

Early Soviet Advertising: "We Have to Extract All the Stinking Bourgeois Elements"

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The expression "Soviet advertising" appears to be an oxymoron. In the Soviet Union, the state was fully responsible for all production, including consumer goods. Although brand names were present, there was no competition among goods or producers. At first glance therefore, there would appear to be no justification for the use of advertising. However, the factual evidence suggests that advertising existed in the Soviet Union throughout its whole history. What was the nature of this advertising? Did the Soviets have a theoretical justification for socialist advertising? How instrumental was its application? What relation did advertising have with on economic and political realities as well as specific cultural and social conditions?

The history of the Soviet advertising is yet to be written. This paper attempts to reconstruct the history of Soviet advertising throughout the history of the regime. Using an historical interpretive analysis, the paper analyzes Soviet advertising in the 1920s, a period that signified the start of advertising in the socialist Russia. This research is based on Zhurnalists [Journalist], a periodical that has not been previously described by researchers, on several published memoirs of advertising practitioners, and on a number of secondary sources. Firstly, my research establishes the historical, political, and economic background against which the early Soviet advertising was developing. Then, it describes and analyzes some advertising examples. Finally, the author of this paper closely studied Zhurnalists, reading every issue¹ to find the advertising-related publications and thorough analyzed content and the emergent themes. A close reading of these primary sources goes beyond a content analysis to interpret these documents and to situate them historically. These interpretations are supported and developed through the use of historical secondary data.

Because Soviet advertising was socially and ideologically constructed, interpretive humanistic modes of inquiry are the most appropriate methods to address the

matter. This research was guided by theoretical recommendations drawn from the collection of articles edited by Elizabeth Hirschman in "Interpretive Consumer Research" (1989). It also utilizes recommendations of Kumcu 1987, Fullerton 1987, Firat 1987, Pollay 1987, Savitt 1980 and Witkowski 1993 that underline that any culture is bound by context and recommend that historical analysis should employ a mix of data sources as well as utilize the narration to go beyond the accumulation of facts.

When in October of 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution overturned the government it ruptured the gradual development of history in Russia including advertising history as well. By that time, advertising industry was fully developed; Russian advertising agencies in industrial urban centers such as Moscow and St. Petersburg thrived (West 1995). After the Revolution, the desire of the Bolsheviks to distance themselves from bourgeois reality and to abolish not only private property but also the free market system resulted in abandonment of the instrument or trade advertising. The system of market-based trade was replaced with barter and distribution of goods for the working class became centralized. The virtual collapse of industry and trade had created a catastrophe in daily existence. In place of advertising for non-existent consumer goods, the Bolsheviks resorted to agitation and propaganda for the new social system. However, such propaganda employed principles similar to those of advertising—an appeal to a certain target (proletariat), concentrated on a single concept making it easy to comprehend, and attracted the attention of the viewers with bright colors and intricate shapes. In place of consumer goods, however, they promoted political ideas.

During this period, famous painters, poets, and artists came to be interested in lending their talents to the development of a new Soviet Russia. Their favorite medium was a poster that was often reproduced by hand through stencils with whatever paint was available (Russkii plakat 2000), creating the new "revolutionary" Constructivist style that became the artistic trademark of the period. Revolutionary posters or political advertisements were often executed in the geometrical, non-mimetic, minimalist styles. Alexander Rodchenko was among active propagandists and was not only a leading figure of the artistic avant-garde but also a professor at the New School of Art (Armer 1990, 10).

¹ It was published irregularly ranging from two issues a year to 36 issues a year. As with many early Soviet magazines, the frequency of publication depended mostly on the availability of paper, rather than on the editorial policy.

THE FUTURE OF MARKETING'S PAST

When in 1921, through the introduction of the NEP (New Economic Policy) the state decided to relieve the economic struggle of the population and reintroduced private trade and limited concessions to foreign producers. Barter and central distribution gave way to "untold quantities of [consumer] goods" that were displayed in store windows and promoted through trade advertising by private businesses (Ball 1991, 89).

Unexpectedly, the NEP had created anxiety for the Soviet authorities: to prove the superiority of socialism under new conditions, they in fact had to perform a role of they did not plan for—that is, to become producers of consumer goods. Soviet enterprises had to engage in competition with petty traders. Special importance was placed on state advertising to show the advantage of the Soviet-produced goods (Russian Poster 2000).

In response to the state needs, Alexander Rodchenko started collaboration with Vladimir Mayakovsky (a famous Revolutionary poet) on advertising production. Mayakovsky was "a copywriter" and Rodchenko was "an art director" and the state became their "client." The fame and significance of Mayakovsky and Rodchenko for the Soviet culture was such as it yielded to suggestion that if Umberto Eco and Andy Warhol would have formed an advertising agency, it will have had a similar cultural significance and impact (Armer 1990). The unique style and message of the joined creations of these artists made advertising a voice of the new country. In 1925, several advertising posters made by Rodchenko and Mayakovsky were displayed at the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris, and the authors were awarded a silver medal (Anikst and Chervich 1987, 26).

Although Soviet advertising in the 1920s existed *de facto*, in order to avoid ideological attacks a theoretical and ideological justification of its existence was necessary in a country that practiced scientific materialism. After all, advertising was an expression of capitalism. Apparently, both on the state level and among the ideologically indoctrinated public there were some doubts about the benefits of the use of this capitalist tool on Soviet soil. The debate about the topic was evident on the pages of the press and in books of the time. The ostensibly pro-advertising position was taken by *Zhurnalist* [Journalist], the short-lived trade magazine of the press workers (1922-1933).

Zhurnalist was a child of the NEP. It started in 1922 by a section of the print workers organized under the trade union of All-Russian educators (*Zhurnalist*, issue 1, September 1922). From its first issue it demonstrated an interest in analyzing Soviet advertising efforts, in creating a theoretical basis for its existence, and in improving the Soviet advertising through science and education. At the beginning, it was a lively magazine that published advertisements and engaged in sharp discussions. *Zhurnalist* ended its publication in 1933, two years after the association of the workers of the press was liquidated by Stalin's decree. During its last years, the journal became

stifled, formal, and the topic of advertising gradually disappeared from its pages.

In 1922, *Zhurnalist* acknowledged that advertising became a fact of life in socialist Russia. There was a great faith in advertising that was believed to be capable of advancing not only the economy but culture. It was perceived as a tool of so much needed modernization. In issue 12, 1927, N. Sinitsyn wrote, "Our colossal territory and the boundless market allows our country not only to sell goods but also to culturally enlighten the population, cultivate the new needs, and show the possibilities of the new life—all these factors will make advertising a leading force in the Soviet future" (48).

However, the publication suggested that the science of advertising had not been yet been grasped by Soviet practitioners. The authors suggested drawing upon American and German advertising expertise as well as upon earlier experiences in Revolutionary propaganda. At the same time, insisted *Zhurnalist*, there was a great divide in goals of capitalist and socialist advertising; while praising the possibilities of the institution of advertising for its abilities to educate the population about the new way of life, "we have to extract all the stinking bourgeois elements [from it]" (V. Gaus, *Advertising perspectives*, issue 5, 1927). *Zhurnalist* envisioned socialist advertising as an antagonist to capitalist one. At the same time, the journal insisted on the importance of drawing from the propaganda experience. The comparison of advertising (something to be learned) with agitation (that many Soviets had a first-hand experience with) came throughout *Zhurnalist* numerous times. The article "Advertising = propaganda" named three specific goals of Soviet advertising: "to lead the consumer in the world of trade, showing the fastest way to the goods they need (announcement)," "to direct the masses and to educate them in the problems of the industry (agitation)," and "to be a branch of real art. It could create a face of the street and beautify it" (65). In particular, the article emphasized the link between the advertising posters of the 1920s and the Revolutionary posters of the previous decade and concluded that advertising could learn from its predecessors, "Let us remember the severe and tragic beauty of the War Communism posters that fill the hearts of the hungry fighters with enthusiasm. The plywood sheets of Moserklama [The Moscow State Ad Agency] attached to buildings and fences, boring and mute, despite the diversity of bills and posters, cannot match the War Communism posters" (*ibid*).

The analysis demonstrates that rather than serve as a trade device, Soviet advertising was perceived to be an ideological instrument similar to propaganda. Soviet proponents of domestic advertising from *Zhurnalist* believed that it would help the country to achieve the goals of building a new Bolshevik reality as well as transform it into a modernized, industrialized society.

For the young Soviet country, advertising was a new tool that was temporarily embraced by the Soviet State as a competitive weapon against NEP-men. The purpose of the