Early Soviet Advertising: Awe Have to Extract All the Stinking Bourgeois Elements®

Natasha Tolstikova, University of Maine, Orono

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - This paper is the first part of the ongoing project to reconstruct the history of the Soviet advertising throughout the history of the regime. It utilizes interpretive, historical and textual methods of analysis. The October Revolution of 1917 ruptured the gradual development of history in all life venues including advertising. The paper argues that in Russia, advertising underwent the stages of development similar to that of America, including industrialization and modernization.

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This paper is the first part of the ongoing project to reconstruct the history of the Soviet advertising throughout the history of the regime. It utilizes interpretive, historical and textual methods of analysis. The October Revolution of 1917 ruptured the gradual development of history in all life venues including advertising. The paper argues that in Russia, advertising underwent the stages of development similar to that of America, including industrialization and modernization.

The disastrous economic conditions that Russia found itself after the Revolution mostly replaced the market-based trade with non-monetary forms of exchange, therefore the economic purpose of advertising ceased to exist. Instead, the advertising of consumer goods the Bolsheviks resorted to agitation and propaganda for the new social system. However, in doing so, it employed the principles similar to that of advertising—dissemination and selling of ideas. The topics of agitation were anti-war, pro-Revolution and pro-industrialization.

The focal point of this paper is the Soviet advertising effort in the 1920s. Because of the fusion of different political and economic entities, this period was unique for the Soviet history in many ways. To remedy the ailing economy, the government reinstated private trade and traders. As a result, the period from 1921-1930, a period of “state capitalism,” was an amalgam of ideologies, norms, and cultures. The necessity to compete with private businesses forced the state to use every ideological weapon available. The special importance was placed on the state advertising that was designed to show the advantage of the Soviet-produced goods.

Famous Soviet artists were interested in creating specifically Soviet advertising that had a Revolutionary look. Visually, it consisted of angular geometric constructions that were supposed to represent people and material subjects in non-mimetic ways. They aggressively used typography, playing with different sizes, directions, and the letter appearances. Instead of creating a pleasing image and luring consumers into buying the merchandise, it emanated the Revolutionary energy and up-beat attitude.

In the 1922, Zhurnalist [Journalist], the new organ of print workers of Russia, began its publication. It was a lively print medium that was engaged in discussions on the nature and content of the Soviet press and the directions of its development, experimenting with various writing styles and visual aids. From its first issue, Zhurnalist showed interest in Soviet advertising, attempting to develop ideological and theoretical base for it. The Communist ideology propagated the clean break with the bourgeois past. Predictably, those interested in the advancement of advertising, had rejected the past advertising achievements of the czarist Russia, however accomplished they had been. Instead, they suggested turning to the American and German advertising experience—the countries that had been considered as the most efficient and technologically developed.

However, Zhurnalist’s authors defined Soviet advertising goals as contrasting to that of capitalist advertising goals. Instead of immersing in competition, Soviet advertising in their opinion should educate the consumers and inform them of the new habits and new ways of life and at the same time beautify life and to be the branch of art. Concentrating on differences in ideology with capitalism, the proponents neglected to see the similarities in the advertising functions of both systems: essentially the Soviet advertising goals were the existing roles of bourgeois advertising. Advertising publications in Zhurnalist also suggested the association of propaganda and advertising which on some occasions they called “trade propaganda.” They recommended drawing upon the experience of Revolutionary posters.

The only road of the advancement of Soviet advertising for Zhurnalist was education of advertising cadres and mastering the methods of scientific psychology. It reported the results of original scientific experiment, reprinted articles from German advertising publications on psycho-techniques, and published essays on contemporary American advertising. Zhurnalist showed interest to psychology as a powerful tool for the effective propaganda. The authors of Zhurnalist interested in the topic, organized the Association of Advertising Workers was to develop methodology for the rational and effective advertising.

The young Soviet Russia had ambitious goals of building socialism in one country. This meant a giant leap of mostly rural communities into urban industrialized nation and transformation of Russia into modern society. Modernity for the country reflected categories similar to that of the Western world: progress, rationality, effectiveness, and science. Advertising was perceived as a tool that will help the young country to approach the gleaming ideal.