Bachelor's Thesis

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Designing the Red Dream:

A Visual and Historical Analysis of Socialist Realist Propaganda

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Abstract

This BA thesis critically examines Socialist Realist graphic design as a form of political propaganda during the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union. It analyzes the strategic use of visual elements and language to construct compelling narratives that promoted the USSR's economic achievements, asserted ideological superiority, and fostered a vision of national progress. Employing a methodology that combines work analysis of graphic designs by artists Nina Nikolaevna Vatolina and Viktor Ivanovich Govorkov with historical contextualization, my research investigates the ways in which key visual characteristics were deployed to advance Soviet ideological aims and legitimize the political regime. By integrating perspectives from both art history and political science, the project offers a nuanced cross-disciplinary understanding of the complex relationship between visual culture, political ideology, and the mechanisms of state control operating in the mid-20th century Soviet context. This approach seeks to reveal how visual communication was instrumentalized to shape public perception and reinforce the authority of the state.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Question and Objective

Propaganda operates by constructing an aesthetic world in which its messages appear persuasive and natural. This thesis explores the visual mechanisms through which Socialist Realism, the official artistic doctrine of the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era, produced this kind of world. My research centers on the medium of poster design, a visual form characterized by its immediacy, accessibility, and potent didactic potential. Though Socialist Realism has often been dismissed in the West as an art of conformity or kitsch, such an approach fails to appreciate the historical, political, and symbolic complexities that these images embodied for their time and place.

In analyzing selected posters by Nina Nikolaevna Vatolina and Viktor Ivanovich Govorkov, the thesis adopts a cross-disciplinary perspective that combines visual analysis rooted in art historical methodology with political science perspectives on ideology and propaganda. These visual culture artifacts are not treated as static illustrations, but as active agents in the Soviet project of state-building, ideological consolidation, and the shaping of a nation. The research question guiding this project is: How did key visual characteristics of Socialist Realist graphic imagery portraying the USSR's achievements in the economy during the Stalinist regime function as instruments of political propaganda to advance Soviet ideological aims? To approach this question, the thesis integrates formal and contextual work analysis of selected posters with theoretical insights from Soviet history and the politics of visual culture. In doing so, it seeks to contribute not only to the academic study of Socialist Realism, but also to broader conversations about the entanglements of art and power, both in the past and nowadays. This is not just about understanding a visual style, but about how art and ideas come together to shape beliefs, which can then be used to control people.

1.2 Cross-Disciplinary Approach

This investigation adopts a cross-disciplinary approach, analyzing political propaganda through the distinct yet interconnected lenses of art history and political science. Art history provides the methodology for visual analysis of Socialist Realist graphic design, examining its aesthetic characteristics. Political science offers the framework to understand how these visual designs functioned as tools for ideological expression and state control. By integrating these perspectives, the thesis reveals the dynamic relationship between visual culture and political ideology within the Soviet context, demonstrating the inherent link between art and politics in the creation and dissemination of state propaganda during the Stalinist era. This requires a theoretical engagement with propaganda studies and a historical reflection of the Soviet Union

under Stalin, informed by academic literature on Soviet visual culture, Socialist Realism, and the characteristics of Soviet propaganda.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the study of history itself operates within a fundamentally cross-disciplinary field. To comprehend the Soviet context, one must consider not only the timeline of political events but also the social structures, economic forces, cultural norms, and spatial dynamics that shaped Soviet society. Therefore, this thesis' engagement with the historical dimensions of Socialist Realist propaganda inherently involves an interdisciplinary approach, enriching the analysis of the posters and their function within the broader puzzle of Soviet history. As Manning and Ravi note in their work *Cross-Disciplinary Theory in Construction of a World-Historical Archive* (2013):

> Interdisciplinary cooperation and collaboration have proven to be desirable yet difficult goals to achieve in social science research. The nuanced differences among the domains, frameworks, assumptions, and methods of the various fields of study that comprise such research often hinder attempts to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue that is both meaningful and productive.[1]

1.3 Methodology of Visual Analysis

In order to answer my research question, I visually analyze four distinct Socialist Realist propaganda posters from the mid-20th century Soviet Union. I draw on the methodology outlined by Anne D'Alleva in her book *How to Write Art History* (2005). D'Alleva, is an accomplished art historian and expert in art historical methods and theory, recognized for her guidance on analyzing and interpreting art. According to her, "given the variable understandings and interpretations of the very people who made and used the work [...] there is much that you can know and understand. Your tools are contextual and formal analysis."[2] D'Alleva's approach emphasizes the importance of formal analysis, which involves closely examining visual elements such as color, line, composition, and scale, focusing on how these features are arranged and work together to create meaning or evoke a response, without considering external factors.[3] In contrast, contextual analysis looks beyond the artwork itself to explore the broader historical, social, cultural, and personal contexts in which it was created, considering factors like the artist's background, the intended audience, and the cultural or political environment that influenced its creation and reception.[4] Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive understanding of art by combining close visual examination with an awareness of the circumstances that shape meaning. By applying D'Alleva strategies for looking carefully and framing insightful questions about these formal qualities, I am able to

[1] Patrick Manning and Sanjana Ravi, "Cross-Disciplinary Theory in Construction of a World-Historical Archive," *Journal of World-Historical Information* 1, no. 1 (2013), 15, https://doi.org/10.5195/jwhi.2013.3.
[2] Anne D'Alleva, *How to Write Art History* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2005), 73, https://books.google.at/books?id=RoagE-LcrxwC.
[3] Cf. Ibid., 28.
[4] Cf. Ibid., 53.

provide a structured and nuanced interpretation of each poster, grounding my analysis in established art historical methods.

I have chosen the four artworks because each of them depicts themes of agriculture and industrial progress, which were central concerns of Soviet ideology during and after World War II. All four artworks were published by the Union's publishing house Iskusstvo, which played a key role in disseminating propaganda posters that promoted the regime's priorities and shaped public consciousness through visual culture. According to art historian Anita Pisch, "[s]tates that are beset by turmoil, economic failure, social conflict or war invariably respond to these threats by seeking to strengthen the symbolic legitimation of the leadership."[5] By focusing on these themes, the selection of posters highlights the ways in which visual culture was used to promote key ideological messages in the specific historical context. This was not the work of isolated individuals but part of a vast, state-orchestrated cultural apparatus involving hundreds of artists, many of whom were affiliated with unions such as the Moscow Union of Artists and produced work for major publishers like Iskusstvo, which "during the course of the war, […] produced about 800 posters in a total of 34 million copies."[6] These institutions coordinated artistic production on a national scale, shaping everything from stylistic norms to ideological messaging.

The author of the first two chosen artworks, Nina Vatolina, active between the late 1930s and 1960s, is recognized as a highly notable Soviet poster artist and acclaimed for creating some of the best poster designs of the era.[7] Through themes such as collective labor, political participation, industrialization, and the ideal Soviet citizen, Vatolina's designs contributed to the creation of a collective Soviet identity, reflecting the regime's emphasis on optimism, duty, and the promise of a brighter future. Her work consistently aligned with the government's objectives, aiming to inspire enthusiasm, depict the heroism of workers and peasants, and reinforce the legitimacy and goals of the Soviet state, thereby perfectly embodying the aims and aesthetics of Socialist Realism. The creator of the other two artworks, Viktor Ivanovich Govorkov, began his career in book graphics and illustration before focusing on political and satirical posters in the 1930s. His work spanned key themes of Soviet ideology, including collectivization, industrialization, war, family values, and anti-alcohol campaigns, closely aligning with the artistic dogma of the Stalin regime. In the 1950s and 1960s, Govorkov became one of the most active artists at the Agitplakat studio, a collective founded in 1956 in Moscow that specialized in producing agitational posters for mass distribution. As described

[5] Anita Pisch, The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 192, https://doi.org/10.22459/PCSSP.12.2016.
[6] Ibid., 315
[7] Cf. Marina Balina, Larissa Rudova, and Anastasia Kostetskaya, eds., Historical and Cultural Transformations of Russian Childhood: Myths and Realities (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2023), 100, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003274223.

by Pisch, he was regarded as an “honoured graphic artist,”[8] a testament to both his technical mastery and his lasting impact on the development of Soviet poster art.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Socialist Realism

Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution, founder of the Communist Party, and architect of the transition from the Russian Empire to the world’s first socialist state, died in 1924. By the end of the 1920s, Joseph Stalin, a relatively young and ambitious figure within the Soviet leadership, emerged as the dominant leader of the Soviet Union, fundamentally transforming the country’s direction. As Buckley notes, Stalin “had strengthened his political position in the Soviet leadership and by the end of the decade he was able to redirect Soviet economic development. The market relations of the New Economic Policy were brought to an end in 1928 and thereafter industry was planned 'from above.’”[9] Stalin scrapped Lenin’s New Economic Policy and introduced the Five-Year Plan in 1928 to boost industrialization in the Soviet Union and tighten state control over the economy. This plan prioritized heavy industry and agricultural collectivization, achieving major growth in sectors like coal and steel, but also causing severe hardship, including widespread food shortages and famine. It is equally important to acknowledge that Stalin’s regime is closely associated with immense human suffering and loss of life, as historian Moshe Lewin notes:

> Stalinist industrialization also led to excess deaths in peacetime of the order of 10 million or more, many of them during the 1933 famine. Thus, total population loss for 1914 to 1945 from premature deaths and birth deficits amounted to 74 million: 26 million in 1914–22, 38 million for 1941–5, and 10 million in the peacetime years.[10]

Stalin’s regime was marked by the elimination of opposition and the centralization of authority: “Gradually all vocal opposition was eliminated and there was no criticism and debate. Stalin became the great leader beyond criticism—an elevated position in which he was glorified and deified.”[11] The period is most accurately described as totalitarian, with the state exerting control over all aspects of life and prioritizing heavy industry to build socialism in one country.[12]

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[8] Anita Pisch, The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 209, https://doi.org/10.22459/PCSSP.12.2016.
[9] Mary Buckley, Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 110, https://libsearch.ceu.edu/permalink/43CEU_INST/179qfpk/alma991001415199708861.
[10] Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2005), 138, https://books.google.at/books?id=ETQpY-32DysC.
[11] Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 110, https://libsearch.ceu.edu/permalink/43CEU_INST/179qfpk/alma991001415199708861.
[12] Cf. Ibid., 110.

Art has always been shaped by its political and social environment, and the artistic movement called Socialist Realism was no exception. Emerging in the early 1930s, Socialist Realism marked a decisive break from the experimental energy of the early 20th century. In the book titled *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (2020), author David Joselit proposes the division of modern art into three broad categories, used to map the dynamic and interactive relationships between different global art traditions.

> In [...] Communist polities such as the Soviet Union and China, existing forms of heritage (encompassing indigenous practices as well as local forms of European modernism, such as suprematism and constructivism in the Soviet Union) were radically extinguished in favor of a popular art of socialist realism explicitly produced for broad reproduction and dissemination. Here, modernity is linked to the construction of a revolutionary mass culture rather than to experiments in formal invention. The artist assists in nation building rather than avant-garde or bohemian agitation (as s/he is typically styled in the European modernism).[13]

Under Joseph Stalin's regime, Socialist realism became the official artistic doctrine, directly reflecting the political and ideological priorities of the 1930s. As Pisch notes:

> Socialist realism was announced as the officially endorsed method for works of art and literature at the first Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934. [...] Socialist realism was regarded by the Party as the most progressive form of art that had ever existed, as was still being claimed in the Encyclopædic dictionary of literature, published in the USSR in 1987, which proclaimed it 'the leading artistic method of the modern era.'[14]

This policy was tightly connected to Stalin's consolidation of power and his broader efforts to control not only the economy and politics but also the cultural life of the nation.

The doctrine of socialist realism demanded that all art serve the goals of the state by depicting idealized images of socialist life, glorifying workers, peasants, and party leaders, and promoting the values of communism. As Joselit describes, it encompassed "a range of figurative practices of art intended to embody and celebrate the values of state socialism and Communism in part through its participation in mass culture."[15] Joselit further notes that in the world of state socialism, "official art aligned with forms of realism...intended to inspire broad mass identification through propaganda."[16]

The emergence of socialist realism meant the suppression of independent artistic movements and the replacement of local forms of European modernism with a "popular art of socialist realism explicitly produced for broad reproduction and dissemination."[17] Joselit explains that

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[13] David Joselit, "Heritage and Debt," *October* 168 (Spring 2019), 39, https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00381.
[14] Anita Pisch, The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 93, https://doi.org/10.22459/PCSSP.12.2016.
[15] David Joselit, "Heritage and Debt," *October* 168 (Spring 2019), 4, https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00381.
[16] Cf. Ibid., 4.
[17] Ibid., 39.

the movement aimed at "*transforming the masses*—inventing a modernism dedicated to universal legibility and ubiquitous distribution,"[18] prioritizing ideological messaging and accessibility over avant-garde innovation. This approach not only distinguished Soviet art from developments in the West but also served as a powerful instrument for shaping public consciousness and reinforcing the ideals of Stalinist communism during a period of intense state control.

2.2 Propaganda

Socialist Realism functioned as far more than just an artistic style. This perspective is powerfully articulated by Andris Teikmanis, an art historian whose research focuses on the intersections of art, ideology, and politics in the Soviet era. Teikmanis argues:

> Socialist Realism cannot be viewed as a purely aesthetic or political phenomenon. The Socialist Realism also cannot be separated from politics and ideology, and this leads to conclusions that politics cannot be split from the Socialist Realism either. The Socialist Realism was not a decoration for Stalinist politics; it did not make political reality more beautiful nor serve as a 'factory of fortune'. Instead, it was the direct producer of the particular reality that was Socialism.[19]

This highlights how Socialist Realism was fundamentally connected to the construction of Soviet society, serving as a mechanism for shaping not just representation, but lived experience itself.

In her book titled *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, inventions and fabrications* (2016), Anita Pisch argues that "'propaganda' refers to the manipulation and employment of language and symbols in the service of an ideological or social purpose."[20] This understanding is crucial for analyzing the role of visual culture in the Soviet Union. Under Stalin, the government centralized the production of propaganda, resulting in a consistent style and messaging across various artistic mediums. Therefore, understanding political posters requires considering them within the broader scope of artistic production in the USSR.[21] In 1930, the Soviet government introduced the standardized OCT-1337 typeface set, managed by the All-Union Committee for Standards, to ensure consistency, clarity, and equal accessibility of state-mandated print materials, even among the illiterate population.[22] In this environment, the political poster was not only a tool for communication, but a vital means of shaping public consciousness. The omnipresence and uniformity of these

[18] Ibid., 69, (original emphasis).
[19] Andris Teikmanis, "Toward Models of Socialist Realism," *Baltic Journal of Art History* 6 (2013), 102, https://doi.org/10.12697/BJAH.2013.6.04.
[20] Anita Pisch, The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 28, https://doi.org/10.22459/PCSSP.12.2016.
[21] Cf. Ibid., 7.
[22] Cf. TypeJournal. "OCT 1337: Первый советский стандарт на шрифты." Accessed June 1, 2025. https://typejournal.ru/articles/ost-1337.

images served to embed Stalinist ideology into the fabric of Soviet daily life itself, making the poster both a reflection and a producer of the reality envisioned by the regime. As Pisch further observes, “Poster campaigns were central to propaganda efforts throughout the Soviet era and were well suited to deal with the government’s need to publicise widely and quickly a large number of policies and initiatives, to identify enemies of the people, and to promote united goals and visions.”[23] This monopoly over information and imagery had its roots in the early days of Soviet power, with Lenin issuing the ’Decree on the Press’ in 1917 which resulted in the closure of all newspapers expressing hostile opposition or defiance towards the worker-peasant government.[24] The regulation of information, along with the systematic production and distribution of propaganda, emerged as central priorities for the newly established regime.

2.3 Ideology

In the book *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (1989), Mary Buckley defines ideology as follows:

> A political belief system which is composed of interrelated ideas. These ideas offer a theoretical explanation of reality and defend a preferred political order, either past, present or future. Pursuit of these ideas gives rise to an action programme, or strategy to put them into practice through political and social action. The Soviet state from its inception denied non-communist parties the right to exist and gave one party the right to rule and to interpret doctrine. Thus, “armed with Marxism-Leninism” the CPSU today executes its leading and guiding role. Soviet ideology is thus officially constructed “from above”.[25]

Rooted in Marxist-Leninist theory, Soviet ideology served as the organizing logic of the state, aiming to transform society at its deepest levels and to reshape education, economics, and culture according to socialist principles. With Stalin’s rise to power, the role of ideology became even more pronounced and personalized. The phenomenon of the cult of personality emerged, elevating Stalin to a near-mythical status and intertwining his image with the very identity of the Soviet project. This shift meant that ideological conformity was increasingly measured by loyalty not just to socialist principles, but to Stalin himself. “From 1929 until 1953, the retouched image of Stalin became a central symbol in Soviet propaganda across all artistic and cultural genres. Images of an omniscient Stalin appeared in the media of socialist realist painting, statuary, monumental architecture, friezes, banners and posters.”[26]

[23] Anita Pisch, The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 32, https://doi.org/10.22459/PCSSP.12.2016.
[24] Cf. Ibid., 27.
[25] Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 5, https://libsearch.ceu.edu/permalink/43CEU_INST/179qfpk/alma991001415199708861.
[26] Anita Pisch, The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 23, https://doi.org/10.22459/PCSSP.12.2016.

One of the most visible manifestations of this ideological transformation was the *kolkhoz*, or "collective farm."[27] The *kolkhoz* did more than reorganize rural economics, it symbolized the replacement of private property and traditional village life with collectivized labor and planned socialist communities, serving as a living demonstration of socialism's supposed superiority over capitalism. In this way, Soviet ideology under Stalin became both the justification for, and the method of, remaking society—embedding itself into every institution, narrative, and even the everyday landscape of Soviet citizens.

3. Visual Poster Analysis

The following section presents a detailed visual analysis of four Socialist Realist propaganda posters. It adopts the premise that a comprehensive understanding of these artworks requires an exploration of both their visual characteristics and their function within the broader socio-political context of the Soviet Union. Respectively, the strategies employed to communicate Soviet ideological messages are explored through my personal, subjective interpretation. To achieve this, the artistic elements, composition, and textual components of each poster will be subjected to the formal and contextual analysis approach (see section 1.3).

3.1 Struggle to Fulfill and Surpass the New Five-Year Plan, to Increase the Level of Culture and the Material Level of Life of Our People!

[27] Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 91, https://libsearch.ceu.edu/permalink/43CEU_INST/179qfpk/alma991001415199708861.

(Fig. 1) Nina Nikolaevicha Vatolina, *Struggle to Fulfill and Surpass the New Five-Year Plan, to Increase the Level of Culture and the Material Level of Life of Our People!*, 1947, Poster Plakat Collection, https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/posters/struggle-to-fulfill-and-surpass-the-new-five-year-plan-to-incre-pp-498 (accessed June 5, 2025).

This poster, published in 1947[28] is of particular interest to me because it highlights two defining features of Socialist Realist graphic design, namely the cult of personality as well as the aspect of ethnic diversity present among the Soviet population. Firstly, what draws the eye is the flashy red curtain with Lenin and Stalin's profiles, represented simply with a white outline, devoid of other tones and hues that are characteristic to human portraits. The background color is also highly symbolic, as Pisch suggests: "Red was specifically associated with icons, where it often formed a background colour and represented youth, beauty and eternal life and, in posters, it imbues the figures it surrounds with an aura of sacrality."[29] By means of a scale difference, in contrast to the representation of the ordinary citizens, as well as a superior placement, the canonized, god-like representation of the two Soviet leaders is emphasized. Soviet public areas were flooded with posters, frequently dominated by Stalin's image. As he progressively withdrew from public life over the decades, these visual depictions became the population's main connection to their leader, essentially making his portrait his embodiment. In postwar posters, Stalin's image even acquired apotropaeic qualities.[30]

Secondly, this poster proves that the Soviet government was well aware of the diversity among the Soviet populace and the need to cater towards different audiences by using specific representation techniques. The aspect of diversity among the characters illustrated at the bottom of the poster is underlined through a variety of ethnic features as well as traditional ornamentation and elements of folk dress. Guided by professionals in the field of ethnography, whose primary task was to systematically study and categorize the population as an object or asset to be analyzed. Through this approach, the Soviet state ensured that different occupations of the people, ranging from agricultural workers to individuals employed in industry, were also represented. This is evident in the depiction of various tools and accessories, such as protective glasses or the typical headscarf worn by women engaged in farming and cultivating the land.

> Ethnographers' lectures and ethnographic exhibits celebrated the exotic dress, traditional culture, and religious beliefs of the diverse peoples that could be found within Soviet borders. In the 1930s, these lectures and exhibits presented a different characterization of the peoples of the USSR—as peoples who were "experiencing a period of unusually rapid economic and cultural uplift" but still needed assistance to overcome the powerful pull of traditional beliefs and customs.[31]

[28] Cf. *Struggle to Fulfill and Surpass the New Five-Year Plan, to Increase the Level of Culture and the Material Level of Life of Our People!*, 1947, Poster Plakat Collection, https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/posters/struggle-to-fulfill-and-surpass-the-new-five-year-plan-to-incre-pp-498 (accessed June 5, 2025).
[29] Anita Pisch, The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 368, https://doi.org/10.22459/PCSSP.12.2016.
[30] Cf. Ibid., 442.
[31] Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 187, https://books.google.at/books?id=2oeRI84e13QC.

Moreover, what cannot be ignored are the two architectural structures represented in the image's background. On the left side an industrial site can be observed, which further strengthens the point of technological advancement and rapid industrialization happening in mid-20th century USSR. "The excessive growth of large towns entailed huge investment in infrastructure and housing, even though some towns with a lot of housing were not always in a position to maximize use of the local labour force or even squandered it."[32] On the right side however, a state institution with the Soviet flag displayed on top of it, likely a worker's club can be noticed, which in combination with the Russian text at the bottom of the page that translates to "Struggle to Fulfill and Surpass the New Five-Year Plan, to Raise the Material Well-being and Culture of Our People!," which highlights the strong consideration for labor and its picturing as a collective effort towards a common goal. "The propagandising of spectacular socialist successes had the dual function of reassuring the population that they were on the way to achieving their collective goals (and their sacrifices were worthwhile), whilst also reflecting well on the leader and shoring up legitimacy for the Party."[33]

In conclusion, this 1947 poster effectively employs key elements of Socialist Realism, such as the cult of personality and the representation of ethnic diversity with the goal of promoting Soviet ideology. The elevated portrayal of Lenin and Stalin alongside the depiction of a unified, multi-ethnic populace working towards economic goals highlights the regime's efforts to consolidate power, project a vision of national unity, and mobilize support for its policies.

[32] Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2005), 219, https://books.google.at/books?id=ETQpY-32DysC.
[33] Anita Pisch, The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 37, https://doi.org/10.22459/PCSSP.12.2016.

3.2 More Bread for the Front and the Rear Areas. Reap the Harvest in Full!

(Fig. 2) Nina Nikolaevna Vatolina and Nikolai Viktorovich Denisov, *More Bread for the Front and the Rear Areas. Reap the Harvest in Full!*, 1941, Poster Plakat Collection, https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/posters/more-bread-for-the-front-and-the-rear-areas-reap-the-harvest-i-pp-969 (accessed May 22, 2025).

This poster was originally published in 1941.[34] The author, Nina Nikolaevna Vatolina, worked on this poster with her husband, Denisov Nikolai Viktorovich, who was the son of Viktor Deni, Vatolina's professor at Moscow Institute of Art. The main figure in this image is a nameless peasant woman, operating the wheel of a combine harvester. She has an emotionless look, wearing a bright red dress, which is what initially attracts the viewer's attention, as well as accessories typical for Soviet agriculture workers, such as the crossbody bag and the headscarf. The representation of this character underscores the perpetually evolving role of women in Soviet society, highlighting a significant shift with the dawning of World War II:

> In 1913 women represented 24.5 per cent of the labour force in large-scale industry, mostly in the textile branch. In 1928 the number of women in the "workers-employees" category

[34] Cf. *More bread for the front and the rear areas. Reap the harvest in full*!, 1941, Poster Plakat Collection, https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/posters/more-bread-for-the-front-and-the-rear-areas-reap-the-harvest-i-pp-969 (accessed June 5, 2025).

> amounted to 2,795,000, but reached 13,190,000 in 1940, or 39 per cent of the average annual labour force (43 per cent in industry). They were equally present en masse in heavy industry and mining, and their role in industrialization had become decisive.[35]

As the war progressed and more men were called to the front, women stepped in to fill the gap, gradually assuming increasingly central roles not only in agriculture but across all spheres of the economy, including the military industry. “June 1941 the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet issued a resolution concerning the mobilisation of women and girls into war work and in 1942 the Komsomol directed 8,476 girls into the Red Army and Soviet navy.”[36]

In the background, several elements of industrialization can be observed, such as an additional combine harvester, a coal-powered railway and a grain elevator. On the horizon line, an accumulation of buildings and structures indicates a human settlement, reminding us of rapid urbanization also being a key feature in Soviet society.

> Accordingly, the urban population had doubled in twelve years, increasing by 30 million – an exceptionally rapid rate of urbanization by any standards. The annual growth rate for the urban population is eloquent testimony: 2.7 per cent from 1926 to 1929; 11.5 per cent from 1929 to 1933; and 6.5 per cent from 1933 to 1939. The average for the years between the two censuses of 1926 and 1939 was 9.4 per cent a year.[37]

Additionally, a road between the grain elevator and the human settlement is also present, signifying the continuous dependency of the general population on agricultural resources, and the importance of this perpetual connection.

The text translates to “More bread for the front and the rear areas. Reap the harvest in full!” What stands out is the careful use of words, with the Russian ***фронт*** meaning front, and ***тыл*** referring to the rear or rear services, the area behind the front lines that provides support, supplies, and personnel in a military context. This duality emphasizes the idea that bread is needed for both those directly engaged in combat and for those supporting the war effort from behind the lines. Moreover, this highlights the direct link between agricultural labor and the war effort, elevating the work of farmers to a level comparable with that of soldiers. It creates a sense of shared responsibility and purpose.

The text at the bottom of the image “Reap the harvest in full!" underlines the need for efficiency in agricultural work. The word "ПОЛНОСТЬЮ," meaning fully or completely, suggests that no effort should be spared and no part of the harvest should be wasted. This tells the urgency and the understanding that every bit of grain is valuable for sustaining the war effort and the population. It puts into perspective the idea that even seemingly small efforts in the field contribute to the larger goal of providing enough food. The entire country was mobilized for

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[35] Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women’s Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922–53*(Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 137.
[36] Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 121, https://libsearch.ceu.edu/permalink/43CEU_INST/179qfpk/alma991001415199708861.
[37] Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2005), 71-72, https://books.google.at/books?id=ETQpY-32DysC.

the war effort. The home front was as essential as the battlefront. The peasantry, workers, and urban dwellers all participated in the struggle, their labor and sacrifices vital to the survival of the state. This widespread mobilization was part of a larger propaganda effort:

> Over the decades of the Soviet regime, extensive poster campaigns were launched in support of a vast array of initiatives: [...] to rally people for the war effort, to convey the utopian society at the end of the socialist rainbow, and to promote the personality cults of Lenin and Stalin. Their purpose was not only to educate and inform, but also to enlist the population to transform the world through the use of a new language, the formulation of new goals, and the creation of a new form of civilization.[38]

In summary, this 1941 poster effectively mobilizes patriotic sentiment and emphasizes the crucial role of women in the war effort. Through its dynamic composition, symbolic use of color, and textual directives, the poster reinforces the message of total mobilization and the interconnectedness of the front lines and the home front.

[38] Anita Pisch, The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 96, https://doi.org/10.22459/PCSSP.12.2016.

3.3 Bread for Our Motherland! We Provide in Excess of the Plan. What About You?

(Fig. 3) Nikolai Viktorovich Denisov, *Bread for Our Motherland! We Provide in Excess of the Plan. What About You?*, 1946, Red Avantgarde Collection, https://redavantgarde.com/en/collection/show-collection/226-bread-for-our-motherland-we-provide-in-excess-of-the-plan-what-about-you-.html (accessed May 22, 2025).

This image's protagonist is a peasant man, sitting on top of a sack of grain in a cart carried by a horse. He is depicted as happy and successful, with a contented smile, radiating a sense of accomplishment, which illustrates a positive role model for all agricultural workers. This visual strategy closely aligns with the aims of Socialist Realism that historian and political scientist Andris Teikmanis describes as a "state-approved style in art or literature that celebrates the worker's life in a socialist country."[39] The man's warm clothing suggests he is a hard worker, undeterred by the cold. The horse carriage symbolizes the transportation of the harvest and the abundance of the yield emphasizes the visual weight and size of the grain sacks. The protagonist is heading towards a grain elevator, where fellow farmers can be seen bringing their crops in a similar fashion, by means of animal-powered transport. The indistinct, uniform

[39] Andris Teikmanis, "Toward Models of Socialist Realism," *Baltic Journal of Art History* 6 (2013), 100, https://doi.org/10.12697/BJAH.2013.6.04.

figures of the farmers is a repetition that creates a sense of unity and shared purpose, suggesting that all workers are equal participants in the collective effort as well as the "emphasis on the collective and the depiction of crowds in propaganda posters reinforces the notion of a unified society working together towards mutually desired goals."[40] At the same time, the horse-drawn cart itself stands out as a symbol of traditional agriculture, reminding viewers of the enduring role of animal-powered transport and time-honored farming methods in rural Soviet life. The text at the top, "РОДИНЕ-ХЛЕБ!," meaning "Bread to the Motherland!," underscores the patriotic contribution of these agricultural workers, while the call to action at the bottom, "СДАЕМ СВЕРХ ПЛАНА, А ВЫ?," asking "WE ARE DELIVERING ABOVE THE PLAN, AND YOU?," directly reflects the emphasis on exceeding state production goals.

The cooling tower and the motorized vehicle depicted in the background both stand as symbols of industrialization, in clear contrast to the horse-drawn carriage. Likewise, the cigarette in the man's hand, an obvious product of modern manufacturing and consumer culture, opens the discussion about modernity, and reminds us that this was a point in time, when both traditional and modern elements of industry coexisted. Furthermore, the stamp on the grain bags, identical to the one engraved on the upper part of the cart, reads *Kolkhoz Sibiryak*, with Sibiryak being the name of several rural localities in Russia. This toponymic reference may point to the specific collective farm where the action depicted in the poster takes place, while also underscoring the message that even remote Siberian regions contribute robustly to agricultural productivity. Additionally, thanks to the geographic marker, symbolic weight is added, suggesting that prosperity and fulfillment of state quotas are achievable even in distant territories with challenging resources and climate conditions.

When considering the full frame of the poster, the viewer's attention is immediately drawn to the two red elements, the small flag on the cart and the large banner text above, which visually punctuate the otherwise monochromatic composition. These red highlights, emblematic of Soviet imagery, serve both as focal points and as visual reinforcements of the message of patriotic agricultural achievement.

> The colour red had several connotations in the Soviet Union. The Russian word for "red", *krasnyi*, shares a common etymology with the word for "beautiful", *krasivyi*, and red is associated with beauty. Red is a sacred colour in the Russian Orthodox Church, and symbolises life, love, warmth and the victory of life over death as made manifest in the Resurrection.[41]

Ultimately, Govorkov's 1951 poster masterfully blends elements of Socialist Realism with a focus on technological progress and the promise of a brighter future. By idealizing the worker, celebrating industrial achievements, and employing a clear visual narrative, the poster effectively communicates the Soviet vision of advancement and prosperity under the socialist system.

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[40] Anita Pisch, The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 65, https://doi.org/10.22459/PCSSP.12.2016.
[41] Ibid., 152, (original emphasis).

3.4 In the Name of Communism

(Fig. 4) Viktor Ivanovich Govorkov, *In the Name of Communism*, 1951, Poster Plakat Collection, https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/posters/in-the-name-of-communism-pp-904 (accessed May 22, 2025).

This poster, created in 1951 and published with an original print run of 500,000[42], highlights the rapid industrialization and economic growth in the USSR under Stalin's regime. Lenin and Stalin are represented as the main figures in the image, both having a pencil in their hands, drawing lines on a map, which further solidifies their positioning as omnipotent, almighty leaders, that have the capacity to redraw maps, borders, and infrastructure projects according to their personal desires. The subject of this work is to praise the efforts of the Soviet authorities and showcase their achievements in building infrastructure for key branches of industry. This depiction serves to legitimize and glorify the leadership's role in the modernization of the country. The major industrial and infrastructure projects depicted in this image were worked on during the respective times of Lenin and Stalin, and are represented next to the leader under whose leadership they were initiated or developed.

The building in the frame on the left side, with a matching geographical location on the map, is the Volkhovskaya Hydroelectric Station, named after Lenin himself. It is the oldest and longest operating hydroelectric plant in the Soviet Union, completed in 1927.[43] The attention-drawing red book in Lenin's hand has the title *Electrification plan of the R.S.F.S.R*. "In 1920, the Communist Party and Soviet government approved the world's first state plan for the

[42] Cf. *In the Name of Communism*, 1951, Poster Plakat Collection, https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/posters/in-the-name-of-communism-pp-904 (accessed May 22, 2025).
[43] Margarita Stieglitz, 2018. "Peculiarities of Stylistic Evolution of Mid-19th — Early 20th Century St. Petersburg Industrial Architecture." In *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Art Studies: Science, Experience, Education (ICASSEE 2018)*, 438. Paris: Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/icassee-18.2018.90.

economic, political, and social reconstruction of a country by electrification."[44] This ambitious vision of the future, embodied by the Volkhovskaya GES, marked the beginning of a new age in which electrification became a symbol as well as a driving force of Soviet modernization and industrial progress.

On the right side of the poster, however, the figure of Stalin is shown marking in red ink the construction plans for the Main Turkmen Canal, an irrigation project in the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic, which aimed at transporting water from the Amu Darya river to the coast of the Caspian Sea. Moreover, the map behind Stalin indicates the locations of two other important hydroelectric plants on the Volga river, namely Stalingradskaya and Kuibyshevskaya. All three large-scale industrial projects mentioned in this paragraph were started during Stalin's regime, however the Turkmen Canal was never finished. Following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, the costly and forced-labor-dependent construction of projects like the Main Turkmen Canal and parts of the Volga–Baltic Waterway was stopped. High-ranking officials had recognized their limited economic value and the unsustainable nature of the forced labor system, but likely refrained from expressing these concerns during Stalin's rule.[45]

The medal on Stalin's chest is the highest distinction of the USSR, titled *Hero of Soviet Union*, an award granted for service of bravery for the benefit of the Soviet government and nation. Stalin received this honor on June 26th, 1945, for commanding the Red Army to victory of the Soviet Union, as well as the campaign against Nazi Germany during World War II.[46] The red book on the table has the title *Electrification of the USSR*. The text at the top, translating to "In the name of Communism," not only unifies all these elements but also reflects the broader approach of the era: encouraging people to embrace the new communist power, which was portrayed as bringing light to people's lives-both literally, through electrification, and figuratively, through the promise of a transformed society. Leaders exercised immense power, using ideology as a rationale to exert control over the nation's resources and development, shaping its landscape and future according to their will, and emphasizing the centralized authority inherent in the Soviet system.

In summary, this 1951 poster powerfully utilizes the cult of personality to legitimize the Soviet leadership and promote its ambitious industrialization agenda. By portraying Lenin and Stalin as visionary planners shaping the nation's infrastructure, the poster reinforces the Party's authority and celebrates the perceived achievements of the socialist system in transforming the Soviet landscape.

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[44] Jonathan Coopersmith, "Soviet Electrification: The Roads Not Taken," *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 13, https://doi.org/10.1109/44.216772.
[45] Cf. Moshe Lewin, The Soviet Century (London: Verso, 2005), 123, https://books.google.at/books?id=ETQpY-32DysC.
[46] Cf. "Сталин Иосиф Виссарионович," Герои страны, https://warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=1067 (accessed May 22, 2025).

4. Contemporary Relevance

While this thesis focuses on the specific historical context of Socialist Realist propaganda in the Soviet Union, the issue of artistic freedom it raises is not confined to Stalinism. The tension between artistic expression and political control, the use of art as a tool of the state, and the suppression of dissenting voices are themes that resonate across several timelines in Soviet, and later Russian history. Indeed, the challenges to artistic freedom have evolved and persist in various forms in the contemporary world. It is important to remember that even within the Soviet Union, the landscape of artistic control was not static. There was a major effort in the last decade of USSR's existence, that particularly "under Gorbachev has allowed for a freer expression of ideas in public."[47] *Glasnost*, a term which can be translated as "publicity" or "openness,"[48] was a policy that encouraged greater openness and artistic expression. "Although there are limits to glasnost', it has nevertheless served to lift many past restrictions and prompt wider debates about various aspects of culture, history and daily life."[49] This led to a flourishing of artistic experimentation and a loosening of state censorship.

Following the era of *glasnost* the question of artistic freedom in contemporary Russia remains highly contested. A valuable resource for understanding these ongoing debates is the special issue "How Free Are the Arts in Russia Today?" (2007) published in the academic and cultural journal *kultura*. Edited by art historian Sandra Frimmel, the issue brings together diverse perspectives from artists, curators, and legal experts to examine the boundaries of creative freedom, the legal and social pressures facing artists, and the broader cultural and political context in which Russian art is produced and received. Frimmel's analysis highlights the ongoing tension in the Russian society in terms of artistic freedom, emphasizing that the degree to which art can operate independently of external pressures serves as a crucial indicator of a society's openness. Frimmel further explores how legal frameworks are employed to define and potentially restrict artistic expression. This demonstrates a shift from the Soviet Union's direct ideological control to a more nuanced, legally codified form of influence:

> Instead of drawing the boundaries of artistic freedom through continual social discourse, in Russia the trend is to define these borders as universally valid norms through legislation. Contemporary art's lack of functioning cultural institutions, which could help consolidate its position, indicates here a renaissance in the doctrine of art according to which the state directs art through the artists' associations. However, Putin's Russia is a state without a defined

[47] Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 17, https://libsearch.ceu.edu/permalink/43CEU_INST/179qfpk/alma991001415199708861.
[48] Cf. Ibid., 193.
[49] Ibid., 193.

> ideology [...]. Therefore different social groups, both from the state and the church, compete for the right to define, amongst other things, artistic norms.[50]

Yet, writing in 2007, Frimmel also points to the complexity of the contemporary artistic landscape characteristic for those years in the post-Soviet Era, noting that "the position of contemporary art is more differentiated than the large number of attacks would seem to suggest: just recently, the Kandinsky Prize, [...] was awarded for the first time. In addition, the number of private foundations for contemporary art is constantly growing."[51]

Building on this, it is crucial to situate the contemporary Russian context within a broader, global perspective on artistic freedom. Freemuse is an independent international NGO committed to defending and advocating for freedom of artistic expression and diversity. Each year, Freemuse publishes its State of Artistic Freedom report, which systematically documents and analyzes violations, threats, and positive developments affecting artists worldwide. The annual report is widely referenced by policymakers, UN officials, academics, and human rights organizations, and serves as a key resource for understanding the shifting landscape of artistic freedom.

As the latest report from the year 2025 states: "[T]he persecution of Russian artists who criticise the war on Ukraine has continued. They faced arrest, heavy sentences and cancellations of performances. The tragic and lonely death in prison of pianist Pavel Kushner is an example of the extreme danger of speaking out."[52] This climate of fear is compounded by the systematic use of "foreign agent"[53] laws, which are designed to stigmatize and isolate dissenting voices. The report explains these "laws stigmatise dissidents, including artists and writers, as 'traitors', cutting off often vital foreign grants"[54] and have become a model for similar legislation in other countries. Together, these mechanisms have created an environment in which artists are not only at risk of arrest and imprisonment for their views, but also face institutional and financial isolation, leading to widespread self-censorship and a dramatic narrowing of Russia's cultural landscape.

These patterns of repression were vividly illustrated by the state's harsh response to Anastasia Ivleeva's *Almost Naked* party in 2023, where celebrities faced arrests, fines, removal from broadcasts, and public apologies after being accused of propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations and violating public order, with the event widely condemned by officials and the president himself. Such incidents show how even non-political gatherings are reframed as ideological offenses in today's Russia, and alongside the public targeting of figures like singer Monetochka and state actions against institutions like the Gogol Center and Teatr.doc, these

[50] Sandra Frimmel, "Grenzenlose Freiheit? Wie die Kunstfreiheit in Russland mit rechtlichen Mitteln abgesteckt werden soll // Unbounded Freedom? The Use of Legal Means to Demarcate Artistic Freedom in Russia," *H-Soz-Kult* (May 13, 2024), https://www.hsozkult.de/journal/id/z6ann-102911, 20.
[51] Ibid., 20.
[52] Freemuse, State of Artistic Freedom 2025, ed. Marianna Tzabiras and Sara Whyatt (Copenhagen: Freemuse, 2025), https://www.freemuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/SAF-2025_web.pdf, 6.
[53] Ibid., 46.
[54] Ibid., 7.

cases reflect a cultural climate in which creative autonomy is aggressively policed through both legal persecution and orchestrated public shaming[55].

5. Conclusion

This thesis analyzed how key visual characteristics of Socialist Realist graphic imagery under Stalin functioned as powerful instruments of political propaganda. This was accomplished by transforming art into a vehicle for advancing the Soviet Union's ideological aims. As I have shown in my thesis, Socialist Realist posters did not simply depict economic achievements. Through their optimistic realism, glorified depictions of workers and collective farms, and the omnipresent image of Stalin, they actively constructed a vision of Soviet progress that demanded public identification and participation. The state's insistence on clear, accessible imagery, mandated to be understandable and uplifting. It ensured that even the most ambitious economic goals became part of a shared national myth. The works analyzed in this thesis exemplify how art, under Stalinist rule, became an instrument of power, not by denying the aesthetic potential, but by harnessing it in service of a highly orchestrated political vision. These posters did not only illustrate Soviet ideals, they generated them, projected them, and demanded identification with them. In their fusion of symbolism and message, they produced images of the ideal citizen, the worker, the farmer, the soldier, the inhabitant of the utopian world.

Through researching Socialist Realist graphic imagery, I learned how the twentieth century's geopolitical divide deepened, as the Soviet use of visual propaganda exemplifies the political science dimension of state control, where every design choice served to reinforce ideology and power. This insight highlights how the Soviet state's embrace of Socialist Realism as official art was not only a tool for mass mobilization and ideological conformity, but also a marker of the broader cultural and political rift that defined the 20-century world order. As Joselit notes:

> In the second world of state socialism and Communism, official art aligned with forms of realism, which were intended to inspire broad mass identification through propaganda, typically coexisted with a much smaller, parallel 'unofficial' avant-garde art world whose members often adopted sophisticated modernist strategies, inspired either by information gleaned from abroad and/or by earlier avant-garde traditions. In the second world, popular/indigenous forms were often equally suppressed or subordinated to official art.[56]

As contemporary societies continue to struggle with the politicization of visual culture, from algorithmically curated content to state-sponsored narratives, the historical example of Soviet Socialist Realism remains instructive, compelling us to examine how visual regimes construct

[55] Cf. Ibid., 46.
[56] David Joselit, "Heritage and Debt", *October* 168 (Spring 2019), 4, https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00381.

belief and how, once aestheticized, belief becomes difficult to interrogate. If propaganda seeks not only to persuade but to shape reality itself, then understanding its visual strategies is essential for both historians and citizens. This inquiry is especially relevant today, as the period of relative artistic freedom that followed the Soviet era has given way to new challenges; in 2025, Russia remains a place where artists frequently face significant limitations on creative expression. Ultimately, the study of Socialist Realist posters is not only an exploration of the past, but also a valuable lens for understanding the enduring complexities of the relationship between art, power, and individual liberty, and a reminder to remain vigilant in the face of every image that asks for our trust.

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Author’s Declaration

I, *Marius Balan*, hereby declare that I am the sole author and composer of my thesis and that no other sources or learning aids, other than those listed, have been used. Furthermore, I declare that I have acknowledged the work of others by providing detailed references of said work. I also hereby declare that my thesis has not been prepared for another examination or assignment, either in its entirety or excerpts thereof.

Marius Balan

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