The Soviet Union was always a propaganda state.¹ That is, the state’s goal was to mobilize the masses and change economic, political and social behavior by using the instruments of propaganda. While we have a comprehensive understanding of how the press, radio, movies, schools, and posters came to play a major role in furthering the Soviet propaganda agenda, one element that is missing is an appreciation for the role that postal material played during the formative years of the Soviet Union.² This paper examines the critical period from 1928-1945, that is from the time of the First Five-Year Plan through the end of World War II, and shows how, in the form of postal material, propaganda was used to mobilize the masses to support a wide variety of Soviet policies and practices. This was a turbulent and uncertain period that encompassed the beginnings of forced industrialization, the involuntary collectivization of agriculture (1929-1934), the terror of the Great Purges (1936-1938) and four years of a horrific war against Germany from 1941-1945. It is the argument of this paper that philatelic propaganda during this period was used fundamentally for two purposes: to support massive social change and to confront massive social danger.

The stage was actually set virtually right after the revolution when the Soviet leadership was faced with civil war. Groping as it was for ways to mobilize the citizenry; it began to use propaganda, developing the use of the press, movies, posters, etc., as weapons to win the
proverbial hearts and minds of the people. For example, there were the contributions of the brash, young poet, Vladimir Mayakovsky, who created posters and wrote poetry in behalf of the revolution’s goals. Then from the late 1920s and into the 1930s, in the era of large-scale industrialization the efforts to radically transform society took place with full force. In this period, the overarching task of the regime was to change the nation from a substantially illiterate, peasant dominated, agricultural society, to an industrial giant. Then the first half of the forties was consumed by the need to pull the nation through a terrible war. During the rapid industrialization and collectivization, it was not a given that the regime had the support of the citizenry. They had to win people over. Sometimes this was accomplished by violent means. But intimidation has severe limitations and this is where propaganda had a role to play.

This paper will examine the ways that philately was employed in a number of key areas of the economic, political, and social spheres to further the goals of the regime, using a series of case studies as illustrations.

**INDUSTRIALIZATION**

Nothing so dominated Soviet life as did the drive to industrialize. Indeed, economic issues predominated during the dozen years before the war, particularly as regarded the effort to advance heavy industry. Beginning with the first five year plan, initiated at the end of 1928, the Soviet Union drove itself at breakneck speed to close to gap between its own economic backwardness and the industrial output of the economically advanced western countries. The grand experiment with central planning and the effort to close the gap between itself and the rich west created opportunities to persuade the population and give them a sense of personal and national pride in what they were doing. Millions were asked to sacrifice personal material
welfare in support of the drive toward a new world. Central planning in part was designed as a way to mobilize the nation’s resources toward the single-minded goal of rapid industrialization. In the space of a few years, the central authorities took total control of the allocation of resources, the structure and nature of production, and the financial system. One of the prerequisites of the drive to alter the direction of economic output was to invest in heavy industry, that is, those branches of the economy that would propel economic growth.

A number of stamps were issued to herald the industrialization. Among these are the stamps in the well-known worker and peasant series of 1929 (Scott 413-26), and those celebrating completion of the Moscow subway (Scott 551-554). Of note is the series issued in 1929-1930 at the start of the industrialization drive, honoring various heavy industries.

![Figure 1](image)

Figure 1 shows three of these stamps, each telling a story about heavy industry: one shows tractors coming off the assembly line (Scott 428), another shows an iron furnace with a text at the top that says, “More Metals, More Machines,” (Scott 429), and the third shows a blast furnace and a chart displaying planned iron production (Scott 430). Moreover, a 1931 postal cancellation urged the nation to fulfill the five-year plan in four years, a common exhortation at the time.
COLLECTIVIZATION AND AGRICULTURE

One of the great upheavals on Soviet soil was the social and economic revolution that took place in the countryside over several years as the regime forcibly altered the structure of agricultural production, eliminating the family as the unit of production and creating large collective farms in their place. In the main, this transformation took place through compulsion and intimidation, but simultaneously there was a vigorous propaganda campaign that operated side by side with the coercion. The propaganda effort had at least three facets. One was purely political, designed to gain the support of poor peasants against well-off farmers, the so-called kulaks.

As an example of the anti-kulak strategy, a 1931 postal card showed a kulak laden with two bags running from a tractor and carried the slogan, “Through the successful carrying out of
spring planting we will complete collectivization and the total liquidation of the kulaks as a class.”

A second aspect of propaganda during collectivization was the constant pressure on peasants to meet and exceed some goal, often multiple goals. A 1931 postal card sought to mobilize peasants with this exhortation: “Devote all forces to the sowing campaign, to increasing sown area, and to attracting new millions of poor and middle peasants to the collective farms.”
Following closely on its heels, another postal card demanded: “Fulfill the sowing plan—
guarantee the fulfillment of the 5 year plan in 4 years.” (Figure 4) The words were not simply an
idle wish; behind them was enormous pressure to meet often unreachable targets.

The third aspect of the philatelic propaganda effort involved education. Soviet
agricultural authorities used the postal system to teach agronomy to farmers on a wide variety of
agricultural matters. Let me offer a few examples. A 1930 postal card offered lengthy
instructions to peasants on how to skin a pig and prepare the pelt for sale to the Leather
Syndicate or cooperatives, which had the subtext that farmers were expected to surrender these
skins to the authorities. Another card also from 1930 instructed peasants to fertilize their rye in
the field so as to increase yields.
A 1931 postal card says: “Sugar beet collective farmers and individual peasants mechanize the harvest of sugar beets.” (Figure 5) Another 1931 postal card addressed to sugar beet farmers said: “Collective farmers and individual peasant sugar beet growers! Take care to keep harvested beets from spoiling!” One picture on the card says: “Pile the cleaned beets in a heap” and the second picture instructs: “cover them with soil.”

Collective farmers were subject to compulsory delivery quotas. That is, they were assigned a target amount of a particular crop that they were expected to deliver to the state by a specified date. One of the primary ways that peasants expressed their contempt for these delivery obligations was to withhold part of their harvest rather than meet the delivery target. A 1931 propaganda card said: “Sugar beet collective farmers and individual peasants. Give the complete harvest of sugar beets to the sugar factory. Concealment of sugar beets contracted for with the factory leads to an unprofitable economy and to a sugar industry without raw
materials—and leaves the country without sugar.” (Figure 6) While nominally, this was a patriotic appeal to national interest above individual self-interest, in reality, peasants could be dealt with quite harshly, including imprisonment, for failing to meet a compulsory delivery quota.

Figure 6

Among many economic activities celebrated on postal materials, tobacco production offers an interesting case. If alcohol consumption is the country’s national sport, smoking probably comes in second. Following the revolution, N. A. Semashko, the first Soviet Commissar of Health, attempted to affect a total ban on tobacco products, a goal that Lenin himself initially encouraged. The enthusiasm of health reformers notwithstanding, they were far outnumbered by those who believed that tobacco production had an important role to play in the economy and Semashko’s legislation was defeated. Lenin, recognizing a lost cause when he saw
it, essentially deserted Semashko. The die was cast. The nation would be full-speed ahead with tobacco production. State economic interests prevailed. Two postal cards issued in 1931 enthusiastically supported tobacco production. They both stressed patriotic motives and the need to meet agricultural production plans, and warned tobacco farmers about selling to anyone other than the state authorities. The lengthy message on one card said: “Tobacco growing collective farmers and peasants: submit all leftovers of harvested tobacco to the storage points. We will complete the planting of tobacco; you will make your work easier and increase the profit of the collective and your own profit. Contribute to the 100% completion of the sowing plan and tobacco storage.” The other card, which shows a tobacco plant and a tractor operating in a field, says: “Makhorka tobacco growers! Contract and increase the planting of tobacco! With timely and attentive care of raw tobacco, you will improve the quality of raw material and increase your household profit. Submit all raw materials to the delivery point. Not one gram to speculators or middlemen—the enemies of Soviet power. We will eliminate illegal traders.”

SAVINGS BANKS

The leadership made a great effort to attract the monetary resources of households and get them to place their savings in a savings bank (sberkassa). This was not a bank in a traditional sense, that is, it was not a commercial bank with the capacity to make loans to businesses or individuals. Rather, it was a financial institution in which citizens could place their savings to be held by the state. Getting people to part with their savings required a heroic effort because most Russians kept their money out of the banking system.

There was good reason to go after consumer savings. Inflationary pressure came with the rise in wages that accompanied the dramatic expansion of the economy when factory managers
increased their demand for labor. Incomes were rising, but the consumer goods that families would have wanted to buy with their higher incomes were not available on the market. So the Soviet government went after the savings of citizens to sop up the excess demand through the *sberkassa*.

![Image of a postal card](image)

*Figure 7*

But the campaign to extract household savings was not couched in terms of inflationary fears but rather by appeals to a different set of fears. A 1929 postal card pictures a happy family (father, mother, child, with the woman holding a savings passbook) and it says, “My savings book helps us vacation in the summer.” (Figure 7) Another 1929 card shows a man depositing money and the text of the card says: “Build your personal budget through a savings bank.” Yet another card from 1929 shows three peasants in their house, mystified and sad as they observe a storage box that has been opened and ransacked. The card warns, “Don’t keep money at home, rather keep your money in a *sberkassa*.” A 1932 postal card appealed to the participation of
citizens in the drive toward industrialization. The card says: “By means of the savings bank we will add a million rubles of the financial support for our socialist construction.” Notwithstanding all the ways that citizens were shown that depositing their money in a savings bank was a virtuous act, I speculate that the real agenda of policymakers was to control prices before they went out of control as they had in the early 1920s after the Civil War when the nation suffered spectacular rates of inflation, with monthly rates of inflation in excess of 100 percent. In addition, if the limited savings of Soviet households, especially peasant households, could be channeled into the banks, this would limit their ability to demand non-existent consumer goods.

EDUCATION

When the Bolsheviks came to power, they confronted multiple educational challenges. A large part of the population was illiterate: As of 1926 a mere 51 percent of the population over the age of nine was literate, with significant differences between men and women and urban and rural residents. Specifically, although almost 90 percent of urban adult males were literate, only about two-thirds of rural males and one-third of rural women were literate. Schools tended to be authoritarian, while secondary and higher education emphasized a classical curriculum and mainly served the middle and upper classes. At the heart of this educational imbalance was the limited access of peasant children, especially girls, to schooling.

The Soviet regime committed itself to creating a universal democratic education system, including a basic education for everyone, equal access to education for males and females alike, and the liquidation of illiteracy in adults. In public education, the education reformers, strongly influenced by the tenets of progressive education, drew up ambitious plans for “the labor school,” which would eschew specific subjects like history or mathematics. But this reform
never took root in local schools and after 1932 progressive education was banished and a traditional curriculum was restored in the schools. In secondary and higher education, the Soviets placed emphasis on technical education. By the 1930s institutions of technical education expanded greatly, many being connected with factories, which provided evening school education for their workers. In the literacy campaigns of the 1920s, dedicated young people fanned out into the countryside trying to teach adults to read, but their resources were limited. Once the industrialization drive began at the end of the decade, many more resources were devoted to the campaign for adult literacy, now tied to the achievement of socialist culture.

Figure 8

Three pieces of postal material demonstrate the regime’s efforts to stress the new departures in education after the industrial drive began. Figure 8, published in 1930, bears a montage of a factory, a grain crop, and several books. The text, which emphasizes that the campaign is a
nationwide effort, reads: “For a literate factory and collective farm. ‘Down with illiteracy’.” The title of the book in the foreground is, “A Primer on Building Socialist Culture.”

Figure 9

A 1932 postal card addressed to transportation workers, but really intended for all workers, demonstrates the new emphasis on technical education. The message reads: “Remember technical education is a class obligation of each member of the proletariat.” (Figure 9) Lastly, a 1934 postcard (Figure 10) shows a scene in a rural classroom. Entitled “A Lesson in Arithmetic,” it reproduces a painting actually executed in 1885. The students are all thoroughly engaged in one way or another with the problem on the blackboard. The message is clearly that studying mathematics is a good thing and one presumes that it was resurrected in the 1930s by the Soviets to trumpet the kind of education that would prepare youth to be engineers, a profession much needed in the rapidly industrializing nation.
INFANT HEALTH

On the eve of the 1917 revolution, the state of infant health in Russia was deplorable. Most notably, the country had the highest infant mortality rate in the western world. With roughly one-third of all Russian infants dying before their first birthday, infant mortality was
more than three times that of the United States. In addition to the human tragedy behind these numbers, there were some practical economic considerations—every infant death meant one less adult in the future labor force. The most prominent cause of infant death was diarrhea, especially summer diarrhea, when children would become dehydrated and die in large numbers. The cause of diarrhea was largely rooted in the old peasant practice of providing infants with a *soska*, a piece of cloth filled with chewed pieces of solid food that served as a pacifier to get the infant through the day while its mother was in the field working. Mothers (and grandmothers) chewed up bread, bacon rind, and cereal, and tied up the mash in a rag that was then given to the child. Thus, the infant took in little liquid during the day and instead sucked at bits of solid food that it was incapable of digesting and simultaneously consumed the bacteria of the person who chewed the food— with predictable results.

From the early days of the regime the Soviets were very concerned about the high rates of infant mortality. They campaigned throughout the 1920s and 1930s to change the way infants were raised. A key point was to persuade women to breast feed their babies more frequently, and also to urge them, indeed, practically beg them, not to offer any other food to their infant in the first six months of life without permission of a doctor. There were other aspects to the efforts to reduce infant mortality, including expansion of the network of clinics (*konsultatsia*). Mothers were constantly urged to take their babies for physical exams as well as to receive advice on such aspects of child care as feeding and bathing the baby.

While the breast-feeding issue appears to have been foremost on the regime’s agenda, it was only one of many medical issues it advanced. The popular press was filled with articles instructing mothers on how to be mothers. Two articles in *Rabotnitsa* written by doctors gave advice on how to dress children in winter. 7 Another article in the same magazine talked about
training a child to wash himself correctly.⁸ Two 1932 postal cards exemplified the movement to improve child care, offering pediatric advice in pictures and words.

Figure 11

Figure 11 shows a mother placing drops of oil into a small child’s ear. The card says, “Do not remove insects from a child’s ear by yourself. Place 4-5 drops of liquid oil into the ear—the bug will die. Go to the doctor to remove the insect.” Figure 12 portrays a mother bathing an infant. The card says, “How to bathe an infant. Make sure that during the bathing when splashing water the water does not get into the infant’s ear.”
THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

We all know of the cult of personality that was constructed around Josef Stalin, but Stalin could also use his absolute power to elevate or destroy others. In the case of Kliment Voroshilov (1881-1969), Stalin raised up a rather ordinary man to great heights and the postal system was used to help create a mini-cult of personality around Voroshilov.

For about thirty years, Voroshilov was a member of the top leadership, mainly in the military. Stalin became acquainted with Voroshilov during the Civil War and they developed a bond that never broke. Ferociously devoted to Stalin, Voroshilov was rewarded in turn with Stalin’s sponsorship, even at times when it was against the national interest. Voroshilov was appointed Commissar of the Army in 1925. His biography embellished events in his life,
especially his role in the Civil War. In 1929, on the occasion of Stalin’s fiftieth birthday, Voroshilov wrote a gushing salute effectively making Stalin the centerpiece of the Civil War victory.

In 1930, when the Soviets were still dreaming of a fleet of dirigibles, one of them was to be named the “Klim Voroshilov.” The only other individuals for whom dirigibles were to be named were Lenin and Stalin. The postal system was used to elevate Voroshilov in the popular imagination. A postal card issued in 1930 bore a picture of the imagined dirigible “Klim Voroshilov.” The text on the card says: “Every factory, shop, and brigade are in the ranks of the builders of the dirigible ‘Klim Voroshilov’!” A similar postal card using the zeppelin “Klim Voroshilov,” issued the following year, employed the same theme, saying, “The dirigible ‘Klim Voroshilov’ must fly over Soviet land!” As it turned out, this was all propaganda and these airships were never built.
Voroshilov’s crowning moment came in 1935 when he was appointed one of the first five marshals of the Soviet Union. That this stood as a key moment in his life is evidenced by the 1935 black and white photo of Voroshilov in his marshal’s uniform in a friendly pose next to Stalin. (Figure 13) It is an informal portrait, with both of them leaning almost playfully in the direction of the other. This same picture was published on more than one occasion in mass circulation publications such as Rabotnitsa and Delegatka.

In 1934, when the Soviets issued a series of five airmail stamps, the dirigible named for Voroshilov was on the 15 kopek stamp. Another 1935 postcard bears the inscription, “K.E. Voroshilov amidst Lugansk Pioneers (1927)” and shows him surrounded by happy and adoring youth. This card represents Voroshilov as a father figure and suggests that the Soviets were trying to establish that image for him.

Voroshilov’s status turned out to be way out of proportion to his abilities. When his shortcomings as a military leader were exposed during the so-called Winter War in Finland (1939-1940), he was stripped of his position as Commissar of Defense. His performance during World War II was at least as inept. While he was not the only person whose mistakes allowed the Germans to besiege the city, he deserves a share of the blame for the tragedy that ensued in Leningrad. He was responsible for the Northwest Front and he made multiple errors that led to the siege of Leningrad. These errors notwithstanding, Voroshilov survived in the top leadership until 1960.

**WORLD WAR II**

In the Second World War the Soviets used the propaganda system developed in the 1930s to mobilize, offer hope, and develop national unity against the Germans. Like other nations, the
Soviet Union used propaganda during the war, and notably created large amounts of postal material to rally the nation. A recent article in the Rossica society journal demonstrated the richness of philatelic propaganda associated with the Soviet, British, and American wartime alliance. I counted the number of war-related stamps in the 2010 Scott’s catalog: the USSR issued 95 postage stamps with war images on them, the United States issued 18 such stamps and Great Britain issued none. The themes of Soviet stamps included images of military medals, past military heroes, and battles fought and won, among others. Postal propaganda was used to gain support of the population by raising the specter of fear of what might happen if the Germans were to win.

For example, a very dramatic wartime postcard, which reproduced a famous poster, shows a frightened Soviet mother holding her equally frightened child facing a Nazi bayonet and
pleading, “Soldiers of the Red Army, Save Us!” (Figure 14) Other material was designed to inspire confidence in the citizenry. For example, several cards displayed Soviet soldiers in triumphant postures with their equipment. A piece of postal stationary shows Red Army soldiers atop a tank with the Kremlin in the background and bears the expression, “Death to the German occupiers,” a common theme in Soviet wartime propaganda. The point seemed rather clear: citizens should recognize that the war was in the hands of able and powerful soldiers.

One of the dominant themes in wartime propaganda postal material was the use of the images of prerevolutionary Russian military heroes, especially from 1943 on. Their faces and deeds appeared on many items. For example, several postal items celebrated the courage of Alexander Nevsky, the 13th century war hero whose greatest military feat was to repel invaders from Sweden and the Teutonic Knights.
Alexander Suvorov, the 18th century tsarist general who served Catherine the Great and never lost a battle, once said, “Russians Always Defeat the Prussians.” This line is quoted on an item of postal stationary bearing Suvorov’s image. (Figure 15) The words and deeds of these heroes of the past were meant to appeal to Russian nationalism, to raise the nation’s pride, and give courage to soldier and civilian alike.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the uses of philately as propaganda in the Soviet Union. We can only with great caution and to an extremely limited degree evaluate the efficacy of this material because we do not have evidence of how people received the propaganda. What we can deduce is that the regime was convinced of the value of propaganda as implied by the sheer volume and variety it produced. It helped that postal propaganda was virtually costless--financially and in every other way. It was a way to reach many people with relative ease. It was certainly less costly than excessive force which spawns fear and obedience but never respect or loyalty. And it was a way to spread the message without having to use actual personnel to carry the message—the printed word and pictures substituted for people having to preach the message.

It seems reasonable to conclude that while propaganda fulfilled its more nefarious role as a manipulative tool, it also served a valuable educational function, and at times it served as an attempt to arouse the spirit of the people to make common cause against a common enemy, whether the enemy was illiteracy or a German soldier. Philatelic propaganda was a versatile device to assist with great social change and as a means of surmounting the threat to the nation’s survival.
REFERENCES


1 This is the key concept in the book with the same title by Peter Kenez.
2 In addition to Kenez, see Alex Inkeles.
3 The reader is encouraged to peruse Shalimoff and Shaw for a definitive description of more than 300 postal cards published in the Soviet Union during this period.
4 Those interested in the subject of Russia and tobacco should read, Romaniello and Starks.
5 Makhorka was a low-grade tobacco mainly intended for consumption by the peasants who typically rolled their own cigarettes.
6 Juliet Johnson, “Sberbank,” in Millar, vol. 4, p. 1351. In his magnum opus about Jewish immigration to the United States, *The World of My Fathers*, Irving Howe described how suspicious Russian immigrants were of placing money in American banks, a mistrust they apparently brought with them from the old country.
7 Dr. Finn, “Kak nado odevat’ detei zimoi,” *Rabotnitsa*, December 1928, no. 46, p. 19 and no. 47, p. 18.