Karel C. Berkhoff


In his excellent *Motherland in Danger*, Karel Berkhoff argues that the main goal of Soviet propaganda during the Second World War was to mobilize the country’s military and labor workforce. Throughout the book, he demonstrates how Stalin marginalized and quashed news reports that could potentially demoralize and divide the population, or undermine the citizens’ belief in the Soviet leader’s unerringly leadership. Conversely, any information about the war effort that could bolster spirits and reinforce the Soviet Union’s paramount status among the Allies was publicized throughout the mass media. Berkhoff’s story is about the pragmatism of Soviet propagandists who, faced with an existential threat from Nazi Germany, treated information on a case by case basis; no single, overriding policy directed the propaganda system. But through the work of journalists and radio broadcasters, the Soviet press regime shaped a news production and distribution system with one goal in mind: propelling the nation towards victory.

Stalin’s desire for complete control of information did, however, take priority over the goal of mobilization. To this end, Berkhoff focuses on the Soviet leader’s supervision of newspapers and radio broadcasts. Visual forms of propaganda are absent in this study; the author mostly cites the pages of *Pravda, Izvestiia, Trud,* and various local press organs, as well as transcripts of radio programs. *Motherland in Danger* is not, however, simply a study of news content. Rather Berkhoff examines the underlying structures of propaganda, its institutions and tendencies, and how these ultimately affected the content and spread of information. The great strength of this book lies in the diligent and extensive use of archival sources, including documents from the Soviet Information Bureau, founded in June 1941 following the German invasion, and other mass media institutions, such as the Telegraph Agency (TASS) and the Radio Committee. Close supervision of these agencies, which regulated the news – going as far as to prevent citizens from absorbing foreign news broadcasts by confiscating radios – ensured that propaganda remained under the control of Stalin and his confederates.

The book’s organization is highly schematic, structured around several “genres” of news propaganda. These include, among others, reports of heroism on the battlefield; labor on the home front; wartime atrocities; German villainy; partisans and collaborators; and coverage of the Soviet Union’s allies, principally Poland, Britain, and the United States. In each chapter, a genre of
propaganda is introduced and then traced as it evolved over the course of the war. Some chapters are subdivided more thematically. Labor on the home front, for example, includes sections on forced labor, desertion and “shirkers,” and labor competition (Stakhanovism). Irrespective of form, the author always mobilizes his archival evidence carefully, precluding generalizations about the Soviets’ approach to specific propaganda campaigns. He also concludes each chapter with well-reasoned reflections on the effectiveness of Soviet efforts to propagate or quash particular information, always willing to admit where evidence is lacking or where it leads to dead ends.

The chapter on anti-German propaganda exemplifies Berkhoff’s systematic approach to the ever-shifting media topography. Coverage of Nazi Germany, he argues, started off in measured tones. During the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the media reported on friendly encounters between Soviet and Nazi officials, and German victories were lauded in the press. The invasion of Soviet territory soon provoked anti-German rhetoric, but the media differentiated between the fascist invaders and the German people who languished in Nazi captivity. Eventually hatred for all Germans was encouraged, especially in the military ranks; Stalin regarded a “patriotic hatred” necessary to spur the Red Army to victory. The journalist Ilia Ehrenburg, described by Berkhoff as the “most prominent Soviet voice of hatred,” led this propaganda charge against the German “beasts” and “cannibals” (182). The vitriol abated in 1943 with the publication of the Free Germany manifesto, which again distinguished between Germany’s politics and its people. Indiscriminate hatred eventually returned and then, in November 1944, became more nuanced once again. In this last stage, the Soviet authorities even rebuked Ehrenburg for “oversimplifying” and distanced the state from the writer’s call for the “extermination of the German people” (190). According to Berkhoff, this scapegoating came as a result of Stalin’s concern with Nazi propaganda, which linked Ehrenburg personally to the Soviet leader, and thus threatened to derail the negotiations of Germany’s surrender.

Beyond the basic genres of propaganda, Berkhoff’s study reveals other underlying factors that shaped propaganda. For example, he shows the media’s tendency to universalize the experience of the war. In the multi-ethnic state, Russocentrism was tempered and the imagined community of Soviet peoples captured by the term Rodina (motherland) became a key concept in expressing national unity. Reports of the Holocaust were also universalized. The Soviets weakened “the focus on Jews by converting their ordeal into the prototype for the universal threat of Nazism” (148). Jewish victims were mentioned, usually buried on page 3 or 4 of newspapers, but the mainstream press rarely accentuated the importance of anti-Semitism in Nazi rac-