Stalin had committed against his own people in the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s. Though Nikita Khrushchev made note of Stalin's abuses when he came to power after Stalin's death, he was able to do so as the new leader of the Soviet Union, and primarily did so to the party elite. Common members of Soviet society did not have the freedom to discuss what Khrushchev and so many others plainly knew: Stalin used intimidation and violence against the people of the Soviet Union, especially his political enemies and those merely considered as such.

A number of works were released in the 1980s, during *glasnost*, that encouraged discussion of the brutality of the Stalinist era. One noteworthy work is the 1988 film by director Evgeniy Tsymbal, *Zashchitnik Sedov (Defense Counsel Sedov)*, based on the Stalinist Terror of the 1930s. In the film, a lawyer defending the lives of four laborers who have been sentenced to death is told by a government official that his motivations are suspect. After all, why would anyone, even a lawyer, question the edicts of the state? "We'll expose the nature of your politics," the lawyer is told.⁷ Two posters with similar objectives to *Zashchitnik Sedov* were released in 1989. They are known by the title, "It Must Not Happen Again."⁸ The first poster

⁷ *Zashchitnik Sedov (Defense Counsel Sedov)*, directed by Evgeniy Tsymbal, film (1988; Mosfilm), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pquRUiRZgo> (accessed October 15, 2017).

⁸ "It Must Not Happen Again (1 and 2)," *Making the History of 1989*, Item #651, <https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/651> (accessed June 12, 2017).

features a drawing of Stalin with a sniper's rifle, taking aim at something out of frame. The implication here appears to be Stalin's habit of *taking aim* at his political enemies—real or imagined. A separate illustration is featured underneath the first, photographs made to look like criminal detention photos of Stalin. In this case, Stalin has been essentially detained and put on trial in the minds of the *glasnost*-era Soviet public. The vitriol embedded within the illustrations is difficult to comprehend in its scope. The freedom of artists and activists to finally speak freely about Stalin's atrocities must have been a cathartic experience. The second poster features a group of windowpanes transforming into crucifixes. The illustration underneath is of a train full of people, able to be seen somehow through the outside of the train cars. The smoke from the locomotive engine carries the years of the 1930s off into the wind. Perhaps this is reference to the Stalinist Terror of the 1930s, and its *long train of abuses*, but this is merely conjecture on the part of this writer. A quote from the April 5, 1988 issue of *Pravda* is also featured, stating, "The guilt of Stalin, as well as the guilt of those around him, toward the party and people for the mass purges [and] lawlessness [they] committed is huge and unforgivable."

Fig. 4 "It must not happen again" (1989)

Environmental concerns also came into the public sphere during *glasnost*, and not least of all because of the tragic explosion of the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl in Ukraine on April

26, 1986. Whether concerns regarding the environment would have become in any way prominent in the public otherwise is an open question, especially considering that manufacturing and industry was still absolutely vital to the economy of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the environment did become a topic of discussion during the era of *glasnost*, and this can be seen in the poster, "If I Pick Flowers." The poster does not address the issue of nuclear fallout, but of deforestation. Erosion concerns, particularly in the area near and around the Aral Sea due to irrigation, had just begun to be discussed at this time. The poster reads, "If I pick flowers, if you pick flowers. If all of us: if I and you, if we pick flowers—then everything would be deserted, and nothing will be beautiful!"⁹

Fig. 5 "If I pick flowers" (1989)

One reason why this poster and its statement is compelling is because it reveals the wide range of criticism of Soviet policy being openly discussed and debated in the late 1980s. It is one thing to be critical of a past and long-dead regime, or to desire attention be brought to social ills such as alcoholism, drug dependency, spousal abuse, and divorce. This primary source, however, takes aim at something altogether different: the state and its facilitation in the operation of

⁹ "Environmental activism in the Soviet Union," *Making the History of 1989*, Item #19, <https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/19> (accessed June 12, 2017).

industry. Furthermore, it targets not only the state and industry, but the wealthy elite of the Soviet Union's inner circle who wreaked havoc upon the environment for revenue as well as beautification of their personal estates. *Glasnost* brought not only a new ability to reveal long-buried history and the ability to examine concerns in the domestic sphere through a public forum. It also facilitated a new-found ability for people of little means who historically had no voice to make waves and criticize the most powerful members of Soviet society. Suddenly Soviet citizens of modest backgrounds were not only disparaging prominent figures of government and industry, they were being actively encouraged to do so. They may not have been naming names, but a long-closed society suddenly speaking about issues so openly meant that names were of little importance. Everyone seemed to understand the message and the context.

While *glasnost* and *perestroika* were often touted simultaneously, their agendas were often separate. *Glasnost* was meant to address the need for more openness by the Soviet government in the form of more transparency and was similarly encouraged by the general population through a liberalized policy of free speech, free press, and free expression.

Perestroika largely addressed the need for the Soviet Union to restructure itself economically through similarly liberalized economic policies. Though the two liberal policies had separate but complimentary aims, their overlap could at times be seen in public art, such as the 1987 poster, "Independence—that's Responsibility!"¹⁰ The poster demonstrates the new sense of individuality promoted in the late 1980s. The clear purposes of liberalization and celebration of the individual to empower the Soviet state is underscored by the figure in the poster being a Soviet laborer, whose individual ability to strive at work makes him a celebrated figure. There are echoes here of the Stakhanovite Movement of the 1930s, which similarly promoted

¹⁰ "Perestroika and the changing Soviet workforce," *Making the History of 1989*, Item #20, <https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/20> (accessed June 12, 2017).

individual innovation and informed a celebrity status of the strong and heroic laborer, but with some dreadful and terrible repercussions. Among the repercussions were accusations of some laborers being labelled “wreckers”: individuals who deliberately broke equipment and slowed production as a means of harming the state, supposedly. The celebrated laborer illustrated in the 1987 poster, however, is not a product of any over-arching labor movement or a facet of the Stalinist era. Instead, the laborer is cast as a strong and heroic individual, reaping the rewards of his solitary power, and is not represented as a strong cog in an even stronger Soviet machine.

Fig. 6 "Independence: that's responsibility" (1987)

Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the 1980s brought a level of liberalism the region had never seen or previously been able to express. The intended results included economic restructuring to facilitate a healthier economy for the superpower. Gorbachev's interest in ramping down militarism and putting an end to the nuclear arms race was informed by this general desire to put the Soviet economy in a new direction. Liberalization of American goods in the Soviet marketplace further emphasized both a longing to empower the Soviet economy and press the reset button on U.S./Soviet relations, which had been running cold for about half a century until he entered office.

The policy of *glasnost* liberalized the Russian population in ways which were perhaps not foreseen by Gorbachev as well. In the name of creating a renaissance of diplomacy and a refreshed friendship with the West, particularly Britain and the United States, Gorbachev encouraged a similar openness and energizing of policy domestically by liberalizing rights of speech and expression. Doing so created an avenue for long-ignored—or even buried—social ills to be openly discussed, for the impact of industry on the environment to be considered for the first time, and for the Soviet worker to be celebrated not as a servant of the state but as an individual with unique and celebrated qualities.

Gorbachev authorized these policies with the intention of broadening and strengthening the Soviet Union's presence and credibility on the world stage, and creating a modern Soviet economy. Instead, the blooming of liberalism in the Soviet Union, both social and economic, precipitated its fall in a matter of less than a decade following the introduction of said policies. The primary sources referenced in this work, public-service posters of the *glasnost/perestroika* era, reveal the sudden shift in Russian culture in the late 1980s. What many, including Mikhail Gorbachev, saw in the *glasnost* era was a new beginning. It was, in reality, a fascinating end; the end of the Soviet era, punctuated and defined by new social and economic freedoms which celebrated the cause of a new Soviet communism. It was a new Soviet system which hastened its own demise.

About the author

James Masnov is a recent graduate from Western Oregon University (2017). A history major and legal studies minor, James is interested in intellectual history, the history of the early American

republic, the history of imperial and Soviet Russia, American constitutional history, and the history of political philosophy/ideology. He plans to attend graduate school in two years to pursue a PhD in history.