



Religion is Poison – Protect the Children

Nikolai Terpsikhorov

1930



Nikolai Terpsikhorov (1890-1960) refers with his poster title to Lenin's famous slogan that religion has to be considered a drug, as the opium of the people in the words of Marx. He was certainly influenced by the anti-religious politics of his time. After the October Revolution of 1918, the state wanted to combat the "religious narcotic" and build a secular state. Women were seen as religious multipliers. Due to domestic isolation, they were more receptive to religious propaganda and thus exerted a harmful influence on children and men. As a counter-model to the backwards misguided woman, the image of a new Soviet woman was to be drawn. Freed from exploitation and social isolation, she became a politically active comrade and valuable productive force.

In his poster, Terpsikhorov thematically took up the total educational claim of the socialist state by treating the gender-based generation conflict as a central theme. The poster is carried by polarizing opposites. The artist juxtaposes an old woman with the stereotypical features of a witch with a young healthy-looking girl in school uniform. The old woman roughly pulls the girl at her blonde braid from the school towards the church. The illustrated coarseness can also be interpreted as fighting motif, which allegorizes the fight against religion as a counter-revolutionary force.

A contemporary symbol of technological progress is portrayed by the silhouette of an airplane. Another typical representation of the time was visualized in the contrast of the architecture. The school building is portrayed in the style of socialist classicism. Due to its modernity it stands as a symbol of the new order. The depicted trumpet seems to be a biblical symbol that announces the new order. In contrast Terpsikhorov painted a dilapidated church with crooked onion domes – the old order that is collapsing. He also symbolizes the "poisonous" nature of religion by contrasting a boy in school uniform with the stocky, older, bearded cleric. The latter looks almost cunningly from the concealment of a stone window, while crows circle above the leaning church towers. Crows are considered unfortunate birds. In the course of Christianization, they became demonic beings who accompanied the devil. This symbolism of decline underscores the socialist agenda for the destruction of religion.

Terpsikhorov's artwork impresses with its aesthetics of simplicity that idealize socialism as a saviour. He created a piece of art with great recognition value. As a sample motif for atheist poster art, it was taken up in various online publications.