



How the Priests Exploit the People

Viktor Deni

1920



The poster manifests the general anti-clerical attitude as well as the specific hostility towards the Orthodox Church of the Bolsheviks in the early Soviet Union. Viktor Deni creates messages on the poster. He impressively depicts the dichotomy between the poor lays and the rich clergy through the postures of the protagonists. The peasant couple assumes a submissive posture in front of the residing clergyman, while he represents the entire might of the Orthodox Church. The peasant couple represents the rural exploited population. The conditions of the persons' garments underline the class

difference. The peasants wear patched clothes, incompatible in colour. Their shoes also indicate their low social and economic status. They appear emaciated, their skin wrinkled, indicating the ongoing Civil War and the associated famine. On the other hand, the cleric is well fed. His chubby, flushed face and obesity indicate prosperity. His clothing, black robe, large golden cross, is clean and noble. This mode of representation gives the outsider an insight into the existing two-class system, in that the clergy symbolises the demanding exploitative strength.

The gifts of the peasants to the priest also stress the exploitative greed of the church: They give the chicken as well as the basket full of eggs; they can keep nothing for themselves.

A remarkable detail is the discrete presence of the government on the poster. The left corner is stamped with the message that "Removing this poster is a counterrevolutionary act". The government thereby claims the power to mould the public sphere – and anticlericalism as an essential part of this message. At the same time, it reminds the viewer that Russia was still in Civil War in 1920, when careless deeds as removing or overpasting a poster could become a serious crime.

The subtitle "All people are brothers, gladly we take from them", a pun with the homonymy of the final word of the verses, also indicates the critical message. The Orthodox Church justifies its societal exploitation with the argument that all members of the state are connected as a family and that each member has its social function. Therefore, the peasantry had the duty to maintain the clergy. The Soviet propaganda criticize the amounts for this maintenance (the high standard of living vs. the poor peasants) as well as the claim that the clergy provides a service for the peasants in return. By calling them parasites and denouncing their function in the community, the poster states classic critical arguments against functionaries of religion and religion in general.

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