

GLASNOST

Graphic designers in the Soviet Union were once prohibited from treating controversial subjects in their work. With the advent of glasnost, a new breed of Soviet posters has appeared that addresses everything from AIDS and drug abuse to the failings of perestroika. With bold images that draw on their country's visual heritage, Soviet designers today are producing a healthy critique of an ailing society.

A frequent theme in posters of the glasnost era is social rehabilitation.

The poster at left describes alcohol abuse as the country's most insidious problem: it results in retarded children, social degradation, hooliganism and road accidents.

GRAPHICS

by Steven Heller

Contemporary Soviet graphics reflect, propagate and sometimes obfuscate the dramatic political upheavals that have taken place in Russia and the Baltic republics under Mikhail Gorbachev. But though the degree of freedom now permitted designers would have been unimaginable only a few years ago, the graphic arts first began to offer alternatives to the Party line decades before Gorbachev's remarkable initiatives. The exuberant design work now identified with glasnost and perestroika evolved from tentative explorations undertaken during the tenure of Nikita Khrushchev and continued under Leonid Brezhnev. And one force that helped to foster design as a creative enterprise during those long "years of stagnation" was, ironically, that quintessential capitalist tool, advertising.

In 1960 Aleksei Kosygin, then prime minister of the USSR, acknowledged at the annual Party Congress that the Soviet economy was in deep trouble and that the use of some market-oriented incentives might be necessary to stem the damages. For a young optical engineer named Naum Kazhdan, living in Leningrad and working at the Ministry of Ship Building's Laboratory of Technical Aesthetics (Soviet-speak for industrial design), Kosygin's statement suggested that new ideas were welcome. He decided that advertising might be the very tool the prime minister was looking for and so, without any real knowledge of the advertising trade, he approached his superiors at the ministry with a plan to develop pamphlets, broadsheets and other materials aimed at export markets for the factory's new fiberglass boats. The plan was approved and the Ministry of Ship Building established the first post-Stalinist advertising agency in the USSR. Step by step Kazhdan learned his trade in a virtual vacuum.

In the early 1960s the Soviets sent the Bolshoi Ballet to America and in return the USIA sent them "Architecture U.S.A." and "Design U.S.A." (the latter exhibit designed by Chermayeff and Geismar Associates). Kazhdan made friends with the American exhibition guides, who allowed him to "steal" some of the books about advertising that accompanied the shows. From these, he and his colleagues discovered what he calls "world class" advertising techniques. In fact, Kazhdan learned about the Swiss style, which consequently led him to adopt a Cyrillic version of Helvetica and a Swiss grid structure for his publications.

Design advances were slow to develop in the USSR owing to the strict ideological controls exercised by the mid-level bureaucrats and minor but powerful party functionaries who kept a stranglehold on innovation. By the early 1970s, the notion of advertising had, however, been accepted in varying forms in other ministries throughout the country. The Ship Building Ministry's agency had itself grown from six to 160 people, including copywriters, photographers, typographers and designers. Yet growth demanded greater Party and government controls: thus was formed the Union of Trade Advertising, which published a magazine

This recent issue of the Soviet advertising magazine *Reklama* suggests a new playfulness in Soviet graphics and draws on influences ranging from Eastern Europe to Northern California.



called *Reklama* to survey the work of advertising groups placed in the various plants and factories throughout Russia and the republics.

By the mid 1970s, a new generation of Soviet fine and graphic artists was hungering for inspiration. Paradoxically, Western influences were easier to come by than the Russians' own avant-garde legacy, which was known only to a small group of cognoscenti; in addition, the remains of this legacy were being sold off to foreign collectors at a prodigious rate. Still, *Graphis* magazine was a prized possession for Russians, and books featuring work

by Lou Dorfsman, Herb Lubalin, and Chermayeff and Geismar were passed around like samizdat publications. "But," says Kazhdan, "we did not simply copy these Western models. We tried to analyze what was good about them and then we built our own styles." Some of this work was seen in public while much of it was done in secret, shown only in small exhibits in private apartments. Kazhdan says that for certain outlets, including international exhibitions, "we were tacitly allowed to do adventuresome things. But for Party organs this was impossible." Moreover, the Artists Union was a monopoly controlling all kinds of art, fine and applied, and its leaders were old Party members hostile to younger artists and their new ideas.

Given this kind of official resistance, the death of Leonid



The poster above offers metaphorical instruction on the planting of crops, part of the Soviet Union's long tradition of didacticism. The type specimen at right is a Cyrillic face inspired by Helvetica that was published in *Reklama*.

Brezhnev, shortly followed by that of Yuri Andropov, did little to change the cultural climate. And when Mikhail Gorbachev finally emerged as leader, glasnost was not proclaimed overnight. But in terms of graphic design, the official thaw was in effect; a 1985 typography show, which was co-sponsored by the Artists Union and ITC and which traveled to the U.S., was proof that official attitudes had relaxed.

By 1984, when the concepts of glasnost, perestroika and demokratia were announced to the world, an initial explosion of excitement in the graphic arts took place in the Baltic republics of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, where poster artists had already been exploring different methods of visual presentation. Most of the new posters (which owed more to the Polish poster style than to the International Style) were created for the local cultural and performing arts events that had traditionally allowed artists more freedom. In 1986, a milestone of another poster genre was displayed at a Latvian political poster show. Laimonis Chenberg of Riga designed a poster called "Perestroika?" that showed two saucepans with different colored covers. The symbolism, though seemingly obscure, was actually rather pointed. The question Chenberg asked was, if the government could not even achieve the simplest task — that of matching the right cover to the right saucepan — could this really be perestroika? Could restructuring really

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Букварная

succeed with the existing

This radical exhibition an artist had publicly at- with the weapon of irony. wrote, "For the first time had the right, and he took municate his own view of lems." When a selection show was published, it sian critic labeled a "new poster art," and triggered some Muscovite artists al-



mechanisms still in place? marked the first time that tacked an official policy As one Russian critic in a long time, the artist it immediately, to com- the world and its prob- of works from this poster signaled what one Rus- orientation in political a chain reaction that hit most immediately.

Some of the most interesting examples of this "new wave" can be found in recent issues of the revitalized *Reklama*, still the Soviet Union's only advertising magazine. For all practical purposes, advertising has been sharply limited by the paucity of Soviet economic resources and by the state monopolization of goods. Since perestroika, however, some opportunities have emerged for commercial enterprise, and advertising artists have in turn responded to the challenge. For instance, issues of *Reklama* from the 1970s present products as the "heroes" of advertisements, whereas works in later issues shift the emphasis from the actual goods to the possibility of a creative use of these goods. And consistent with the developments that now affect Russian society as a whole, articles in *Reklama* have become less wordy, less tendentious in tone and more informative. The magazine's circulation is claimed to be 60,000 and its offices have become a "professional information center" for designers and would-be designers caught up in the new openness. Yet because of the abysmal condition of the Soviet economy, most of this new wave of advertising is virtually invisible in the streets or stores.

Nonetheless, graphic rejuvenation, if not widespread, is evident—a direct consequence of the relaxation of censorship and the easing of stringent ideological requirements. Glasnost posters, says historian Anna Suvorova, "are called to life by a revolution from above and supported by the powerful mass movement from below." In addition, social

The cover of *Reklama*, above, announces an issue on window displays. The poster below cautions that glasnost is not a tool for personal gain. The cartoon is reminiscent of a pre-glasnost drawing style that targeted American capitalists, not Soviet bureaucrats.



ills, until now unmentioned in Soviet public discourse, are being addressed: among the formerly taboo subjects are compassion for the handicapped, drug and alcohol addiction, prostitution and AIDS. Governmental abuses are also subjected to the commentators' art, with lampoons of the bloated bureaucracy and the lingering presence of Stalinist tendencies now becoming increasingly visible.

Dr. Suvorova comments that "all the posters created by perestroika/demokratia in the setting of glasnost have the same distinction: a peculiar 'distrust' of the word." The slo-

gans that defined posters in the past are rejected in favor of a “visual scheme and a plastic flow” — the very same artistic attributes that were once deemed bourgeois baggage. But she also says that by comparison with the revolutionary posters of 1917, “the perestroika poster [has perhaps less] spontaneity, drive and mobilizing emotion, but it is enriched with logic, associativeness and irony.” With perestroika, graphic art has become intellectualized. The new posters demand that viewers decode unfamiliar images, aphorisms and grotesqueries to explore the problems inherent in Soviet society. Indeed, as one Russian observer has noted, “the poster nowadays is contradictory; it is not always precise and understandable for the general audience.”

With the shattering of longheld dogmas, this is not only a time of painful reappraisal for many Soviets, it is also a period of great peril. In speaking to various sources in and outside the USSR, one hears that glasnost is really dead, perestroika is actually a myth and the Soviet Union is not ready for demokratia. In fact, this latter term has been downplayed considerably in recent years. Although the political environment is more receptive to the publication of some controversial posters, the all-union Moscow poster publishing house, Plakat, is still managed by Party functionaries who impose constraints and limit production.

And repression remains. Stalin’s purges of the 1920s and 1930s are now acceptable subjects for attack but the KGB must be given a friendly

face. While Brezhnev can be criticized, Gorbachev is still protected by the censors. Despite the turmoil in the republics and criticism of his policies in Russia, satire aimed directly at Gorbachev is strongly discouraged. Indeed, many artists and intellectuals have turned against Gorbachev for not effecting change quickly enough. Some designers work during the day making posters for various cultural activities and at night create a new genre of critical commentary in a post-glasnost, samizdat-like environment. These critiques will probably never be published through the official publishing organs, so the maquettes are handed around or smuggled out of the country for publication elsewhere.

Before we celebrate the total collapse of the iron curtain and McDonald’s colonization of the USSR, we must remember that power is still absolute in the Soviet Union and that the restructuring of an entire society is both a remarkable and a daunting task. Thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev, at least some of the strictures long present in Soviet life have been relaxed. Material conditions may continue to deteriorate, but intellectually there is room to breathe. As comedian Yakov Smirnoff recently acknowledged, yes, there is now freedom of speech in the USSR. “But what’s more important,” he said, “if glasnost holds up, Russians will continue to have freedom *after* they speak.” The graphic works of this era of glasnost are, one can hope, signposts to this new society. ■



This poster reaffirms that glasnost encourages “strong opinions” and “a culture of discussion” as the primary work of Party meetings.