UNDER THE BANNER OF LENIN: THE IMAGE OF LENIN AS A LEGITIMATING DEVICE IN POSTERS OF STALIN, 1930 TO 1953.

Abstract

Although a vast body of literature exists on Iosif Stalin and the Stalin era in the USSR, art under Stalin, particularly political propaganda posters, has received comparatively little attention with only a few studies conducted from a historical and political perspective. Research into Stalinist posters employing the methodologies of art history brings to light much new material and enhances understanding of cultural production during the Stalinist years, as well as contributing to knowledge across a variety of other academic disciplines. Stalin’s personality cult was generated and maintained through a charismatic persona created by the propaganda apparatus. A major theme of Stalinist propaganda was Stalin’s ideological lineage from Vladimir Lenin, which enabled the transfer of charismatic legitimacy from Lenin to Stalin after Lenin’s death and then continued to confer legitimacy on Stalin’s leadership until his death in 1953. One of the most effective means of promoting this legitimacy was to visually link the image of Stalin with that of Lenin. Posters which feature Stalin and Lenin together are examined in order to trace the evolution of Stalin’s image over the years of his leadership and examine one of the means by which his persona came to take on the features of deity.
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Despite burgeoning research interest in Iosif Stalin’s leadership of the Soviet Union since the opening of the state archives, comparatively little literature exists on art under Stalin, and particularly on the art of the propaganda poster. Such research as there is usually adopts the perspective of the historian or political scientist, rather than the iconographic, iconologic and semiotic perspectives of the art historian in which meaning is inferred from the posters themselves, examined within their historic context. Stalin’s image saturated Soviet public space and his leadership was celebrated across all artistic mediums, including painting, posters, statuary, theatre, film, literature, poetry, porcelain, textiles and song. The personality cult of Stalin was manufactured in a manner not dissimilar to branding to create a charismatic persona for the leader and to mobilise the large and ethnically diverse Soviet population to achieve the goals of modernisation, industrialisation and the world’s first communist society. One of the primary techniques employed by Soviet political propagandists of the Stalinist era to confer legitimacy on Stalin’s leadership was to visually link Stalin’s image with that of Lenin. Over the decades of Stalin’s leadership, approximately one-third of political posters which feature the image of Stalin, juxtapose this image with that of Lenin.1 This occurs in a number of ways throughout the entire period of Stalin’s leadership and subtle variations in the way in which this was done reflect the evolution of the Stalin cult over time.

Linking Stalin and Lenin in propaganda established a lineage for Stalin as Lenin’s best disciple, allowing him to partake of Lenin’s charisma and to build his cult on the foundations of the Lenin cult. Within the context of the struggle for succession which occurred after Lenin’s death, the personality cult of Lenin became a vehicle to power and legitimacy. Historian Robert Tucker makes the purpose of this strategy clear: ‘Stalin followed the strategy of cult building via the assertion of Lenin’s infallibility. By making the party’s

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1 The posters discussed here study have been sourced primarily from the poster archives at the Russian State Library in Moscow. The Russian State Library contains over 400,000 posters and in theory at least, every poster produced under the Soviet regime had to be registered with, and have a poster forwarded to, the Russian State Library (or Lenin Library, as it was known during the Soviet years). Approximately 500 posters were selected from the collection for examination and approximately 300 of them were found to contain an image of Stalin. This sampling, while comparatively small, was not random. The posters are stored in folios which each span a few years, and which are arranged thematically. It was thus possible to target folders which were most likely to yield a high proportion of posters which contained images of Stalin. In addition to the poster collection at the Russian State Library, the poster collection at the Museum of Contemporary History in Moscow was also accessed, yielding 43 posters which contained an image of Stalin, although there was considerable overlap with those contained in the State Library collection. Additional posters meeting the criteria for this research were found in a number of books which contained Soviet poster collections, made reference to Soviet posters, or were monographs devoted to the most well-known Soviet poster artists. Of the 389 posters which comprise my sample of posters with images of Stalin, he appears with an image of Lenin in 138 posters.
previous **vozhd**

an iconographic figure beyond criticism, Stalin... implicitly nominated the successor-**vozhd** for similar treatment.' (Tucker 1992: 154). Philip Pomper emphasises the quasi-religious nature of Stalin’s relationship to Lenin, whilst suggesting also that this relationship was politically expedient for Stalin: ‘Stalin, of course, had made himself high priest of the Lenin cult and had sustained it to the very end.’ (Pomper 1978: 28).

The appeal to an established lineage is a phenomenon which occurs throughout the history of charismatic leadership, and is often perpetrated through the use of a variety of artistic media. The ‘logo’ of Darius the Great, king of the Persian Achaemenid Empire, in which he was depicted as an archer was used by his successors for generations after his death, as was Alexander the Great’s portrait on coinage. Caesar Augustus linked himself firmly to the deified Julius Caesar by fostering the cult and promoting the apotheosis of Julius Caesar. Maximilian I asserted a visual and genealogical lineage from the Caesars, as well as Constantine, the Trojans, the Merovingians, and Noah, as can be seen in the monumental woodcut, *The Triumphant Arch* by Albrecht Dürer; and Napoleon I robed himself in the regalia of a Roman emperor in Ingres’ painting *Napoleon on his Imperial Throne*.

Stalin gained control of the Politburo at the Fifteenth Party Congress on 18 December 1927 demonstrating that not only had he been a close companion and confidant of Lenin, but that he had always supported his political positions and was a devoted adherent to his dogma: ‘As for myself, I am just a pupil of Lenin's, and the aim of my life is to be a worthy pupil of his.’ (Stalin 1931).

The first appearances of Stalin with Lenin in a poster occur in the year 1930. In a poster promoting the value of political education, ‘Komsomol political education system mid-Volga organization V.L.K.S.M for 1930-31’ (fig. 1), Lenin and Stalin appear outlined in a sacral red Bolshevik aura on either side of the poster, although as a full-length figure, Lenin is larger and therefore more prominent than the smaller bust of Stalin. Quotations from both leaders are featured, along with the words of Engels, and their authoritative texts are depicted around the page.

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**Leader**

**1517, Woodblock print, 295 cm x 357 cm**

**1806, Musée du Louvre, Paris.**

**In 1924 Stalin gave a series of lectures at the Sverdlov University, which were then published as the book *The Foundations of Leninism*. In this ambitious book Stalin attempted to comprehensively systematise Lenin’s teachings across a broad spectrum of subject areas, supporting his assertions with large numbers of illustrative quotes from Lenin. While other members of the Party leadership had delivered talks and papers on aspects of Leninism, none had attempted such comprehensive coverage, and Stalin’s book became the most influential writing on Leninism at the time.**
The other 1930 poster in which Lenin and Stalin appear together is a well-known poster by Gustav Klutsis in which the giant heads of the two leaders dwarf montaged scenes of socialist construction. Stalin’s head is only half visible and literally in Lenin’s shadow. ‘Under the Lenin Banner for Socialist Construction’ (fig.2.) is the first of Klutsis’ posters which includes Stalin, but it is Lenin, already dead for six years, who is seen to be at the forefront of the movement towards construction and industrial expansion. Stalin appears behind, but literally merged, with Lenin and the overt message is that Stalin, the disciple of the great master, is emerging as the ‘Lenin of today’. In her examination of mythopoetic elements in memories of Stalin, Natalia Skradol posits that the transfer of special characteristics from one great man to his successor can only be accomplished when there is a moment of physical contact between the two (Skradol 2009: 34):

‘…allegorised either as an act of midwifery on the part of Stalin, or as a smooth continuation of a most intimate co-existence with each man being an extension of the other, punctuated by death. Physical contact is indispensable for the sacred royal unction ritual, as a figure endowed with divine authority performs the marking of the new ruler.’
By merging Lenin and Stalin into one conjoined face, Klutsis employs mythic symbolism to denote the transfer of power and conferring of legitimacy from Lenin to Stalin.6

Klutsis had been a member of the Latvian rifle guard which formed Lenin’s personal bodyguard during the days of the October Revolution, and had thus witnessed Lenin’s leadership at close range. He had a strong personal allegiance to Lenin7 and was fully committed to employing his artistic talent in service of the goals of the regime,8 securing many commissions for posters during the early to mid-1930s. One is tempted to speculate that, by placing Stalin so deeply in Lenin’s shadow, Klutsis was asserting the unique qualities

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6 In Chiaureli’s 1946 movie Klyatva (The Oath), Lenin’s spirit is transferred to Stalin while he sits on a park bench in Gor’kii. The movie can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dlP5g_UTrY.

7 In her monograph on Klutsis and Kulagina Margarita Tupitsyn notes that Klutsis’s experiments in applying formalist methodology to socio-political iconography always included an image of Lenin, as he was the figure that Klutsis most admired (Tupitsyn 2004:19).

8 In his autobiography Klutsis summed up his role as an artist of the revolution: ‘My task was to make the revolutionary struggle of the working class and Soviet reality the contents of my creative output, converting it into artistic images comprehensible to the masses […] Before me was the challenge to transform the poster, the book, the illustration, the postcard into mass conductors of Party slogans.’ (Klutsis quoted in Lodder 2011: 168)
of Lenin as Bolshevik leader. Weight is given to this interpretation by Margarita Tupitsyn’s assertions that the exaggerated claims made in propaganda for Stalin’s fiftieth birthday celebrations⁹ would have ‘infringed on Klutsis’ consciousness’ due to his personal experiences with Lenin (Tupitsyn: 61). It is interesting to note that at some time between 21 September 1930 and 31 August 1931, Klutsis was expelled from the Party, accused of not paying member’s dues for five months, of distancing himself from the Party’s work, and of exhibiting ‘political illiteracy’. After repenting his mistakes, Klutsis was immediately reinstated (Tupitsyn: 188).

Between 1930 and 1934 Stalin appeared with Lenin in between a quarter and a third of all Stalin posters. Lenin is usually depicted in an apotheosised form, providing inspiration on a banner,¹⁰ or as an outlined head,¹¹ although Lenin is also sometimes shown as ‘solid’ and substantial as in a 1932 poster by Klutsis, ‘October to the World’ (fig.3.).

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⁹ These included claims that Stalin was ‘the Great Leader – the organizer of the October Revolution, the creator of the Red Army, and distinguished military commander … leader of the world proletariat, and the great strategist of the Five-Year Plan.’ (Geller, Nekrich 1982: 246).

¹⁰ As in Viktor Deni’s ‘With the banner of Lenin’, 1931.

¹¹ As in Rumiantsev’s ‘Shock work at the machine is combined with the study of Marxist-Leninist theory,’ 1931.
Here Lenin appears as the great teacher of Stalin, showing him the way forward to the future with outstretched arm, the iconic pose which came to be associated with Lenin. Although Lenin has seniority as the teacher or guide, both men are differentiated from all other figures in the poster, depicted as titans in the urban industrial landscape, dwarfing the scenes of construction behind them, and the rows of workers like ants beneath them. In fact, Stalin appears to be crushing the tiny workers beneath his feet, while the shadowy figures of people on the hill in front of Lenin, could almost be fleeing the scene.

In 1933 there was a sudden leap in the number of images of Stalin in posters, coinciding with an increase in his appearances in the newspaper Pravda. On 7 November 1933 the foreign correspondent Eugene Lyons walked down Gork’ii Street in Moscow, counting the portrait posters of Lenin and Stalin as he went. Images of Stalin outnumbered images of Lenin, 103 to fifty-eight (Lyons 1935: 140-41).\textsuperscript{12} The idea of the banner of Lenin came to prominence, with Stalin invoking the victorious and inspirational banner of Lenin in three posters of 1933, all of which featured the concluding quotation from Stalin’s lengthy and detailed political report to the Sixteenth Congress of the CPSU(b) on 27 June 1930.\textsuperscript{13} Two of the best known names in Soviet graphic art, Gustav Klutsis and Viktor Deni, were contracted to produce posters on this theme, while the third, Iraklii Toidze, was in the early years of a highly successful graphic arts career. Deni’s poster (fig.4.) features sketches of the head of Lenin, and head and neck of Stalin, almost equal in size, on either side of a radio transmitter which broadcasts the words ‘Long live the proletariat revolution of the whole world’ set against a plain backdrop. Lenin’s head, sketched in faint tones, seems to float in the picture plane, while Stalin, anchored by his neck and collar and sketched in darker tones, casts a shadow and appears more solid. Although it is Lenin’s inspiration which is invoked in the text, it is Stalin who invokes it as the truest disciple and interpreter of Leninism.

\textsuperscript{12} It must be borne in mind that this figure relates to the display of images, not the production of posters, and evidence from the current sample suggests that Stalin’s appearances with Lenin in posters maintained the same proportion of the total as in previous years.

\textsuperscript{13} ‘With the banner of Lenin we were victorious in the battle for the October Revolution./ With the banner of Lenin we were victorious in attaining decisive achievements in the struggle to build socialism./ With the same banner we will be victorious in our proletarian revolution throughout the world./ Long live Leninism!’ This text appears on propaganda posters from as early as 1931.
Klutsis’ poster on the same theme (fig.5.) is dominated by the large curve of a red banner which hovers over the Soviet leaders. Lenin looms large and monolithic, cast in stone behind Stalin, who is larger than the other figures. While Stalin is singled out as worthy of extra attention, the poster makes clear that his firm foundation is Leninism. Toidze’s poster (fig.6.) juxtaposes the present and the past with Stalin adopting a static hand-in-pose behind a red podium. Arrayed behind him are the smiling Soviet people, male and female, of various nationalities and in the garb of various occupations, looking to the future. Behind them are three banners and behind these two historical scenes – the storming of the Winter Palace with Lenin atop the turret of a tank, urging the revolutionaries forward; and a smaller scene with a younger Stalin, mimicking Lenin’s pose and speaking on his behalf at the semi-legal Sixth Party Congress of August 1917 in Petrograd. Stalin is thus seen as Lenin’s right-hand man in the revolutionary years, and as the ‘Lenin of today’ in the 1930s.

14 Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Ordzhonikidze, Kalinin, Kirov, Kuibyshev, Kossior and Mikoian.
15 The publishing details on the poster misspell Toidze’s surname as ‘Taidze’, however the bottom right of the poster contains Toidze’s signature and can thus be safely attributed to him.
16 This significant Congress was held semi-legally between the February and October Revolutions. Lenin was in exile and unable to attend, and Stalin delivered the Political Report on behalf of the Bolshevik Party.
Figure 5: Gustav Klutsis, With the banner of Lenin we were victorious in the battle for the October Revolution./ With the banner of Lenin we were victorious in attaining decisive achievements in the struggle to build socialism./ With the same banner we will be victorious in our proletarian revolution throughout the world, 1933; Publisher: Izogiz; Edition: 300,000; Size: 62 x 88 cm; Location: Russian State Library, Moscow

Figure 6: Irakli Toidze, With the banner of Lenin we were victorious in the battle for the October Revolution./ With the banner of Lenin we were victorious in attaining decisive achievements in the struggle to build socialism./ With the same banner we will be victorious in our proletarian revolution throughout the world, 1933; Publisher: Izogiz, Moscow and Leningrad; Edition: 300,1000; Size: 62 x 94, 82 x 110 cm; Location: Russian State Library, Moscow
Historian Bernice Rosenthal divides the Stalin cult into three distinct periods. In the first period, until 1933, the Lenin cult was used to position Stalin as Lenin’s heir; in the second period, between 1933 and 1936, Stalin was elevated above the Party; and it is only in the final stage, from 1936 to 1953, that Stalin came to be spoken of in superhuman terms (Rosenthal 2002: 374). Close examination of the propaganda posters of the time lends support to much of this theory, although it is argued here that Stalin took pains throughout the entire period of his leadership to emphasise his role as Lenin’s heir. Before 1933, he was not consistently distinguished from his Politburo colleagues, except on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday. From 1933 onward, Stalin was increasingly singled out for special accolades, although he still often appeared alongside Politburo colleagues. During these years, when Stalin appeared with Lenin, they usually inhabited different realms, Stalin being earthbound, while Lenin was presented in apotheosised form. It was only in 1936 that Stalin was referred to in superhuman terms and from 1937 posters evidence an increased tendency to treat the images of Stalin and Lenin in a similar manner.

One of the most interesting pairings of Lenin and Stalin of 1937 occurs in Toidze’s ‘I am pleased and happy to know how our people fought and how they have achieved a world-historic victory. I am pleased and happy to know that the blood freely shed by our people, was not in vain, that it has produced results! I.Stalin’ (fig.7.). The top half of the poster deals with the present in 1937. Stalin stands behind a raised podium in front of a banner with a bas-relief of Lenin’s head enclosed in a medallion. Below Stalin is a crowd of citizens all paying tribute, including a young child, symbol of the new nation; an old man holding a bound copy of the 1936 Stalin constitution; an aviator; and in the centre, elevated above the others but below Stalin, is the Rodina, symbol of the Motherland, bearing aloft a cornucopia of harvest. Stalin reciprocates the tribute paid to him by applauding the crowd. 1937, the year of the great purge, is depicted as a year of success and abundance, and Lenin appears as a kind of Soviet saint or deity whose presence confers approval upon the scene below.
The middle of the poster contains the poster caption, a quotation from Stalin from the Report on the Draft Constitution of the U.S.S.R. The bottom of the poster depicts a scene from the Bolsheviks’ mythic past. Lenin and a younger Stalin stand side by side, towering over, but separated from, the troops rushing into action during the Civil War. While the scene at the top is static and the red banner does not move, all but Lenin and Stalin are in motion in the scene below, cavalry surging forward and the banner billowing in the wind. Muscles ripple and strain, sabres are raised and pistols cocked, clouds swirl in the sky and a beam of light falls upon the head of the lead horse, making it resemble a unicorn, and endowing the scene with a sense of the mythic or supernatural. Stalin and Lenin are shown here as equals, although Lenin points the way forward to victory. While Lenin is apotheosised in the part of the poster which deals with the present day, the two are depicted as co-leaders of the Party during the Revolution and Civil War.

In 1938 and 1939, Stalin’s appearances with Lenin remained at around thirty-four percent and twenty-four percent respectively of total Stalin posters. Stalin appears on equal footing with Lenin in two 1938 posters by Dmitri Moor and Sergei Sen’kin which publicise the agricultural act (fig.8) and celebrate the might of the Red Army (fig.9). In her discussion

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of the giant photographic portraits of Lenin and Stalin which were hung in Red Square on Soviet holidays, Dawn Ades remarks a phenomenon which is equally applicable to these smaller posters by Moor and Sen’kin. The arrangement of Lenin and Stalin on either side of a bloc of text is directly reminiscent of the Russian Orthodox icon, and invites comparison with Saints Peter and Paul, and particularly Saints John Chrysostom and Basil, who are (Ades 1995: 251):

‘normally depicted facing inward towards each other and with the holy texts unfolding between them, as in a sixteenth-century Novgorod icon in the Russian Museum. The modern variant shows the two Soviet leader-saints, now both figuratively and literally in command of the Word…’

Lenin is always situated to the viewer’s left. This not only associates him with ‘the past,’ but also signifies sacrality. As historian Jan Plamper points out in his discussion of imagery in Pravda, the upper left quarter of the front page was always especially sacred (Plamper 2012: 40). When Stalin is pictured with Voroshilov or Molotov, it is his image which occupies the upper left corner.

Figure 8: Dmitrii Moor and Sergei Sen’kin, The USSR Is the Country of the Largest Socialist Agriculture in the World, 1938; Location: http://sovietart.me/posters/author/Moor_D._S./14
In 1940, Stalin appears with Lenin in only twenty-five percent of the total Stalin posters. In one of these posters, Lenin is only visible as a face on a tiny processional barrier in an indistinct crowd while the profile of Stalin dominates the poster, and in another he appears in the form of the Order of Lenin which sits like a stamp of approval over a schematic map of the new reconstruction planned for Tashkent’s transformation into a cultured city. Another 1940 poster from Tashkent by Vladimir Kaidalov quotes from Stalin’s funerary oath to Lenin on 26 January 1924: ‘Departing from us, Comrade Lenin urged us to strengthen and extend the union republics. We swear to you, Comrade Lenin, that we will fulfil with honour your behest’ (fig.10.). A giant head of Lenin sits above the Kremlin in a crimson sky. Beneath it, a crowd of people in Uzbek dress carry large red banners and look up at Stalin who stands at the podium, arm raised to swear his oath. The portion of Stalin’s oath that is quoted on the poster refers to socialist work to be undertaken in the union republics, of which Uzbekistan was one. In 1940, Tashkent was in the early stages of a total reconstruction which would see a ‘cultured city’ rise out of the demolition of a city of single-storey mud-brick houses, the opening of the Tashkent canal, and the opening of the childrens’ railway. Plans to refashion

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21 N. Zhukov, ‘Thank you Comrade Stalin for our happy life’, 1940.
22 B. Zhukov, ‘We are the birthplace of the most happy, daring, all-powerful people, where grey-haired old men are cheerful, where there is the carefree laughter of children. (From the welcome to the builders of BFK by Comrade Stalin)’, 1940.
the city’s inhabitants into high-rise dwellers were meeting with resistance, and this poster calls upon the apotheosised Lenin to legitimate Stalin’s plan, whilst also showing Stalin to be a man of his word.

With the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War in 1941, there was a sharp decline in the number of posters produced which contained an image of Stalin, however, appearances with Lenin jumped to fifty percent and stayed roughly at this level until 1946, the year in which Stalin was glorified as responsible for victory in the war. It is not unexpected that in the disastrous early years of the war, with Stalin’s decision-making ability called into question, he may have elected to keep a low public profile, both in terms of public appearances and in terms of propaganda images, and also that the figure of Lenin may have been more frequently paired with Stalin to confer legitimacy. What is surprising is that in 1946, when Stalin’s legitimacy as leader in his own right was highest, he appeared with Lenin in fifty-five percent of posters.

The posters of the war years express mixed trends, with the images of Stalin and Lenin differentiated in terms of treatment in fourteen posters between 1941 and 1945 (inclusive); and Stalin and Lenin treated in similar or identical fashion in thirteen posters during the same period. Lenin continued to be invoked as a protective banner, while Stalin’s leadership in the
present was stressed. Typical of this treatment is Petr Golub’s 1945 poster ‘Under the banner of Lenin, under the leadership of Stalin - forward to new victories!’ (fig.11.). Lenin appears as a bas-relief enclosed in a medallion on a gold-fringed red banner, while Stalin stands to attention in his Marshal’s uniform in the foreground, before a pink-tinged Kremlin which appears to rise out of the mist in the manner of an enchanted castle. Victory in the war has recently been attained and it is Stalin’s leadership that will continue the momentum to new victories of socialism. In other instances, Lenin and Stalin appear on the banner together and the banner is invoked in both their names as the banner of ‘Lenin-Stalin’, almost as if they form one entity (similar to Marx-Engels), an entity which represents the Party, the State and Soviet power.

![Poster](image)

**Figure 12: Petr Golub, Under the banner of Lenin, under the leadership of Stalin - forward to new victories!, 1945; Publisher: Iskusstvo; Edition: 200,000; Size: 85.5 x 61 cm; Location: Russian State Library, Moscow**

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23 Babitskii, 'Under the leadership of Comrade Stalin, forward to complete victory over our foe!', 1944 and M. Kaprenko, 'Under the banner of Lenin, under the leadership of Stalin - forward to the complete defeat of the German invaders!', 1944.

24 A.V. Vasil’ev and S.F. Yanevich, 'Under the banner of Lenin-Stalin we were victorious in the great October Socialist Revolution. Under the banner of Lenin-Stalin we will be victorious in the Great Patriotic War. Raise the banner of Lenin-Stalin. It carries us to victory', 1941; Serov, 'Long live the 25th anniversary of the Leninist-Stalinist Komsomol', 1943 and N. Zhukov and V. Klimashin, 'For the Soviet fatherland the sons of all the peoples of the Soviet Union go into battle. Long live the Red Army - the army of brotherhood and friendship of the peoples of the USSR! Under the banner of Lenin-Stalin forward to the west!', 1943.
Between 1947 and 1950 Stalin’s appearances with Lenin in posters ranged between about thirty and fifty percent. In a strikingly simple poster of 1949 by L. Stenberg (fig.12), Stalin’s discipleship to Lenin is emphasised in the poster caption, while his equality of status with Lenin is reinforced visually. The image is dominated by an undulating banner in rich red tones. At the top of the banner, Stalin and Lenin appear in golden bas-relief profile. At the bottom of the banner, also in gold, are a sprig of oak leaves, and one of laurel leaves, both symbols of heroism, strength and victory. The caption in large gold letters fills most of the poster: ‘The banner of Lenin, the party's banner is raised high and carried on by Stalin - the disciple of Lenin, the best son of the Bolshevik Party, and a worthy successor and the great continuer of the work of Lenin’.

After 1950 the overall number of posters of Stalin declined. While in most years of his reign Stalin appeared in posters as a leader in his own right in more than half of the political posters which contain his image, the use of an image of Lenin to legitimate Stalin’s leadership constituted a major and consistent theme in propaganda posters. Stalin had come to power by demonstrating that he was the truest disciple of the immortalised Lenin, and continued to emphasise his role as Lenin’s student and disciple throughout his leadership. Propaganda images portrayed Stalin as having been an equal leader of the October Revolution and Civil
War, and as receiving Lenin’s blessing and guidance from beyond the grave. After 1936, despite being still very much alive, Stalin was often apotheosised in posters by placing him in the sky, on banners and friezes, as an icon on the wall or in a procession, or as a statue, employing similar visual devices to those used to depict Lenin. Stalin thus moved from being blessed by Lenin as a worthy successor to manifesting sacrality in his own persona. When Stalin died in 1953, for many it seemed as if they were witnessing the death of God.25

25 Writer Ilya Ehrenburg reflected: ‘The medical record mentioned leucocytes, collapse, arrhythmia. And we had long forgotten that Stalin was a human being. He had become an all-powerful and mysterious God. And then God died from a cerebral haemorrhage. That was unbelievable.... I did not feel sorry for the God who died of a stroke at the age of seventy-three, as if he were not a God, but a mere mortal, but I felt fear about what was to come.’ (Ehrenburg 2004: 147).
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KEY WORDS

Soviet posters, Stalinist posters, Stalin and Lenin, Stalin, Soviet art, Soviet propaganda