The Reinvention of Iconic Tradition in Soviet Russia

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Throughout Russian history the iconic tradition has largely formed the Russian national consciousness. In the Soviet era, the Orthodox religion was rejected, but the iconic tradition persisted in the art of the official state artists. Playing on both the inferiority and the superiority complexes of the Russian psyche, the art of Soviet Russia displayed both an attraction and repulsion to tradition and religion.

After the Russian Revolution, it was necessary for the leaders to rid the country of Orthodox traditions. One of the fundamental principles of Soviet Communism was that the Orthodox religion was something used by the Tzars to suppress the people. But tradition is something that is necessary for a society to properly function. Thus what usually happens is that tradition is simply reoriented to fit the ideals of the new power. This is exactly the situation that was happening in Communist Russia—Orthodoxy was being deliberately not used or more often adapted to the ideals of the new regime. The old traditions could not just be thrown out completely, because this leaves a void in society. Thus it was necessary to fill this void with new, Soviet traditions.

The most important thing to do for the Soviets was to establish the new signs of Communism. To do this they would adapt existing Orthodox signs. In place of the Cross there would be the hammer and sickle, or the communist star. Thus throughout Russia, especially in Moscow the Crosses that topped the major building’s spires would be taken off and replaced by stars. Graveyards also reflected this change in ideology as gravestones began to be topped with stars instead of crosses. There was also a need to replace the ultimate sign in the Russian consciousness—Christ himself. This sign would be effectively replaced under the leadership of Stalin. Lenin would be the figure that myth would be centered on, just as Christ had been to pre-revolutionary Russia.

The most effective medium for the Soviet leaders to promote this new signage was through the official state art. The influence of religious signs, especially the icon, would be strongly felt in the work of the party artists, as well as in the work of the nonconformist artists, who sought to expose this exploitation.