Documents

Considering the Evidence: Experiencing Stalinism

For the Soviet Union, the formative period in establishing communism encompassed the years of Joseph Stalin's rule (1929–1953). Born in Georgia in 1878 rather than in Russia itself, the young Stalin grew up with a brutal and abusive father, trained for the priesthood as a young man, but slowly gravitated toward the emerging revolutionary movement of the time. He subsequently joined the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, though he played only a modest role in the Russian Revolution of 1917. After Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin rose to the dominant position in the Communist Party amid a long and bitter struggle among the Bolsheviks. By 1929 he had consolidated his authority and exercised enormous personal power until his death in 1953.

To Stalin and the Soviet leadership, the 1930s was a time of "building socialism," that is, creating the modern, abundant, and just society that would replace an outdated, corrupt, and exploitative capitalism. Undertaking that gigantic task meant social upheaval on an enormous scale, offering undreamed-of opportunities for some and disruption and trauma beyond imagination for others. The documents that follow allow us to see something of the Stalinist vision for the country as well as to gain some insight into the lives of ordinary people—peasants, workers, women, ethnic minorities, the young, and the upwardly mobile—as they experienced what scholars have come to call simply "Stalinism."

Document 22.1

Stalin on Stalinism

In January 1933, Stalin appeared before a group of high-ranking party officials to give a report on the achievements of the country's first five-year plan for overall development. The years encompassed by that plan, roughly 1928–1932, coincided with Stalin's rise to the position of supreme leader within the governing Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

- What larger goals for the country underlay Stalin's report? Why did he feel those goals had to be achieved so rapidly?

- To what indications of success did Stalin point? Which of these claims do you find most/least credible?
- What criticisms of Stalin's policies can you infer from the document?
- What do you think Stalin meant when he referred to the "world-wide historic significance" of the Soviet Union's achievement? Keep in mind what was happening in the capitalist world at the time.

Joseph Stalin

The Results of the First Five-Year Plan

1933

The fundamental task of the five-year plan was to convert the U.S.S.R. from an agrarian and weak country, dependent upon the caprices of the capitalist countries, into an industrial and powerful country, fully self-reliant and independent of the caprices of world capitalism,... to completely oust the capitalist elements, to widen the front of socialist forms of economy, and to create the economic basis for the abolition of classes in the U.S.S.R., for the building of a socialist society....

The fundamental task of the five-year plan was to transfer small and scattered agriculture on to the lines of large-scale collective farming, so as to ensure the economic basis of socialism in the countryside....

[O]nly a modern large-scale industry... can serve as a real and reliable foundation for the Soviet regime....

Let us pass now to the results of the fulfillment of the five-year plan....

We did not have an iron and steel industry, the basis for the industrialization of the country. Now we have one.

[Stalin follows with a long list of new industries developed during the first five-year plan: tractors, automobiles, machine tools, chemicals, agricultural machinery, electric power, oil and coal, metals.]

And we have not only created these new great industries, but have created them on a scale and in dimensions that eclipse... European industry.

And as a result of all this the capitalist elements have been completely and irrevocably ousted from industry, and socialist industry has become the sole form of industry in the U.S.S.R....

Finally, as a result of all this the Soviet Union has been converted from a weak country, unprepared for defense, into a country mighty in defense..., a country capable of producing on a mass scale all modern means of defense and of equipping its army with them in the event of an attack from abroad.

We are told: This is all very well; many new factories have been built, and the foundations for industrialization have been laid; but it would have been far better... to produce more cotton fabrics, shoes, clothing, and other goods for mass consumption.... Then we would now have more cotton fabrics, shoes, and clothing. But we would not have a tractor industry or an automobile industry; we would not have anything like a big iron and steel industry; we would not have metal for the manufacture of machinery—and we would remain unarmed while encircled by capitalist countries armed with modern technique....

It was necessary to urge forward a country which was a hundred years behindhand and which was faced with mortal danger because of its backwardness....

The five-year plan in the sphere of agriculture was a five-year plan of collectivization.... [I]t was

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Source: Joseph Stalin, "The Results of the First Five-Year Plan," *Pravda*, January 10, 1933.

necessary in addition to industrialization, to pass from small, individual peasant farming to... large collective farms, equipped with all the modern implements of highly developed agriculture, and to cover unoccupied land with model state farms....

The Party has succeeded in routing the kulaks° as a class, although they have not yet been dealt the final blow; the laboring peasants have been emancipated from kulak bondage and exploitation, and the Soviet regime has been given a firm economic basis in the countryside, the basis of collective farming.

In our country, the workers have long forgotten unemployment.... Look at the capitalist countries: what horrors result there from unemployment! There are now no less than 30–40 million unemployed in those countries....

The same thing must be said of the peasants.... It has brought them into the collective farms and placed them in a secure position. It has thus eliminated the possibility of the differentiation of the peasantry into exploiters—kulaks—and exploited—poor peasants—and abolished destitution in the countryside.... Now the peasant is in a position of security, a member of a collective farm which has at its disposal tractors, agricultural machinery, seed funds, reserve funds....

[W]e have achieved such important successes as to evoke admiration among the working class all over the world; we have achieved a victory that is truly of world-wide historic significance.

°**kulaks:** relatively rich peasants.

Document 22.2

Living through Collectivization

For Russian peasants, and those of other nationalities as well, the chief experience of Stalinism was that of collectivization—the enforced bringing together of many small-scale family farms into much larger collective farms called *kolhozy*. Thus private ownership of land was largely ended, except for some small plots, which peasants could till individually. That process generally began with the arrival of outside "agitators" or Community Party officials who sought to persuade, or if necessary to force, the villagers to enter the *kolhoz*. They divided peasants (*muzhiks*) into class categories: rich peasants (*kulaks*) were to be excluded from the collective farms as incipient capitalists; poor (*bedniak*) and middle (*seredniak*) peasants were expected to join.

One witness to this process was Maurice Hindus, a Russian-born American writer who returned to his country of origin in 1929, when Soviet collectivization was beginning in earnest. There he roamed on foot around the countryside, recording conversations with those he met. The extract that follows begins with a letter he received from "Nadya," a young activist who was among many sent to the rural areas to encourage, or enforce, collectivization. Then Hindus records a discussion between peasants objecting to collectivization and an "agitator," like Nadya, seeking to convince them of its benefits.

- How do Nadya and the agitator understand collectivization and their role in this process? Why do they believe that it was so critical to building socialism?

- How do village peasants view collectivization? On what grounds do they object to it? How might they view the role of the agitators?
- How did the peasants understand themselves and their village community? How did they respond to the communists' insistence on defining them in rigid class terms? Why do you think they finally entered the collective farms?
- Why were Stalin and the Communist Party so insistent on destroying the *kulaks*?

Maurice Hindus

Red Bread

1931

Nadya Speaks

I am off in villages with a group of other brigadiers organizing *kolhozy*. It is a tremendous job, but we are making amazing progress. It would do you worlds of good to be with us and watch us draw the stubborn peasant into collectivization. Contrary to all your affirmations and prophecies, our *muzhik* is yielding to persuasion. He is joining the *kolhozy*, and I am confident that in time not a peasant will remain on his own land. We shall yet smash the last vestiges of capitalism and forever rid ourselves of exploitation. Come, join us; see with your own eyes what is happening, how we are rebuilding the Russian villages. The very air here is afire with a new spirit and a new energy.

Nadya

The Peasants Speak

"There was a time,"... began Lukyan, who had been a blacksmith,..."when we were just neighbors in this village. We quarreled, we fooled, sometimes we cheated one another. But we were neighbors. Now we are *bedniaks*, *seredniaks*, *koolacks*.° I am a *seredniak*, Boris here is a *bedniak*, and Nisko is a *koolack*, and we are supposed to have a class war—pull each other's hair or tickle each other on the toes, eh? One against the other, you understand?...

"But it is other things that worry us," continued the flat-faced *muzhik*..., "it is the *kolhoz*. That, citizen, is a serious matter—the most serious we have ever encountered. Who ever heard of such a thing—to give up our land and our cows and our horses and our tools and our farm buildings, to work all the time and divide everything with others? Nowadays members of the same family get in each other's way and quarrel and fight, and here we, strangers, are supposed to be like one family. Can we—dark, beastly *muzhiks*—make a go of it without scratching each other's faces, pulling each other's hair or hurling stones at one another?"...

"We won't even be sure," someone else continued the lament, "of having enough bread to eat. Now, however poor we may be, we have our own rye and our own potatoes and our own cucumbers and our own milk. We know we won't starve. But in the *kolhoz*, no more potatoes of our own, no more anything of our own. Everything will be rationed out by orders; we shall be like mere *batraks*° on the landlord's estates in the old days. Serfdom—that is what it is—and who wants to be a serf?"...

°**koolacks:** variant spelling of "kulaks."

°**batraks:** hired help.

Source: Maurice Hindus, *Red Bread: Collectivization in a Russian Village* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 1, 22–34.

"Dark-minded beasts we may be," wailed another *muzhik*. . . . "We are not learned; we are not wise. But a little self-respect we have, and we like the feeling of independence. Today we feel like working, and we work; tomorrow we feel like lying down, and we lie down; the next day we feel like going to town, and we go to town. We do as we please. But in the *kolhoz*, brother, it is do-as-you-are-told, like a horse—go this way and that, and don't dare turn off the road or you get it hard, a stroke or two of the whip on bare flesh. . . . We'll just wither away on the socialist farm, like grass torn out by the roots." . . .

The Communist Party Official Speaks

At this point a new visitor arrived, a tall youth, in boots, in a black blouse and with a shaved head. . . . A stranger in the village, he was the organizer of the *kolhoz*, therefore a person of stern importance. . . .

"Everything is possible, grandfather, if we all pool our resources and our powers together," replied the visitor.

More laughter and more derisive comment. . . .

"Tell me, you wretched people, what hope is there for you if you remain on individual pieces of land? Think, and don't interrupt. . . . From year to year as you increase in population you divide and subdivide your strips of land. You cannot even use machinery on your land because no machine man ever made could stand the rough ridges that the strip system creates. You will have to work in your own old way and stew in your old misery. Don't you see that under your present system there is nothing ahead of you but ruin and starvation? . . . You do not think of a future, of ten, twenty, a hundred years from now, and we do. That's the difference between you and us. The coming generations mean nothing to you. Else you would see a real deliverance in the *kolhoz*, where you will work with machinery in a modern organized way, with the best seeds obtainable and under the direction of experts. . . . Isn't it about time you stopped thinking each one for himself, for his own piggish hide? You *koolacks* of course will never become reconciled to a new order. You love to fatten on other people's blood. But we know how to deal with you. We'll wipe you off the face of the earth, even as we have the capitalists in the city. Make no mistake about our intentions and our powers. We shan't allow you to profit from the weakness of the *bedniak*. And we shan't allow you to poison his mind, either! Enough. But the others here—you *bedniaks* and you *seredniaks*—what have you gained from this stiff-necked individualism of yours? What? Look at yourselves, at your homes—mud, squalor, fleas, bedbugs, cockroaches, *lapti*.° Are you sorry to let these go? Oh, we know you *muzhiks*—too well. . . . You can whine eloquently and pitifully. . . . But we know you—you cannot fool us. We have grown hardened to your wails. Remember that. Cry all you want to, curse all you want to. You won't hurt us, and I warn you that we shan't desist. We shall continue our campaign for the *kolhozy* until we have won our goal and made you free citizens in a free land."

°**lapti:** cheap wooden shoes.

Document 22.3

Living through Industrialization

A second major feature of the Stalinist era was rapid state-controlled industrialization. "We are fifty to a hundred years behind the advanced countries," declared Stalin. "We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we shall do it or we shall go under." During the 1930s, that enormous process brought huge numbers of peasants from the countryside to the cities, sent many of them to new and distant industrial sites such as Magnitogorsk—a huge new iron and

steel enterprise—and thrust millions into recently established technical institutes where they learned new skills and nurtured new ambitions. The brief excerpts in Document 22.3 disclose the voices of some of these workers as they celebrated the new possibilities and lamented the disappointments and injustices of Stalinist industrialization. These sources come from letters written to newspapers or to high government officials, from private letters and diaries, or from reports filed by party officials based on what they had heard in the factories.

- In what respects might Soviet workers have benefited from Stalinist industrialization?
- What criticisms were voiced in these extracts? Do they represent fundamental opposition to the idea of socialism or disappointments in how it was implemented?
- Which of these selections do you find most credible?
- Through its control of education and the media, the Stalinist regime sought to instill a single view of the world in its citizens. Based on these selections, to what extent had they succeeded or failed?

Personal Accounts of Soviet Industrialization

1930s

Letter in a Newspaper from a Tatar Electrician

I am a Tatar.° Before October, in old tsarist Russia, we weren't even considered people. We couldn't even dream about education, or getting a job in a state enterprise. And now I'm a citizen of the USSR. Like all citizens, I have the right to a job, to education, to leisure. I can elect and be elected to the soviet [legislative council]. Is this not an indication of the supreme achievements of our country?...

Two years ago I worked as the chairman of a village soviet in the Tatar republic. I was the first person there to enter the kolhoz and then I led the collectivization campaign. Collective farming is flourishing with each year in the Tatar republic.

In 1931 I came to Magnitogorsk. From a common laborer I have turned into a skilled worker. I was elected a member of the city soviet. As a deputy, every day I receive workers who have questions or need help. I listen to each one like to my own brother, and try to do what is necessary to make each one satisfied.

I live in a country where one feels like living and learning. And if the enemy should attack this country, I will sacrifice my life in order to destroy the enemy and save my country.

Newspaper Commentary by an Engineer, 1938

Soon it will be seven years that I'm working in Magnitogorsk [a huge new iron and steel enterprise]. With my own eyes I've seen the pulsating,

°**Tatar:** a Turkic ethnic group.

Source: First and second selections: Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 221–22, 349–50; third through seventh selections: Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 39, 72, 134–35, 139, 173–74.

creative life of the builders of the Magnitogorsk giant. I myself have taken an active part in this construction with great enthusiasm. Our joy was great when we obtained the first Magnitogorsk steel from the wonderful open-hearth ovens. At the time there was no greater happiness for me than working in the open-hearth shop.... Here I enriched my theoretical knowledge and picked up practical habits... of work. Here as well I grew politically, acquired good experience in public-political work. I came to Magnitogorsk nonparty. The party organization... accepted me into a group of sympathizers. Not long ago I entered the ranks of the Leninist-Stalinist [communist] party.... I love my hometown Magnitka with all my heart. I consider my work at the Magnitogorsk factory to be a special honor and high trust shown to me, a Soviet engineer, by the country.

Letter to a Soviet Official from a Worker, 1938

In fact, there's been twenty years of our [Soviet] power. Fifteen to sixteen of these have been peaceful construction.... The people struggled with zeal, overcame difficulties. Socialism has been built in the main. As we embark on the third five-year plan we shout at meetings, congresses, and in newspapers "Hurray, we have reached a happy, joyful life!" However, incidentally, if one is to be honest, those shouts are mechanical, made from habit, pumped by social organizations. The ordinary person makes such speeches like a street newspaper-seller. In fact, in his heart, when he comes home, this bawler, eulogist, will agree with his family, his wife who reproaches him that today she has been torturing herself in queues and did not get anything—there are no suits, no coats, no meat, no butter.

Letter from a Student to His Teacher, No Date

I worked at a factory for five years. Now I'll have to leave my studies at the institute. Who will study? Very talented Lomonosovs° and the sons of Soviet rulers, since they have the highest posts and are the best paid. In this way education will be available only to the highest strata (a sort of nobility), while for the lowest strata, the laboring people, the doors will be closed.

°**Lomonosovs:** i.e., brilliant students (Mikhal Lomonosov, 1711–1765, was a Russian scientist and writer).

Two Comments from Factory Workers Found in Soviet Archives, 1930s

What is there to say about the successes of Soviet power? It's lies. The newspapers cover up the real state of things. I am a worker, wear torn clothes, my four children go to school half-starving, in rags. I, an honest worker, am a visible example of what Soviet power has given the workers in the last twenty years.

How can we liquidate classes, if new classes have developed here, with the only difference being that they are not called classes? Now there are the same parasites who live at the expense of others. The worker produces and at the same time works for many people who live off him. From the example of our factory it is clear that there is a huge apparat of factory administrators, where idlers sit. There are many administrative workers who travel about in cars and get three to four times more than the worker. These people live in the best conditions and live at the expense of the labor of the working class.

Entry from a Worker's Diary, 1936

[T]he portraits of party leaders are now displayed the same way icons used to be: a round portrait framed and attached to a pole. Very convenient, hoist it onto your shoulder and you're on your way. And all these preparations are just like what people used to do before church holidays.... They had their own activists then, we have ours now. Different paths, the same old folderol.

Comment from an Anonymous Communist in Soviet Archives, 1938

Do you not think that comrade Stalin's name has begun to be very much abused? For example:

Stalin's people's commissar...
Stalin's canal...
Stalin's harvest...
Stalin's five-year plan...
Stalin's constitution...
Stalin's Komsomol°...

I could give a hundred other examples, even of little meaning. Everything is Stalin, Stalin, Stalin. You only have to listen to a radio program about our achievements, and every fifth or tenth word will be the name of comrade Stalin. In the end this sacred and beloved name—Stalin—may make so much noise in people's heads that it is very possible that it will have the opposite effect.

°**Komsomol:** youth organization.

Document 22.4

Living through the Terror

More than anything else, it was the Terror—sometimes called the Great Purges—that came to define Stalinism as a distinctive phenomenon in the history of Soviet communism (see p. 1038). Millions of people were caught up in this vast process of identifying and eliminating so-called "enemies of the people," many of them loyal communist citizens. The three selections that follow, all from women, provide a small taste of what it meant to experience arrest and interrogation, life in the camps of the Gulag, and the agony of those left behind waiting for loved ones who had vanished into the Terror.

- What might you infer from these selections about purposes of the Terror, the means by which it was implemented, and its likely outcomes, whether intended or not?
- Many innocent people who were arrested believed that others were guilty as charged, while in their own case a mistake had been made. How might you account for this widespread response to the Terror?
- In what different ways did people experience the Stalinist Terror? What do you think motivated each of these women who wrote about it?
- The extent of the Terror did not become widely known until well after Stalin's death in 1953. How do you imagine that knowledge was used by critics of communism? What impact might it have had on those who had ardently believed in the possibilities of a socialist future?
- How might you compare the Soviet terror and the Nazi Holocaust?

Personal Accounts of the Terror

1930s

[The first excerpt is from the memoirs of Irina Kakhovskaya, an ardent revolutionary, though not a party member, who was arrested in 1937 and spent seventeen years either in prison or in a labor camp. Here she describes her arrest and interrogation.]

Early on the morning of February 8, 1937, a large group of men appeared at the door of our quiet apartment in Ufa. We were shown a search warrant and warrants for our arrest. The search was carried out in violent, pogrom-like fashion and lasted all day. Books went pouring down from the shelves; letters and papers, out of boxes. They tapped the walls and, when they encountered hollow spots, removed the bricks. Everything was covered with dust and pieces of brick....

At the prison everything was aimed at breaking prisoners' spirits immediately, intimidating and stupefying them, making them feel that they were no longer human, but "enemies of the people," against whom everything was permitted. All elementary human needs were disregarded (light, air, food, rest, medical care, warmth, toilet facilities)....

In the tiny, damp, cold, half-lit cell were a bunk and a half bunk. The bunk was for the prisoner under investigation and on the half bunk, their legs drawn up, the voluntary victims, the informers from among the common criminals, huddled together. Their duty was never to let their neighbor out of their sight, never to let the politicals communicate with one another... and above all to prevent the politicals from committing suicide.... The air was fouled by the huge wooden latrine bucket....

The interrogation began on the very first night.... Using threats, endearments, promises and enigmatic hints, they tried to confuse, wear down, frighten, and break the will of each individual, who was kept totally isolated from his or her comrades.... Later stools were removed and the victim had to simply stand for hours on end....

At first it seemed that the whole thing was a tremendous and terrible misunderstanding, that it was our duty to clear it up.... But it soon became apparent that what was involved was deliberate ill will and the most cynical possible approach to the truth....

In the interrogation sessions, I now had several investigators in a row, and the "conveyor belt" questioning would go on for six days and nights on end.... Exhaustion reached the ultimate limit. The brain, inadequately supplied with blood, began to misfunction.... "Sign! We won't bother you anymore. We'll give you a quiet cell and a pillow and you can sleep...." That was how the investigator would try to bribe a person who was completely debilitated and stupefied from lack of sleep.

Each of us fought alone to keep an honest name and save the honor of our friends, although it would have been far easier to die than to endure this hell month after month. Nevertheless the accused remained strong in spirit and, apart from the unfortunate Mayorov, not one real revolutionary did they manage to break.

[The second selection comes from the memoirs of Eugenia Ginsberg, a woman who survived many years in perhaps the most notorious of the gulag camps—Kolyma in the frigid northeastern corner of the Soviet Union. In this selection, Ginsberg recounts an ordinary day in camps.]

The work to which I was assigned...went by the imposing name of "land improvement." We set out before dawn and marched in ranks of five for about three miles, to the accompaniment of shouts from the guards and bad language from the common criminals who were included in our party as a punish-

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Source: First selection: Irina Kakhovskaya, "Our Fate" in *An End to Silence*, translated by George Saunders and edited by Stephen Cohen (New York: Norton, 1982), 81–90; second selection: Eugenia Semyonovna Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 366–67; third selection: Anna Akhnatova, *Poems*, selected and translated by Lyn Coffin (New York: Norton, 1983), 82, 85.

ment for some misdeed or other. In time we reached a bleak, open field where our leader, another common criminal called Senka—a disgusting type who preyed on the other prisoners and made no bones about offering a pair of warm breeches in return for an hour's "fun and games"—handed out picks and iron spades with which we attacked the frozen soil of Kolyma until one in the afternoon. I cannot remember, and perhaps I never knew, the rational purpose this "improvement" was supposed to serve. I only remember the ferocious wind, the forty-degree frost, the appalling weight of the pick, and the wild, irregular thumping of one's heart. At one o'clock we were marched back for dinner. More stumbling in and out of snowdrifts, more shouts and threats from the guards whenever we fell out of line. Back in the camp we received our longed-for piece of bread and soup and were allowed half an hour in which to huddle around the stove in the hope of absorbing enough warmth to last us halfway back to the field. After we had toiled again with our picks and spades till late in the evening, Senka would come and survey what we had done and abuse us for not doing more. How could the assignment ever be completed if we spoiled women fulfilled only thirty percent of the norm?... Finally a night's rest, full of nightmares, and the dreaded banging of a hammer on an iron rail which was the signal for a new day to begin.

[The third selection is from the poetry of Anna Akhmatova, probably Russia's most famous modern poet. In this poem, "Requiem," Akhmatova writes passionately about endlessly standing in line, either seeking information about her imprisoned son or trying to send him parcels, an experience that paralleled that of countless other mothers and wives during the Terror.]

In the awful years of Yezhovian horror,° I spent seventeen months standing in line in front of various prisons in Leningrad. One day someone "recognized" me. Then a woman with blue lips, who was standing behind me, and who, of course, had never heard my name, came out of the stupor which typified all of us, and whispered into my ear (everyone there spoke only in whispers):

—Can you describe this?

And I said:

—I can.

Then something like a fleeting smile passed over what once had been her face.

For months I've filled the air with pleas,
Trying to call you back.
I've thrown myself at the hangman's knees,
You are my son and my rack....
I've seen how a face can fall like a leaf,
How, from under the lids, terror peeks,
I've seen how suffering and grief
Etches hieroglyphs on cheeks,
How ash-blonde hair, from roots to tips,
Turns black and silver overnight.
How smiles wither on submissive lips,
And in a half-smile quivers fright.
Not only for myself do I pray,
But for those who stood in front and behind me,
In the bitter cold, on a hot July day
Under the red wall that stared blindly.

°**Yezhovian horror:** i.e., the Terror (Nikolay Yezhov, 1895–1939, a communist official, administered the most severe stage of the purges).

Using the Evidence: Experiencing Stalinism

1. **Defending Stalinism:** Develop an argument that the fundamental goals of Stalinism (building socialism) were largely achieved during the 1930s.
2. **Criticizing Stalinism:** Develop an argument that genuine socialism was essentially betrayed or perverted by the developments of the Stalin era.
3. **Assessing change:** In what ways did the Stalin era represent a revolutionary transformation of Soviet society? In what ways did it continue older patterns of Russian history?
4. **Considering moral judgments:** Why do you think that historians have found it so difficult to write about the Stalin era without passing judgment on it? Does this represent a serious problem for scholars? Should students of the past seek to avoid moral judgments or is it an inevitable, perhaps even useful, part of the historian's craft?

Visual Sources

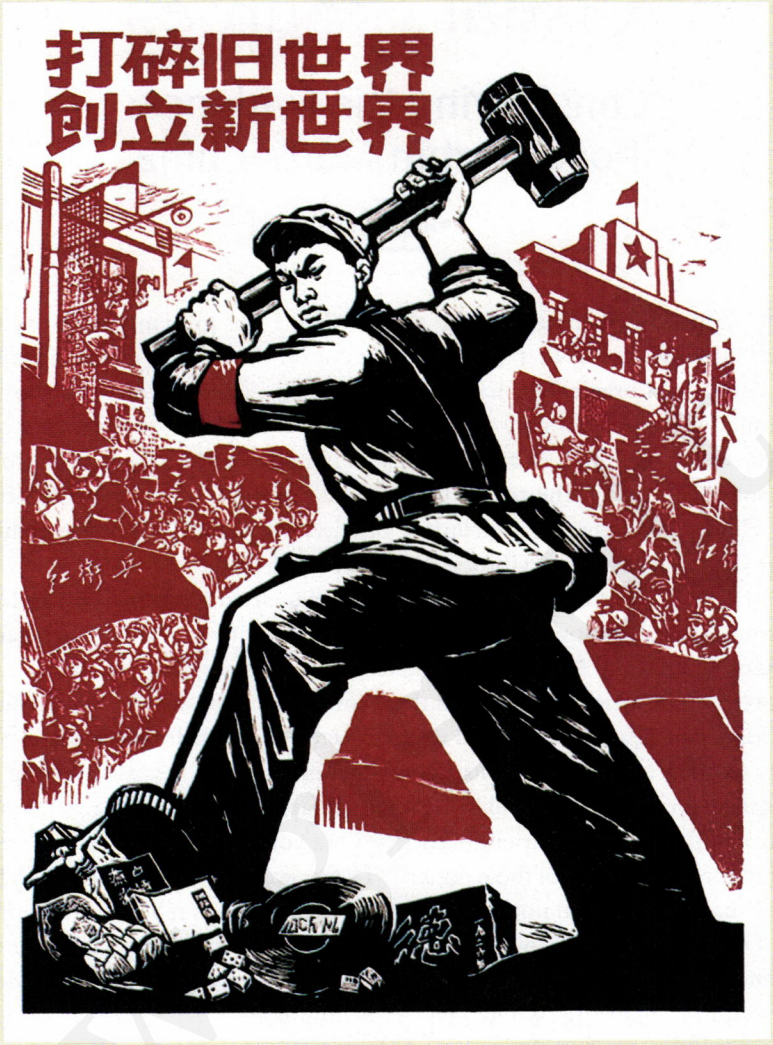
Considering the Evidence: Poster Art in Mao's China

"I wanted to be the girl in the poster when I was growing up. Every day I dressed up like that girl in a white cotton shirt with a red scarf around my neck, and I braided my hair in the same way. I liked the fact that she was surrounded by revolutionary martyrs whom I was taught to worship since kindergarten."[14] As things turned out, this young girl, Anchee Min, did become the subject of one of the many thousands of propaganda posters with which the Chinese communist government flooded the country during the thirty years or so following the Chinese Revolution of 1949.

In China, as in other communist countries, art served the state and the Communist Party. Nowhere was this more apparent than in these propaganda posters, which were found in homes, schools, workplaces, railway stations, and elsewhere. The artists who created these images were under the strict control of Communist Party officials and were expected to use their skills to depict the party's leaders and achievements favorably, even grandly. They were among the "engineers of the human soul" who were reshaping the consciousness of individuals and remaking their entire society. One young man, born in 1951, testified to the effectiveness of these posters: "They... were my signposts through life. They made sure we did not make mistakes.... [M]y life is reflected in them."[15]

The posters that follow illustrate the kind of society and people that the communist leadership sought to create during the years that Mao Zedong ruled the country (1949–1976). The realities behind these images, of course, were often far different.

Coming to power in 1949, Chinese Communist Party leaders recognized that their enemies were by no means totally defeated. A persistent theme throughout the years of Mao's rule was an effort to eliminate those enemies or convert them to the communist cause. Spies, imperialist sympathizers, those infected with "bourgeois values" such as materialism and individualism, landowners or capitalists yearning for the old life—all of these had to be identified and confronted. So too were many "enemies" within the Communist Party itself, people who were suspected of opposition to the radical policies of Mao. Some of these alleged enemies were killed, others imprisoned, and still others—millions of them—were subjected to endless self-criticism sessions or sent down to remote rural areas to "learn from the peasants." This need to demolish the



Visual Source 22.1 Smashing the Old Society (The University of Westminster Chinese Poster Collection)

old society and old values is reflected in Visual Source 22.1, a poster from 1967, the height of the Cultural Revolution (see pp. 1043–44). Its caption reads: "Destroy the Old World; Establish the New World."

- Notice the various items beneath this young revolutionary's feet. What do they represent to the ardent revolutionaries seeking to "destroy the old world"? What groups of people were most likely to be affected by such efforts?
- What elements of a new order are being constructed in this image?

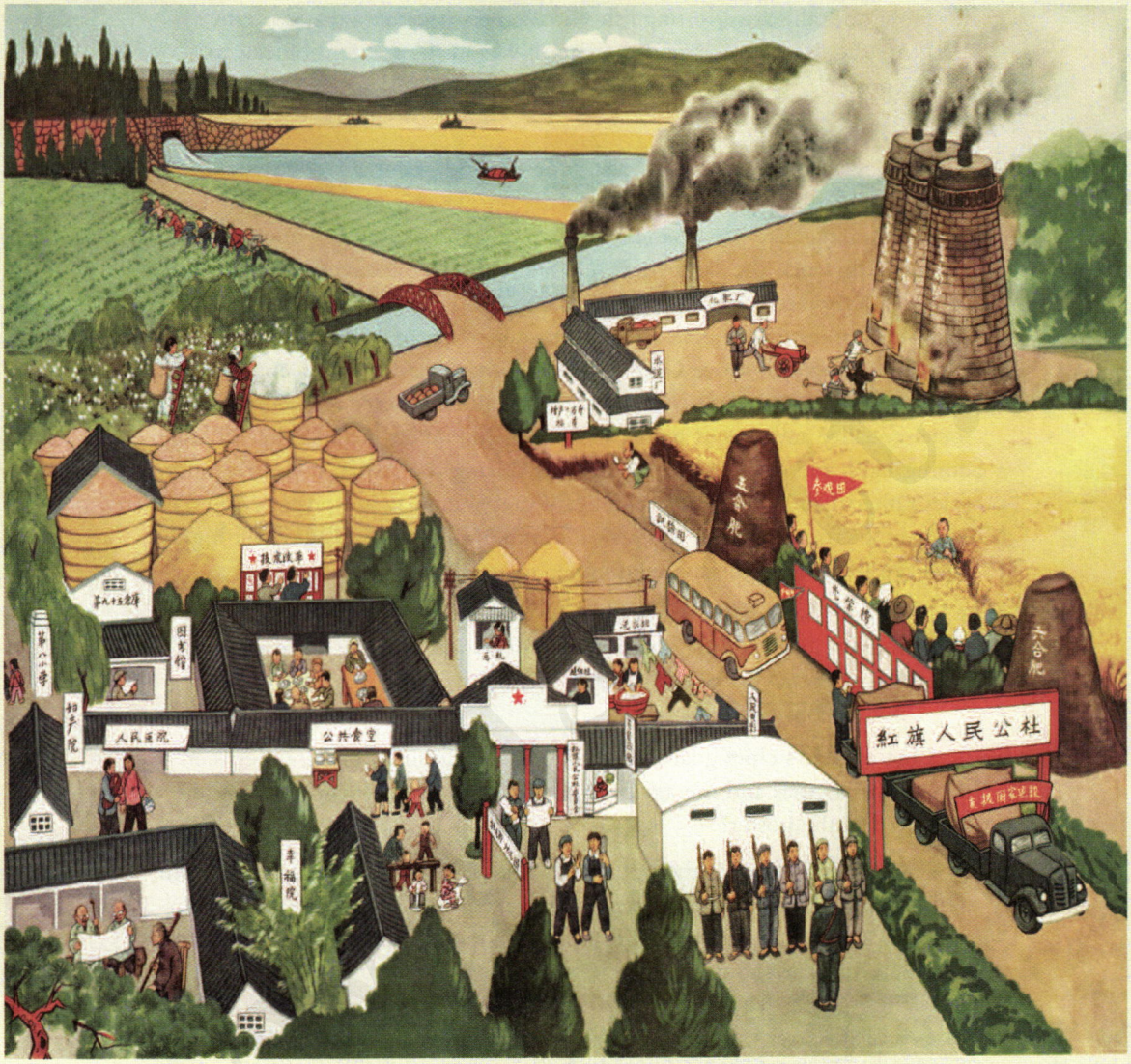
- How does the artist distinguish visually between the old and the new? Note the use of colors and the size of various figures and objects in the poster.

The centerpiece of Mao's plans for the vast Chinese countryside lay in the "people's communes." Established during the so-called Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, these were huge political and economic units intended to work the land more efficiently and collectively, to undertake large-scale projects such as building dams and irrigation systems, to create small-scale industries in the rural areas, and to promote local self-reliance. They also sought to move China more rapidly toward genuine communism by eliminating virtually every form of private property and emphasizing social equality and shared living. Commune members ate together in large dining halls, and children were cared for during the day in collective nurseries rather than by their own families. Visual Source 22.2, a poster created in 1958 under the title "The People's Communes Are Good," shows a highly idealized image of one such commune.

- What appealing features of commune life and a communist future are illustrated in this poster? Notice the communal facilities for eating and washing clothes as well as the drill practice of a "people's militia" unit at the bottom of the picture.
- One of Mao's chief goals was to overcome the sharp division between industrial cities and the agricultural countryside. How is this effort illustrated in the poster?

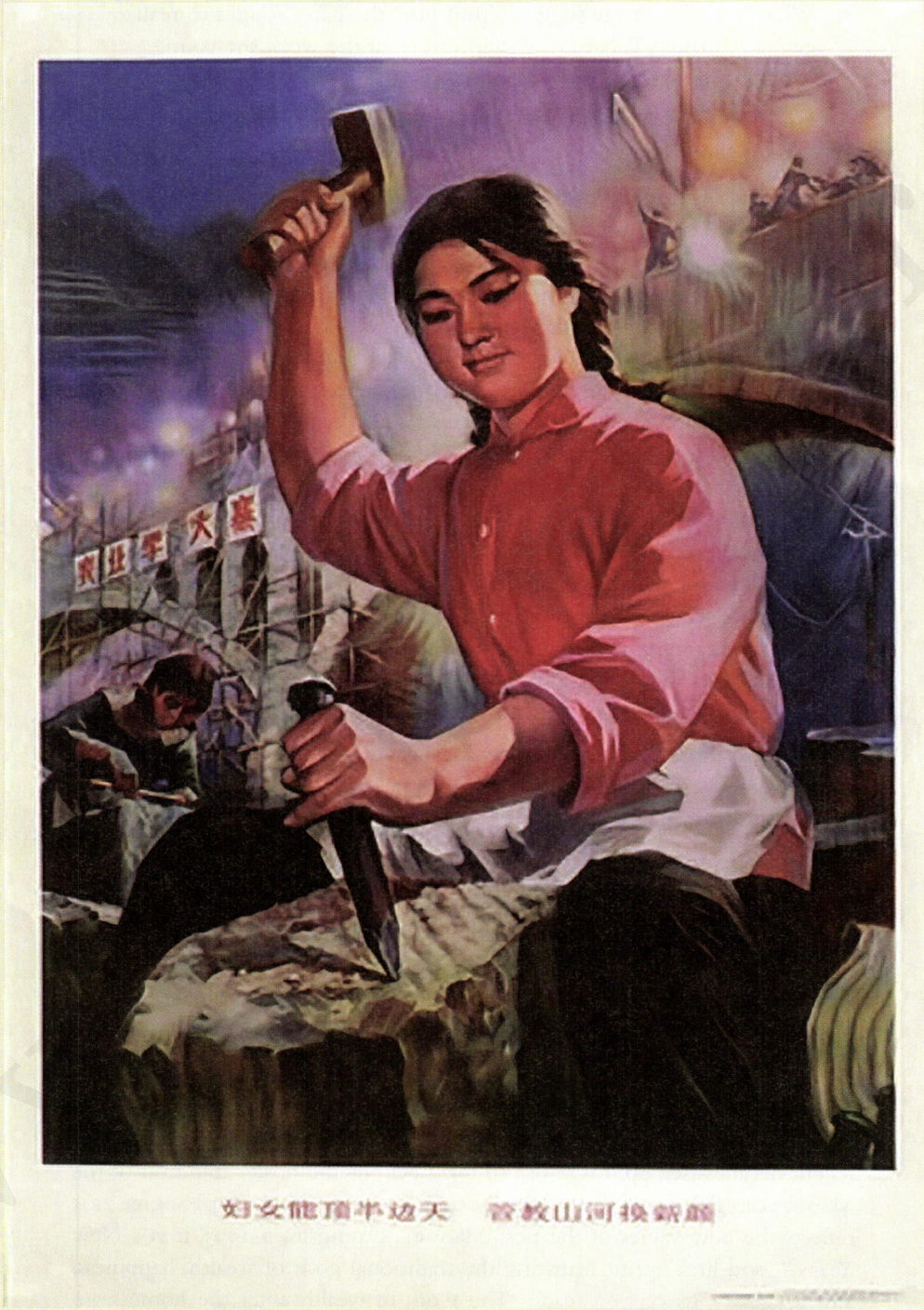
The actual outcomes of the commune movement departed radically from their idealistic goals. Economic disruption occasioned by the creation of communes contributed a great deal to the enormous famines of the late 1950s, in which many millions perished. Furthermore, efforts to involve the peasants in iron and steel production through the creation of much-heralded "backyard furnaces," illustrated in this image, proved a failure. Most of the metal produced in these primitive facilities was of poor quality and essentially unusable. Such efforts further impoverished the rural areas as peasants were encouraged to contribute their pots, pans, and anything made of iron to the smelting furnaces.

Among the core values of Maoist communism were human mastery over the natural order, rapid industrialization, and the liberation of women from ancient limitations and oppressions in order to mobilize them for the task of building socialism. Visual Source 22.3, a 1975 poster, illustrates these values. Its caption reads: "Women Can Hold Up Half the Sky; Surely the Face of Nature Can Be Transformed."



Visual Source 22.2 Building the New Society: The People's Commune (Courtesy Stefan Landsberger. Photo: International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam)

- In what ways does this poster reflect Maoist communism's core values?
- How is the young woman in this image portrayed? What does the expression on her face convey? Notice her clothing and the shape of her forearms, and the general absence of a feminine figure. Why do you think she is portrayed in this largely sexless fashion? What does this suggest about the communist attitude toward sexuality?



Visual Source 22.3 Women, Nature, and Industrialization (The University of Westminster Chinese Poster Collection)

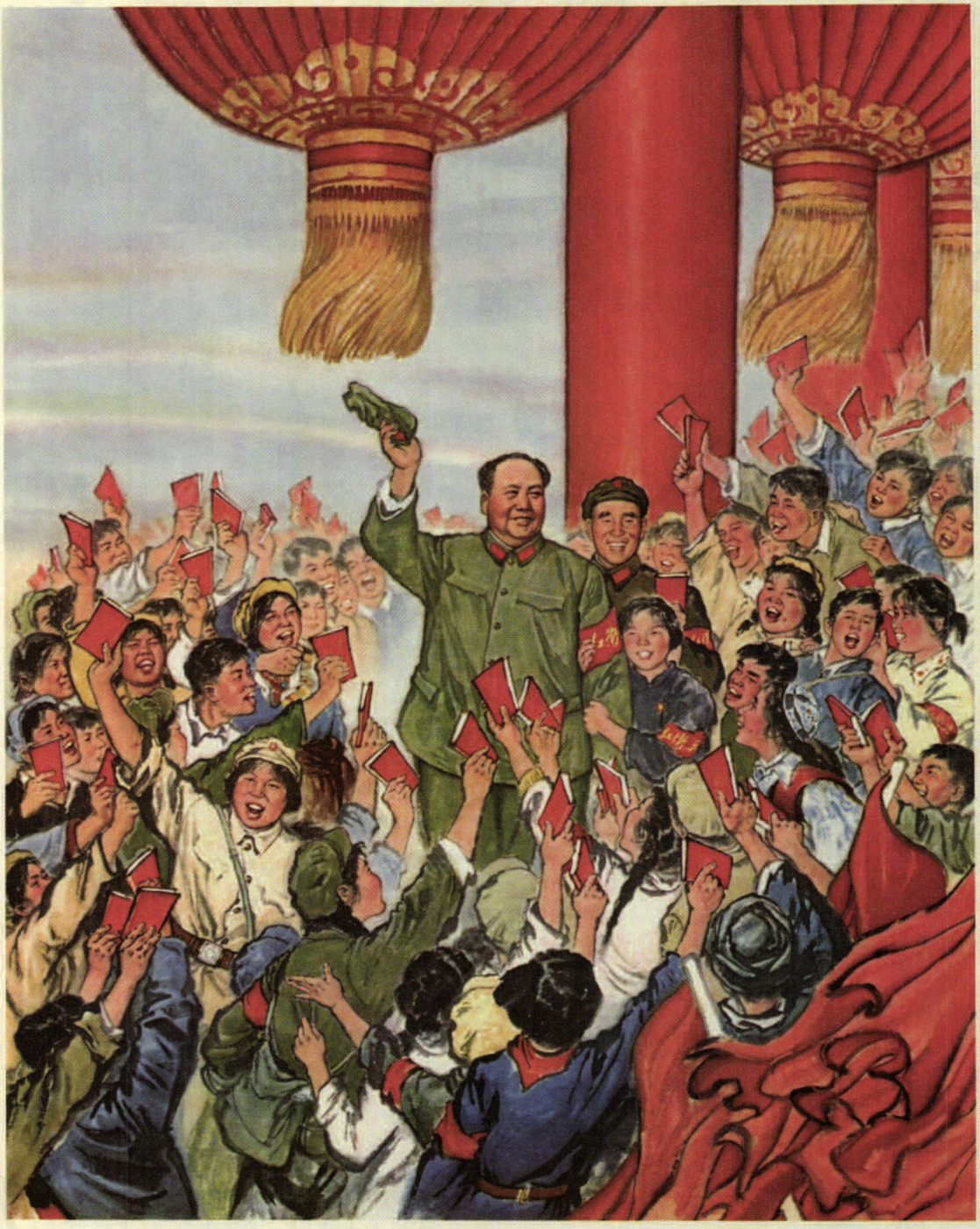
- What does this image suggest about how the party sought to realize gender equality? What is the significance of the work the young woman is doing?
- Notice the lights that illuminate a nighttime work scene. What does this suggest about attitudes toward work and production?

A central feature of Chinese communism, especially during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976, was the growing veneration, even adoration, of Chairman Mao. Portraits, statues, busts, and Mao badges proliferated. Everyone was expected to read repeatedly the "Red Treasured Book," which offered a selection of quotations from Mao's writings and which was widely believed to facilitate solutions to almost all problems, both public and private. Many families erected "tablets of loyalty" to Mao, much like those previously devoted to ancestors. People made pilgrimages to "sacred shrines" associated with key events in his life. Schoolchildren began the day by chanting, "May Chairman Mao live ten thousand times ten thousand years."

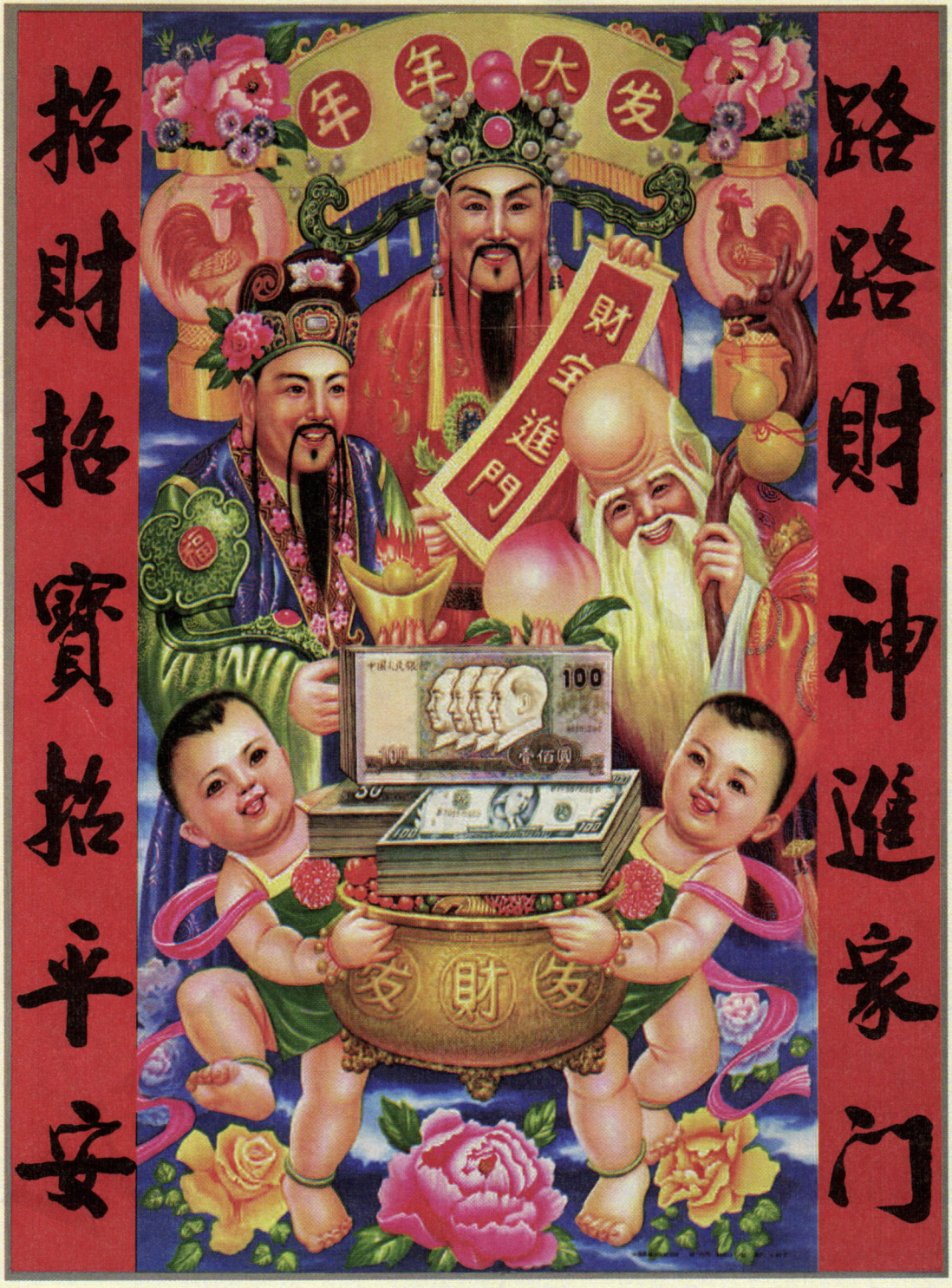
And Mao was the centerpiece of endless posters. Visual Source 22.4, a poster created in 1968, portrays a familiar scene from the Cultural Revolution. Millions of young people, organized as Red Guards and committed to revolutionary action, flocked to Beijing, where enormous and ecstatic rallies allowed them to catch a glimpse of their beloved leader and to unite with him in the grand task of creating communism in China. The poster's caption reads: "The reddest, reddest, red sun in our heart, Chairman Mao, and us together."

- What relationship between Mao and his young followers does the poster suggest? Why might some scholars have seen a quasi-religious dimension to that relationship?
- How do you understand the significance of the "Red Treasured Book" of quotations from Mao, which the young people are waving?
- How might you account for the unbridled enthusiasm expressed by the Red Guards? In this case, the poster portrays the realities of these rallies with considerable accuracy. Can you think of other comparable cases of such mass enthusiasm?

After Mao's death in 1976, the Communist Party backed away from the disruptive radicalism of the Cultural Revolution and initiated the market-based reforms that have generated such spectacular economic growth in China in recent decades (see pp. 1052–54). In this new era, the poster tradition of the Maoist years faded, and party control over the arts loosened. Visual Source 22.5 reflects the new values of the post-Mao era. Dating from 1993, it is a New Year's "good luck" print featuring the traditional gods of wealth, happiness, and longevity. Its caption reads: "The Gods of wealth enter the home from everywhere; wealth, treasures, and peace beckon." Another poster reflecting the post-Mao era in China can be found in Visual Source 24.2 on page 1183.



Visual Source 22.4 The Cult of Mao (Courtesy Stefan Landsberger. Photo: International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam)



Visual Source 22.5 Propaganda Posters after Mao (Courtesy Stefan Landsberger. Photo: International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam)

- In what specific ways do these posters reflect the changed policies and values of the post-Mao era in China? Pay attention to the role of tradition, material values, and foreign contact. What, if any, points of similarity with the earlier posters can you find?
- How might ardent advocates of Maoist communism respond to these posters?
- How do these posters represent the good life? How is wealth portrayed? What is the significance of the American currency?

Using the Evidence: Poster Art in Mao's China

1. **Reading communist intentions:** Based on the first four visual sources, how would you describe the kind of society that the Chinese Communist Party sought to create in China during Mao's lifetime?
2. **Distinguishing image and reality:** Based on the narrative of this chapter and especially on what happened after Mao's death, assess the realities that lay behind these visual sources. To what extent do the posters accurately represent the successes of Maoist communism? What insights do they shed on its failures?
3. **Defining audience and appeal:** To whom do you think these posters were directed? What appeal might they have for the intended audience?
4. **Noticing change:** How could you use these posters to define the dramatic changes that transformed China since 1949? How might a traditional Chinese official from the nineteenth century respond to them?
5. **Assessing posters as evidence:** What are the strengths and limitations of poster art for understanding Chinese communism under Mao and after his death?