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Women had to be drawn into the revolutionary struggle, Nadezhda Krupskaya insisted in 1913: “The woman question for male and female workers is a question how to draw the backward masses of women workers into organization, how best to explain to them their interests, how best to make them into comrades in the general struggle.”[1] Lenin also condemned women’s backwardness as interfering with the revolutionary struggle: “The domestic life of the woman is a daily sacrifice of self to a thousand insignificant trifles. [….] Her backwardness and her lack of understanding for her husband’s revolutionary ideals act as a drag on his fighting spirit, on his determination to fight.”[2]

In this essay, I explore the visual representation of that backwardness. For revolutionaries of all stripes, a core value in the revolution was overcoming Russia’s backwardness. In Russian it literally meant “lagging behind” [*otstalost*], but it had a wide compass to include illiteracy, superstition, drunkenness, syphilis, lack of culture, and lack of political engagement.[3] I ask how early Soviet artists conveyed this backwardness – especially as synonymous not only with ignorance, but also with “darkness” and a lack of revolutionary consciousness. How did they compose posters for the masses in those early years of Soviet power, especially during the extensive civil and national wars of 1917-1921? How and why was gender such an important part of that visual imagery?

These questions relate to the larger question of visuality more generally, especially how images can serve as tools of specific ideologies. How might images such as these complicate or even contradict a prevailing or desired gender ideology? How might such images reveal ambiguities and anxieties? What tropes and messages might these images convey that were not necessarily intended by the original image-makers?

The topic of Soviet posters – and even the topic of gender in Soviet posters – is not a new one. Victoria Bonnell, Stephen White, and many others provide excellent analyses of what Bonnell calls “the iconography of power” conveyed in such mass-produced images. Their premier work has shown that blacksmiths (typically male) in particular epitomized advanced workers, while a woman’s economic status was usually signaled by the position of her kerchief (tied behind her head for a woman worker or under her chin for a peasant woman).[4] However, there has not been enough analysis of gender-specific issues related to backwardness and forwardness during the early Soviet period.[5]

In this visual essay I would like to address two main points. First, I argue that early Soviet artists chose to represent backwardness in literal, spatial terms. Subjects (mostly men) demonstrating revolutionary consciousness tended to look and move forward or out toward the viewer, while those who were less advanced (mostly women) looked backward over their shoulders, toward the rear. Secondly, early Soviet poster artists tended to portray women workers and peasants in domestic settings that showed the old,

prerevolutionary lifestyle that had to be overcome, with illustrations of poor practices including ignorant childcare, failed sanitation and hygiene, and illiteracy. As I have shown elsewhere, men were often portrayed as holy warriors, even icon-like, and vanquishing external enemies.[6] Women, as I show here, were depicted as benighted and in need of tutelage from the Communist Party, which would point them to the perfect future. These portrayals tended to perpetuate gender binaries despite early Soviet claims to women's equality and even sameness. And they showed women as irrevocably associated with the domestic. Men, by contrast, were rarely shown in these early years as immobilized and stuck in the past. Although theoretically women could overcome the backwardness of the domestic sphere, and some posters even showed the new practices that would help them, the most vivid images depict them as old and crone-like with very disturbing features.

Of course, it is true that visual propaganda from this early, embattled period tended to be schematic by its very nature. It was created during an era of intense fighting, and the imagery had to be quickly grasped by citizens on the go. Men were more likely than women to be serving in the Red or White cavalry, riding horseback as well as holding and using arms. Women did have a greater role in the domestic sphere in popular imagination. Yet the contrast with Bolshevik propaganda in written texts is stark. While official Bolshevik PR emphasized women's equality and their new roles in industrial production, these visual works tended to place women in classic spheres of backwardness (especially poor childrearing and medical care). Although both men and women appeared in association with illiteracy and sometimes drunkenness, nonetheless, on the whole, the posters tended to intensify gender differences in representations rather than diminishing them by showing men as active, forward-moving and women as stuck in the home and backward-looking.

This essay will examine four groups of images, all meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive: 1) male warriors in dynamic positions; 2) women as static Marianne figures (following Eugene Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People"); 3) women following behind men and barefoot; 4) women subverting the cause, plus female "healers" propounding dangerous practices and needing basic literacy training.

Forward Charging Men

An early example of men's dynamic movement can be seen in the image "Forward – To the Defense of the Urals!" (1919) by Aleksandr Apsit (pseud. A. Petrov). Here the lead soldier races into battle with his rifle extended and his mouth open to form a cry: "Forward! To the Defense of the Urals!" Behind him, the mass of men charge with outstretched arms and rifles. With eyes trained on the horizon and wide strides propelling them into battle, they clearly focus on their forward motion. While nothing is known about why Apsit chose this image, it seems likely that he was responding to the Bolsheviks' 1918 spring campaign to dislodge White (anti-Bolshevik) forces in the Ural Mountains. Trotsky himself, in a speech at the time, exhorted his followers saying that while the revolution and war had reached a critical moment, "only one of these forces [fighting now] is progressive, leading mankind forward, and that is the force of the working class."[7]

Aleksandr Apsit (pseud. A. Petrov): “Forward. To the Defense of the Urals!” [Vpered, Na Zashchitu Urala], Moscow 1919. Source: Russian Poster, [08.10.2025]

Female Figures as Allegories for the Revolution

Female figures in the earliest years tended to be abstract, representing Liberty, Equality or Justice. In fall 1918, the state authorities produced a poster by Panteleimon Zhilin’s “Long Live the Great Anniversary of the Proletarian Revolution! Long Live the Commune!”[8] The central figure appears to be an allusion to Revolution itself, either as Marianne (as in Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*) or *La Marseillaise* of François Rude (both from the 1830s). With Medusa-like hair, her face is decidedly androgynous, even masculine. Clad in Roman sandals with a sword at her belt, she seems designed to give both a military and a masculine look as well as a classical one. In her left (muscular) arm, she grasps a red banner with the words “October 25, 1917 – November 7, 1918.” (At this time the Soviet government had changed to the Western calendar, so the authorities were doubtless signaling that henceforth the “October Revolution” would be celebrated on November 7.) The leading woman overshadows three wraith-like figures, perhaps two men and a boy, all seriously emaciated. In the background, a factory or a city streams blue rays of light toward the heavens. While she does not appear to be particularly “backward,” her androgyny suggests the difficulties of drawing a positive female figure. If she was to be a “comrade” and call others out to join the revolution, she could not be a “baba,” the backward woman. But it is difficult to see her as any kind of role model for women workers and peasants.[9]

Fig. 2. Panteleimon Zhilin: “Long Live the Great Anniversary of the Proletarian Revolution! Long Live the Commune!” Cover “Lukomor’e”, No. 19-20, June 17, 1917. Source: Laboratoriia fantastiki, https://www.fantlab.org/edition430514 [08.10.2025]

A second Marianne-like figure appears in Plotnik Grav’s “Woman Worker of Free Russia! Hold your Communist Banner more Firmly. Behind you the Women of the whole World Go to Battle against Capital” (1921). A gray figure with vacant eyes, she conveys no movement. The only color comes from the red banner in her upstretched hand and the red dots on her scarf. While it is true that the “Soviet Union” as a country did not form until 1922, it seems a bit odd that as late as 1921 this poster addresses only the women workers of Russia. While the woman represented conveys a certain strength, she does not appear to be very convincing as a leader calling other women into the struggle. In exhorting women to hold the communist banner “more firmly,” the title suggests that otherwise they would hold it too weakly.

Fig. 3. Plotnik Grav: “Woman Worker of Free Russia! Hold your Communist Banner more Firmly. Behind you the Women of the whole World Go to Battle against Capital” [Rabotnitsa Svobodnoi Rossii! Krepche derzhi znamia kommunizma. Za toboi idut zhenshchiny vsego mira na bor’bu s kapitalom], 1921. Source: Pikabu, [08.10.2025]

Women Lagging

Many revolutionary images conveyed just one or two men, usually a worker and a peasant, to portray the idea of *smychka,* i.e., joint revolutionary union of those two classes. While some did include female figures, they were often portrayed as third, behind the other two. Or they were helpers in some way, who facilitated the work of the men.

Fig. 4. Aleksandr Nikolaevič Samokhvalov: “Long live the Komsomol! Toward the 7th anniversary of the October Revolution” [Da zdravstvuet Komsomol! K sed’moi godovshchine Oktiabr’skoi revoliutsii], Leningrad 1924. Source: Russian Poster [08.10.2025]

On the seventh anniversary of the October Revolution (1924), A. N. Samokhvalov’s “Long Live the Komsomol” was massively produced and sometimes titled “How they made the holidays ‘red.’” The red color in that second title and dominant in the image itself contains a word play on “red” Saints’ days from the Church calendar of the prerevolutionary era, and the red holidays of the Soviet era. Here a woman worker walks one step behind a man striding forward. While she holds the banner with him, she looks backward over her shoulder. And while he has shoes, she is barefoot! The outlines of her toes are visible even against the red background. It is not clear if she is looking backward to call more people to join the revolution or if she is looking back to what has been left behind, what is to be jettisoned going into the new order. Perhaps it is both. But she is definitely the less advanced of the two figures, and he is the more resolute.[10]

Fig. 5. Nikolai Kogout: “With our Weapons we Defeated the Enemy. With our Labour we Shall Have Bread. Everyone to Work, Comrades!” [Oruzhiem my dobili vraga. Trudom my dobudem khleb. Vse za rabotu, tovarishchi!], Moscow 1920. Source: Russian Poster [08.10.2025]

The woman worker’s status as helper can also be seen in a famous image from 1920, Nikolai Kogout’s “With our Weapons we Defeated the Enemy. With our Labour we Shall Have Bread. Everyone to Work, Comrades!” Against a busy background of factory workers (all male) and smoking chimneys, the lead male blacksmith brings down his giant mallet while the woman assistant holds the iron in place on the anvil. He has a Civil War cap (called a *budenovka*) at his feet. While she is also clad in a blacksmith’s apron, she wears it over a skirt. Her role – holding the iron – is important, but it is obviously secondary. She is bent over her task, stationary, while he swings his hammer down from on high.

Fig. 6. Unknown artist: “What Has the October Revolution Given the Woman Worker and Peasant” [Chto dala Oktiabr’skaia revoliutsiia rabotnitse i ‘krest’ianke], Moscow 1920. Source: Russian Poster [08.10.2025]

The most dynamic and colorful image of a woman wearing a blacksmith’s apron can be seen in the widely reproduced image “What Has the October Revolution Given the Woman Worker and Peasant” (unknown artist, 1920). Here the protagonist is positioned centrally on a rock that says “Land to the peasants and factories to the workers.” She points to the future world of homes of the mother and child, workers’ councils [*soviets*], adult education, kindergartens, libraries, women workers’ clubs, and public dining facilities. The sun of revolution shines down from above. Dressed in a blacksmith’s apron with a hammer in her hand, she has a peasant sickle at her feet, so she can represent the union of workers and peasants in her person. With rosy cheeks and red dress, she is both feminine and strong.

At the same time, she also looks over her shoulder, away from the future idyllic scene. The posters’ title emphasizes what the October Revolution has given women, not what women have taken or won through struggle. In other words, women are the recipients, more than the actors. The buildings in the background are topped by the maternity hospital, linking women firmly to the domain of motherhood – Soviet propaganda rarely discussed parenting by fathers or other individuals. And she is standing still. In this, she resembles more the messenger than the activist, more Angel Gabriel in the Annunciation than Delacroix’s *Liberty*.

Dangerous and Backward Women

Perhaps the most iconic image of women’s backwardness and one of the earliest was Mikhail Cheremnykh’s famous “Story of the Bubliki (Bagels) and the Baba who Did not Acknowledge the Republic” (1920). Here a quintessentially backward woman (the baba)

sells *bubliki*, refusing to give any to the Red Army soldier, as a result of which she ends up being swallowed whole by the greedy Polish pan (rich man). Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem, which was reproduced on this poster, ends with the moral of the story: "Feed the Red [Bolshevik] warriors and bring your grain without howling [i.e., without resistance]."

Fig. 7. Mikhail Cheremnykh: "Story of the Bubliki (Bagels) and the Baba who Did not Acknowledge the Republic" [Istoriia pro bubliki i pro babu, na priznaiushchuiu Respubliki], Petrograd 1920. Source: Russian Poster [08.10.2025]

If we look closely at the image of the woman on the poster and in Mayakovsky's poem, she is verbally described as "white and fat," while visually she is quite large, in fact, the same large size and, above all, the same colors (white and blue) as the Polish invader. The Bolshevik soldiers, by contrast, are shown in red and described as "skinny." When the Red soldier asks her to give him a *bublik*, she responds by insulting him and the republic, emphasizing her own selfishness: "I'll never give you my bagels. Go away, soldier. Get away from me! What the hell do I need in a republic?" At the beginning of the series of pictures, she is portrayed as rich in bagels – in fact, they cover her body. But she has been selfish in not giving the soldier a bagel, which could be a danger to the whole country; as he says, "the pan (Polish invader) will swallow up the republic if we are skinny." So instead she is swallowed up by the Polish invader, and the reader is reminded

Fig. 8. Moskovskii proletkul't. V.Kh.M.A: "Peasant Woman! Be Prepared to Go from the Old Life to the New" [Krest'ianka! Bud' gotova uiti ot staroi zhizni k novoi], 1920. Source: Duke University [08.10.2025]

Frequently, Russian posters exhorted the baba to move "from the old life to the new." In one complex image, "Peasant Woman! Be Prepared to go from the Old Life to the New" (n.d.), a triangular image shows a woman in red kerchief and dress, with eyes upraised toward the red star above her, with the accompanying inscription "Fulfill the commandments of Ilyich [Lenin]." To her left are depicted the evils of the Russian Orthodox Church which under tsarism had made her subordinate: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will swindle you," the headings says. Women bow down to the Church; an old woman healer with a hooked nose waves a stick over a sick child; a fat priest baptizes a child "in order to fill his pocket." To the right are shown the evils of the *Domostroi*, a medieval set of rules and household advice that prescribed women's subordination to men, with texts and images praising wife- and child-beating. Only in the center triangle, which flows down from the red star, does she experience "the new order" [*novyi lad*]. Soviet power has given women full and equal rights, so "don't fall behind" [*ne otstavai*] in creating cooperatives, children's nurseries, and in studying. At the center of it all, the peasant woman is again stationary, pointing to Lenin's commandments [*zavety*] to help her understand and know what to do.

Fig. 9. Unknown artist: “Protect your Children from Infections. Don’t Kiss Children on the Lips. Give Children more Fresh Air and Sunshine.” [Beregite detei ot zarazy. Ne tseluete deti v guby. Daite detiam bol’she vozdukha i solntsa], Source: Stena, [08.10.2025]

Dozens of posters showed pictures of the bad old ways – with crowded stuffy huts, infants who were swaddled, smothered, and unwashed. The Maternal and Child Welfare division of the Commissariat of Health [*Okhmatmlad*] had its own publishing house in the 1920s that produced dozens of posters addressed to women on maternal and child health.[11] Not all of them were negative. Some advised that pregnant women should be protected from excessive physical labor, and that mother’s milk was the best nourishment for the child.[12] But they also heavily stigmatized the traditional woman healer, known in Russian as the *babka*, and ordinary mothers who followed the wrong advice.

In “Protect Your Children from Infections” (anonymous, 1920s), the viewer is instructed “Don’t Kiss Children on the Lips. Give Children more Fresh Air and Sunshine.” Here a crone stands to the left as the mother pushes her away from the child. The mother with her kerchief tied behind her head (symbolizing that she was closer to being a woman worker than a peasant) sits peacefully outside a wooden house with a healthy toddler on her lap. The sunshine, beautiful house, dog, and leaves on the tree suggest a wholesome environment. The old woman, by contrast, encroaches with extended arms to take the child. Wearing a scarf tied below her chin (as peasant women did) and a long apron with folk designs, the older woman has skin darkened from the sun and enlarged lips. The age and skin tone of the older woman seem clearly designed to convey the danger she represented to the blond, white-skinned child.

Fig. 10. Okhmatmlad: “Give Birth in the Hospital. [Otherwise] the Woman Healer [Babka] Will Cripple your Health” [Radi v
bol’nitse. Babka kalechit tvoe zdorov’e], 1920s. Source: pikabu [08.10.2025]

The troublesome old woman features prominently in another poster, “Give Birth in the Hospital. [Otherwise] the Woman Healer [*Babka*] Will Cripple your Health” (also Okhmatmlad, 1920s). Here an old woman in the foreground holds a swaddled baby while standing next to a dirty table with a cat and a pig on the floor and a cow in the background. Behind her, a wan mother with a long-suffering look on her face lies next to a hanging cradle of the kind that Soviet authorities abhorred. The child is clearly wrapped in swaddling clothes, and the whole scene is under the direction of the healer. By contrast, on the right-hand side of the image, the mother lies in a white, antiseptic hospital with a male figure in charge, aided by a woman nurse. Here she (the mother) looks up blissfully at the ceiling; everything is clean and orderly.

As in Western Europe and North America in the 19th century, women healers were now being marginalized and excluded in favor of medical doctors.[13] To encourage this change through visual media, the older women had to be stigmatized with long noses and grim expressions. In the “new” sanitized world, they had to literally be erased from the image of the hospital and the healthy new mother.

Fig. 11. Book cover of the courtroom drama “Kurynikha. Trial of a Woman Healer / Kurynicha. Sud nad znacharkoj”, 1925, published by the Leningrad branch of Proletkul’t

One of the most striking images of a so-called wise woman [*znakharka* or *babka*] made to look evil is not a poster but rather the cover of a play called “Kurynikha: Trial of a Woman Healer” (1925). The eponymous Kurynikha, whose name means “chicken,” looks out at the viewer with her long fingers poised over a soup bowl that resembles a cauldron. With her green coloring, wide eyes, long nose, and toothless, gaping mouth, she can only be seen as a witch. Her nickname – the chicken lady – moreover, reminds the viewer of the famous Slavic witch Baba Yaga, whose house stands on chicken legs and who herself is sometimes known as the “bony-legged one.” As in the previous image, the clear message here is that the woman healer, who is untrained and superstitious, will cause harm with her ignorant practices and beliefs.[14]

Fig. 12. “Are You Helping to Liquidate Illiteracy? Everyone Join the ‘Down with Illiteracy’ Society.” Leningrad 1925. Source: Wikimedia Commons [08.10.2025]

A common theme of posters with women in them was illiteracy. In the poster, “Are You Helping to Liquidate Illiteracy?” (1925), a woman worker in red kerchief reaches out to urge everyone to join the Society for the Elimination of Illiteracy (often called *Likbez* colloquially for “*likvidatsiia bezgramotnosti*”). In its composition, this poster resembles Dmitry Moor’s famous 1920 poster “Did You Volunteer?,” in which a soldier in Civil War cap (*budenovka*) points and demands military service from every male viewer. Although Russian and Soviet viewers might not have recognized it, Moor’s poster in turn was drawn from a British poster by Alfred Leete, “Lord Kitchener Wants You” (1914), and an American one, “Uncle Sam: I Want You for U.S. Army” (1917) by James Montgomery Flagg. As the British Director of General Recruiting, Lord Derby, is reported to have said in 1915 of the Kitchener poster, this type of pressure could certainly be called “bullying by poster.”[15]

In “Are You Helping to Liquidate Illiteracy?”, the central woman looks squarely at the viewer. She is both dynamic and demonstrative. Yet, viewers would have automatically compared her, perhaps seeing her as secondary and derivative to Moor’s “Did You Volunteer?” It is also possible that the motif would have evoked the WWI propaganda of the “Women’s Battalion of Death,” that was explicitly designed to shame male laggards who had failed to volunteer for the front. For the organizers of *Likbez*, the poster “Are You Helping to Liquidate Illiteracy?” used this kind of military imagery to indicate the critical importance of this campaign. Both women and men would have been shamed into joining *Likbez* with an eye to eliminating their unacceptable illiteracy.

Fig. 13. Elizaveta Kruglikova: “Learn to Read and Write. Oh, Mama. If only You Were Literate – You Would be able to Help Me!” [Ekh, Mamania! Byla by ty gramotnoi, pomogla by mne!], Petrograd 1923. Source: Russian Poster [08.10.2025]

In 1923, *Likbez* published a related poster, “Are You Helping to Liquidate Illiteracy?” by one of the few women artists of the day, Elizaveta Kruglikova (1865-1941), who was famous for her etchings and silhouettes.[16] “Oh, Mama, if only you were literate,” the poster reads, “you would be able to help me!” Here a mother in a peasant kerchief and bast shoes stands before her young daughter. The girl herself is barefoot. The mother stands helplessly, unable to help her daughter. Beside the stove in the background stand a large water barrel and a broom.[17] With a samovar on the table, the image is one of pure domesticity. Prerevolutionary proverbs had said, “A baba’s [woman’s] road is from the stove to the threshold,” implying the limitations of her horizons and her experiences.[18] Here the peasant woman and her young daughter are alone in the hut with no prospects of the larger revolutionary activism of the day.

Fig. 14. Adol'f Iosifovič Strachov-Braslavskij: "March 8 – Day of Women's Emancipation" [8 marta – den' raskreposhchenia zhenshchin] 1926. Source: Russian Poster [08.10.2025]

"March 8 – Day of Women's Emancipation" (1926) pictures a woman in front of factory smokestacks on International Women's Day. For once she is not in the kitchen or peasant hut; nor is she explicitly associated with backwardness. Her face is set, and her gaze is steely. Yet only the banner above her and the words below are in red. She herself is painted in gray, brown, black, and white, like the smokestacks. Buttoned up to the chin in her workers' blouse, she is all muscles and sharp bones, radiating determination. Yet she is not in motion. Both her blouse and the cut of her jaw are more masculine, or at least androgynous, than feminine. There are no signs that she has fought for her accomplishments, or that she is actively calling others to go forward. In this poster she is a bit like the central woman in "What the October Revolution has given Women Workers and Peasants" (figure 6). She signals where women should be – in the factory – but does not give them counsel how to get there. In fact, she is being told what to do, i.e., to build socialism. Since she has been emancipated by Soviet power, the logic seems to go, she must devote herself to building socialism.

Conclusion

From this brief sketch of these four categories – forward men, ugly "Mariannes," lagging women, and backward, passive women – we see that there were few positive images of women. Backwardness shows up in women's positions behind men, their lack of movement and dynamism, the danger they might bring to the revolution through their ignorance. Even when women are shown with the most advanced images of the day – smokestacks and the gifts of the revolution – they are shown in heraldic positions rather than fighting ones.

[1] N.K. Krupskaya, Editorial for the first issue of Rabotnitsa (Feb. 13, 1914), in: Istoricheskii arkhiv 4 (1955), p. 38.

[2] Clara Zetkin, Lenin on the Women's Question, Marxists Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1925/lenin/zetkin2.htm [08.10.2025].

[3] This question of backwardness is a key focus of my first two monographs: Elizabeth A. Wood, The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia, Bloomington, IN, 1997; idem, Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia, Ithaca, NY 2005.

[4] Victoria E. Bonnell, Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin, Berkeley 1997; id., The Representation of Women in early Soviet Political Art in: Russian Review 50.3 (1991), pp. 267-288; id., The Peasant Woman in Stalinist Political Art of the 1930s, in: The American Historical Review 98 (1993), pp. 55-82, online https://academic.oup.com/ahr/article/98/1/55/64207 [08.10.2025]; id., The Iconography of the Worker in Soviet Political Art, in: Lewis H. Siegelbaum/Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, and Identity, Ithaca 1994, pp. 341-375; Stephen White, The Bolshevik Poster, New Haven, 1989; Elizabeth Waters, Childcare Posters and the Modernisation of Motherhood, in: Sbornik: Study Group on the Russian Revolution 13 (1987); id., The Female Form in Soviet Political Iconography, 1917-1932, in: by Barbara Evans Clements/Barbara Alpern Engel/Christine D. Worobec (eds.), Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation, Berkeley 1991, pp. 225-242; Susan Reid, All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in the Soviet Art of the 1930s, in: Slavic Review 57 (1998), pp. 133-173; Frances L. Bernstein, Envisioning Health in Revolutionary Russia: The Politics of Gender in Sexual-Enlightenment Posters of the 1920s, in: Russian Review 57.2 (1998), pp. 191-217; Anna N. Eremeeva, Woman and Violence in Artistic Discourse of the Russian Revolution and Civil War (1917-1922), in: Gender & History 16.3 (2004), pp. 726-743, online https://sites.bu.edu/revolutionaryrussia/files/2013/09/Women-and-Violence-Civil-War.pdf [08.10.2025]; Tricia Starks, The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State, Madison, WI, 2009.

[5] It should also be remembered that "Forwards" [*Vpered*] was the name of a large number of German, Yiddish, and Russian socialist periodicals. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, in his "The General Idea of the Revolution in the 19th Century" (1851), called on socialists to move forward: "What, then, are we waiting for? Forward! and at full speed, against land rent." The Anarchist Library, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/pierre-joseph-proudhon-the-general-idea-of-the-revolution-in-the-19th-century [08.10.2025]."*Vorwärts!" [Forward]* was used as the title for a number of European and American Jewish publications: the first in Paris in 1844; the second, the leading newspaper of the German Social Democratic Party from 1876 until the present; and the third, *Forverts,* a Yiddish-language daily newspaper in the US from 1897 to today. In Russian *Vpered* [Forward] was the title of a journal and a newspaper published abroad from 1873-1877, both of them extremely influential. Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership frequently exhorted their followers to go forward.

[6] Elizabeth A. Wood, Gender Images in the Russian Revolution: Backward Women and Forward Men in Iconic Perspective, 1919-1923, in: Carol Leonard/Daniel Orlovsky/Jurej Petrov (eds.), The Russian Revolution of 1917-Memory and Legacy, Routledge 2024, pp. 176-190.

[7] Leon Trotsky, "The Eastern Front". Speech at the Joint Session of the Samara Province Executive Committee, Committee of the Russian Communist Party and Representatives of the Trade Unions," April 6, 1919, Marxists Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1919/military/ch112.htm [08.10.2025].

[8] The image seems originally have been used on the cover of the popular journal Lukomor'e, No. 19-20, June 17, 1917, as part of an appeal by the Provisional Government for Russians to buy liberty bonds. *Laboratoriia fantastiki,* https://www.fantlab.org/edition430514 [08.10.2025].

[9] Yulia Gradskova makes a passing but very important comment about the tension between androgyny and maternalism in the Revolution in her work: Soviet People with Female Bodies: Performing Beauty and Maternity in Soviet Russia in the mid 1930-1960s. PhD diss., Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2007, pp. 14-15. See also Natalia Budanova, Utopian Sex: the Metamorphosis of Androgynous Imagery in Russian Art of the Pre-and Post-Revolutionary Period, in: Christina Lodder/Maria Kokkori/Maria Mileeva (eds.), Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond, Leiden 2013, pp. 25-41.

[10] For another picture of a sickle-bearing peasant woman walking a step behind two men, see the poster, “May 1st, 1920. Through the Shards of Capitalism to the Universal Brotherhood of Laborers [1oe maia, 1920 goda, Cherez oblomki kapitalizma k vsermirnomu bratstvu trudiashchikhsia], Moscow 1920. Russian Poster, https://russianposter.ru/poster.php?rid=10010146100000 [08.10.2025].

[11] Elizabeth Waters, The Modernisation of Russian Motherhood, 1917-1937, in: Soviet Studies 44 (1992), pp. 123-135.

[12] For a full series of photos of Okhmatmlad posters, see pikabu: Пикабу, “Серия плакатов Охрана Материнства и Младенчества 1925 года,” https://pikabu.ru/story/seriya_plakatov_okhrana_materinstva_i_mladenchestva_1925_goda_12324924 [08.10.2025].

[13] Waters, Modernisation; Yulia Gradskova, Helping the Mother to be “Soviet”: The Medicalisation of Maternity and Nursery Development in Russia in the 1920 and 1930s, in: Gisela Hauss/Dagmar Schulte (eds.), Amid Social Contradictions: Towards a History of Social Work in Europe, Opladen 2009, pp. 225-236. For Europe and North America, the classic work is Barbara Ehrenreich/Deirdre English, For her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women, Garden City 1978.

[14] Anonymous, Kurynikha. Sud nad zhakharkoi, Leningrad 1925; for further discussion, see: Elizabeth A. Wood, Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia, Ithaca 2005, p. 143. The image is also reproduced in Gianna Frölicher, Theater mit Unsichtbaren: Mikroben vor Gericht, https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/theater-mit-unsichtbaren-mikroben-vor-gericht/ [08.10.2025]. A famous pre-Soviet Russian proverb also comments: “A chicken is not a bird, and a woman is not a person.” For more on Baba Yaga, see Joanna Hubbs, Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture, Bloomington 1988, pp. 36-51.

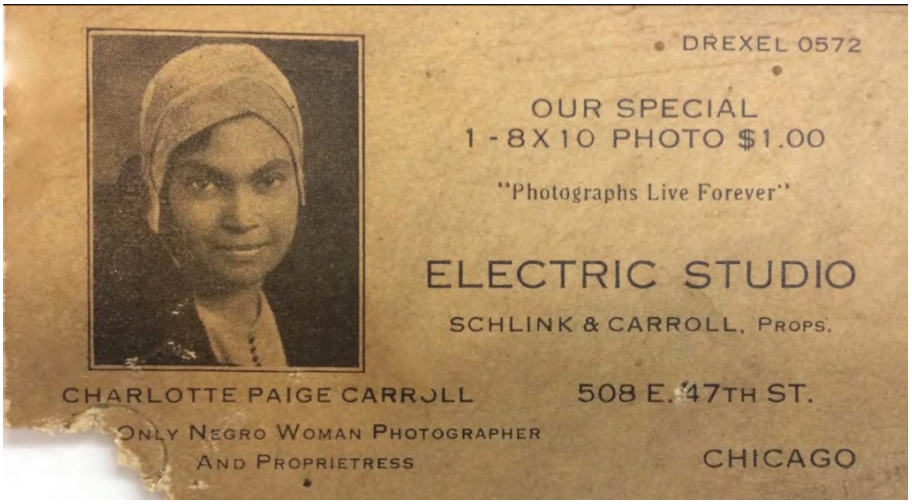
[15] Cited in: James Taylor, Your Country Needs You: The Secret History of the Propaganda Poster, Manchester 2013, p. 7.

[16] See the biography of Elizaveta Kruglikova on Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizaveta_Kruglikova, and a collection of her graphics at the Internet Archive, https://web.archive.org/web/20090203152338/http://graphic.org.ru/kruglikova.html [both 08.10.2025].

[17] While the broom was not used by the most famous witch Baba Yaga to ride on, she was frequently depicted using a broom to erase her tracks as she traveled in a mortar. Baba Yaga, Encyclopedia of Brokgaus and Efron, 1906, see Wikisource https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%AD%D0%A1%D0%91%D0%95/%D0%91%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%B0-%D1%8F%D0%B3%D0%B0 [08.10.2025].

[18] In Russian, “*bab’ia doroga – ot pechi do poroga*.” The woman’s part of a small one-room peasant hut was called the “*babii kut*” or “*babii ugol*.”

This article is part of the theme dossier “Putting Images to Work – Gender and the Visual Archive,” edited by Christina Benninhaus and Mary Jo Maynes.



Theme Dossier: Putting Images to Work – Gender and the Visual Archive

The thematic dossier “Putting Images to Work – Gender and the Visual Archive,” edited by Christina Benninghaus and Mary Jo Maynes, presents the work of historians who use visual sources to explore gender. This work was first discussed at the 2023 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. The authors draw … weiterlesen

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