

Introduction to the Kit

Overview of the Kit

This kit provides teachers, college faculty and other educators with the materials needed to engage students in a dynamic and constructivist process of learning the history of the USSR through reading, analyzing and interpreting posters produced by the Soviet government between 1918 and 1988. Materials include a one-page lesson for each of 78 posters. The posters are divided into chronological units covering five key periods in Soviet history. Each unit includes a two-page student handout of the history of the time period that introduces the key knowledge and vocabulary for decoding the posters from that time period, and a multiple-choice test. The histories and tests are written for high school students but the lessons can easily be adapted for middle school and college level students.

Through the interactive process of classroom decoding, students will develop visual literacy, media literacy and critical thinking skills while learning core information about the history of one of the most important nations in the 20th century. The carefully crafted, often beautiful and sometimes disturbing posters in this kit were created by the Soviet government to educate and indoctrinate the population so it would support the government and its policies. Educators can use these posters to engage students in learning and applying core historical knowledge while understanding the historical and political contexts in which were created.

Soviet Posters

In her book, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, Victoria Bonnell suggests that “the critical issue facing the Bolsheviks in 1917 was not merely the seizure of power but the seizure of meaning.” Political posters played an essential role in the propaganda effort to give meaning to the new Soviet woman and man as “worker heroes.” For a fledgling and largely illiterate nation the role of images in the conveying of meaning was essential. Visual symbols were also highly effective in asserting the power of the new Soviet leadership by creating the image of Lenin as Revolutionary Father and Stalin as the Great Helmsman. Political posters could convey such messages about power in a clear and concise manner. As Soviet history progressed so did the style and content of government posters. By the late 1980s Gorbachev’s government was using the long-established medium of the political poster to promote a new ideological critique that would ultimately help bring down the Soviet system.

The 13 posters in Unit I, *The Birth of the USSR*, establish the perspective of the new communist government as it struggled for survival during civil war, famine and revolutionary transformation. Posters in Unit II contrast 1930s-era messages promoting Stalinist policies with pointed critiques of Stalin produced by Gorbachev's government in 1988. Unit III, *The Great Patriotic War*, and Unit IV, *The Cold War*, powerfully illustrate government perspectives on the key events and issues from both time periods. Finally, the 20 posters in Unit V, *The End of the USSR*, graphically portray a different perspective on communist history and policies. The images of Perestroika and Glasnost poignantly critique communist entitlements, bureaucracy, corruption and a host of social ills previously taboo in state propaganda. Together these 78 posters give students the opportunity to actively identify key events throughout much of the 20th century while they critically analyze the evolving point of view of Soviet governments.

Objectives:

- To teach core information and vocabulary about the history of the USSR.
- To teach students to understand historical and cultural perspective as communicated through visual media.
- To train students in visual literacy and media literacy skills, especially the ability to identify bias in art and propaganda.
- To engage all students, but particularly those disengaged from traditional school work, in complex critical thinking and the development of reading, listening and visual decoding skills and attitudes that support life-long democratic citizenship.

Learning Standards:

This kit addresses many specific standards of the **National Council for the Social Studies** (NCSS), including:

- *Culture*: Knowing how belief systems, such as political ideals of the culture, influence the other parts of the culture?
- *Time, Continuity, and Change*: Knowing what things were like in the past and how things change and develop. Knowing how to read and reconstruct the past. Drawing on their knowledge of history to make informed choices and decisions in the present.
- *Individual Development and Identity*: Knowing how personal identity is shaped by one's culture, by groups, and by institutional influences.

- *Individuals, Groups, and Institutions*: Knowing how institutions are formed, what controls and influences them, how they control and influence individuals and culture, and how institutions can be maintained or changed.
- *Power, Authority, and Governance*: Confronting questions such as: What is power? Who holds it? How is it gained, used, and justified? How are governments created, structured, maintained, and changed?

This kit also addresses specific standards of the **National Council of Teachers of English** (NCTE), including:

- applying a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate print and non-print texts
- applying knowledge of media techniques, figurative language, and genre to critique and discuss print and non-print texts
- participating as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

This kit also addresses many of the core learning skills that have been identified as essential skills for the **21st Century Literacy**, specifically:

- information and media literacy skills: analyzing, accessing, managing, integrating, and evaluating information in a variety of forms and media
- critical thinking and systems thinking: exercising sound reasoning in understanding and making complex choices, understanding the interconnections among systems

Finally, the activities foster group discussion skills, and can be easily linked to related lessons in other disciplines such as art, art history, economics, or multicultural studies.