

Views of War and Revolution in Russia

by Peter Harrington

Throughout history, artists have portrayed the military events of their times. We think of images of Napoleon's victories, the hell of the Western Front, and an aerial bombardment of a small Basque town during the Spanish Civil War. The majority of these pictures were painted with conviction and motivation, albeit for different reasons. One can make the case that some of the artists working for Napoleon may not necessarily have approved of his policies, but in order to maintain their careers and secure commissions, they had to produce paintings acceptable to the French emperor.

The official artists of World War I may have been similarly critical of their governments' handling of the fighting on the Western Front. Rather than producing images for public esteem, they decided to depict the war as they saw it, warts and all, and let their pictures speak for themselves. Hence we see results such as Christopher Nevins's once-censored *Paths of Glory*, with two dead British soldiers entangled in the wire face down. It is rare, however, to find an artist creating images that on the one hand reflect a particular ideology while at the same time surreptitiously condemning that ideology through discreet pictures intended to show the truth behind the lies. Such an artist was Ivan Vladimirov.

Born in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 1869 to a British mother and a Russian father, Ivan Alekseevich Vladimirov spent many of his early years traveling. For example, he worked on a coal ship when he was only twelve. Later he joined the Russian army, serving in the 210th Izhora Battalion as a volunteer, and in 1894 attended the Military Infantry School. His skills as an artist, however, became obvious to many, and he was invited to attend the Imperial Academy of Art in St. Petersburg, where his studies included battle painting. Vladimirov went

on to earn awards in the 1890s for various war pictures, such as scenes from the Russo-Turkish War of 1877, *Capturing a Turkish Fortification* and *The Defeat of the Kabarda Men on the Malka River*. Around that time, he went abroad to hone his skills as a military artist and spent part of 1897 in Paris studying with the great battle painter Edouard Detaille. His mother had schooled him in English, and in 1910 he and some friends went to London, where they organized a Russian art exhibition.

At the outbreak of war in 1914, a London weekly pictorial newspaper, *The Graphic*, commissioned Vladimirov to cover the fighting on the Eastern Front as one of its special artists. This was not his first personal experience of battle as a war artist; in August 1904, at the request of Count Leo Tolstoy, the vice president of the Academy of Art, he had covered the Russo-Japanese War, witnessing several battles. This was the same conflict in which the great Russian military painter Vasily Vereshchagin was killed during the naval battle at Tsushima Strait.

Returning home following the disastrous campaign, Vladimirov witnessed the breakdown of Russian society in the cities, sketching and painting the events. His paintings showed demonstrators near the Winter Palace in 1905, the arrest of students, and revolutionaries manning barricades. These were a portent of things to come. In 1912 he reported on the First Balkan War for the Russian pictorial paper *Niva*.

His initial World War I picture for *The Graphic* appeared on Saturday, November 21, 1914, and depicted Russian infantrymen storming Austrian positions on the outskirts of the town of Jaroslav in Galicia. The artist was identified as John Vladimiroff. Thereafter, his drawings appeared frequently throughout the war, with the approval of the Russian military censors. More than one hundred of his pic-

tures were published in *The Graphic*. Meanwhile, he also worked for Russian publications, including *Niva*, and several of his watercolors were published as recruiting posters, showing aspects of the Russian army. *All Must Help Our Glorious Troops*, 1916, depicted Russian soldiers in a trench, while *All for the Victory*, that same year, showed a convoy of motor vehicles carrying supplies to the front.

In December 1915, *The Graphic* profiled Vladimirov in an article that opened with the statement, "No people have approached war from the point of view in art so poignantly as the Russians." The piece informed readers that the artist had spent the past year with the Russian army in Galicia, during which time he had sustained a slight wound.

While convalescing, he finished many watercolors based on the sketches that filled his notebooks. In the late summer of 1915, he had exhibited 125 war pictures at the Imperial Society for the Encouragement of Arts in Petrograd. There they were viewed by members of the royal family, including Dowager Empress Marie, the mother of Tsar Nicholas II, who purchased a painting depicting Siberian infantry and Cossacks capturing a field gun. Another picture, *Our Cossacks Will Catch Them*, was acquired by Grand Duchess Victoria Feodorovna, whose husband was Nicholas' cousin.

The London weekly newspaper published pictures of the fighting in Poland and Galicia in 1916, but by 1917 Russia was once again embroiled in revolution. As he was on the spot in Petrograd, Vladimirov took full advantage to document the scenes for *The Graphic* and other publications. When he was not present for the action, he was able to secure firsthand information for his sketches from others. For instance, his sketch of the abdication of Tsar Nicholas that appeared in April was drawn from notes supplied by General

After spending World War I sketching scenes of the Eastern Front for a London newspaper, Ivan A. Vladimirov became famous for his paintings of heroic Soviet subjects. Communist authorities, however, would have shot him if they had seen his secret body of work.



Ivan Vladimirov's illustration of Don Cossacks attacking a German truck convoy appeared in the March 20, 1915, London Graphic. The newspaper published more than a hundred of the artist's works depicting scenes of the Great War and the Russian Revolution.

Nikolai Ruzsky, who had helped to persuade the monarch to step down.

Today he is chiefly remembered for his thrilling visual renderings of the October Revolution that brought the Bolsheviks to power and of the subsequent Russian Civil War. Some of his earliest pictures of the uprising showed rioters shooting down Cossacks on a bridge across the Neva River, and navy rioters capturing a vehicle. That he was sympathetic to the plight of the workers and soldiers in the months leading up to the 1917 revolutions is suggested by his arrest by the tsarist authorities for portraying scenes of workers on strike.

So vivid were his pictures that it prompted the editors of *The Graphic* to boast at the beginning of 1918 that theirs was the only paper in Britain featuring accurate illustrations of the Russian Revolution. It reproduced a photograph on January 5 with the caption: "Our Russian Artist. Mr. John Wladimiroff, the special artist of *The Graphic*, sitting in a shell-

hole at the Riga-Dvinsk front. Mr. Wladimiroff enables *The Graphic* to be the only paper in the country giving realistic drawings of the revolution."

Vladimirov traveled to Moscow and witnessed the terror of the commune and the barricades near the Kremlin, and back in Petrograd he captured the drama of the street fighting, the breakdown of authority, and the emergence of the Bolsheviks. Throughout the year, *The Graphic* brought its readers numerous images of the crisis in Russia from the pencil of Vladimirov, and informed its readers that their artist had run great risks on several occasions in Petrograd. His pictures were captioned to heighten the tension: "Anarchy in Russia," "Red Revolution in Russia," "The triumph of the Leninists," and "Revolution, rapine and robbery."

Vladimirov's last picture for the paper appeared on Saturday, September 14, 1918, and was a reconstruction of Red Army troops plundering a train at a station on

the Petrograd-Moscow line. Thereafter, the products of his labor mysteriously disappeared from the eyes of British readers, but he was far from finished documenting the revolutionary events.

Vladimirov was about to enter a difficult stage of his career that forced him to lead a double life. In order to be accepted by the new Bolshevik authorities and to gain access to various artistic academies, he began painting stirring scenes of the revolution that were widely accepted and won for him the Order of the Workers' Red Banner. Later, his role under the Soviet regime was as a "Batalist," or painter of battles, and one of his classic canvases from this period, *Down with the [Tsarist] Eagle*, was praised by the authorities. From then on until his death in Leningrad in 1947, he produced paintings extolling the heroics of the Soviet Union that were acquired by various galleries throughout Russia.

In the 1920s and '30s, most of his paintings reflected revolutionary themes such as *The Flight of the Bourgeoisie from Novorossiisk in 1920*, *The Shooting at the Factory*, *The Reds Capture Ufa*, and *Soviet Troops Come to Vyborg*. He portrayed V.I. Lenin and Josef Stalin in conference in the summer of 1917, and later did a painting of Lenin walking with Maxim Gorki, the novelist and revolutionary propagandist. Around 1940 he portrayed the events of Bloody Sunday, January 22, 1905, in a large oil painting showing a line of imperial troops firing upon unarmed workers, execution-style, by the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg.

Westerners first viewed many of Vladimirov's paintings at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1937, at which Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* was unveiled. Exhibitions of works in his homeland confirmed his reputation as Comrade Vladimirov, a staunch Communist supporter of the Soviet Union. In 1938 some of his pictures



Above: Imperial soldiers fire on workers outside the Winter Palace on January 22, 1905. Such paintings made Vladimirov popular with the Communists, as the works added legitimacy to the regime. Right: The bourgeoisie flee from Novorossiisk, Russia's only deep-water port on the Black Sea, in 1920. Between 1917 and '22, more than 3 million people escaped from Russia.

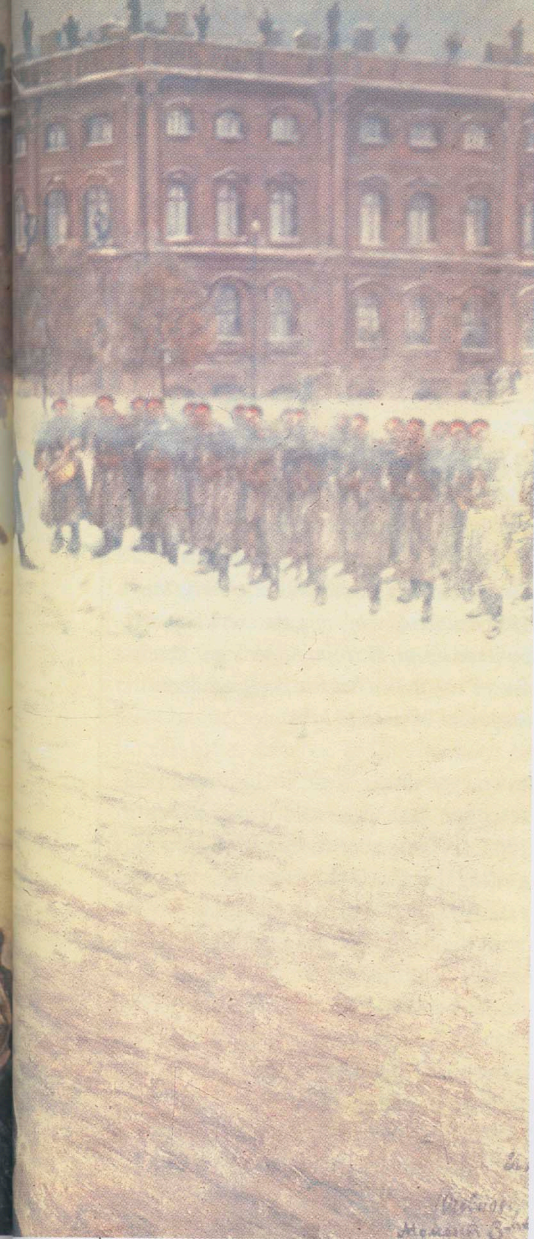
were shown in Moscow at a show titled "Twenty Years of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army."

World War II provided material for similar thematic canvases painted during the war in Leningrad. Pictures from this period include *The Partisans Rout the German Punitive Unit*, painted in 1942, *The Battle for Tikhvin* the following year, and *Combat in the Streets of Berlin*. In 1946 he was awarded the title "Honored Artist of the Russian Federation."



Vladimirov was sympathetic to the plight of the army at the front in 1916, and while he supported in principle the need for reform, he came to despise the Bolshe-

viks following the 1917 revolution and particularly during the civil war. Although he followed the party line by creating heroic pictures, he was secretly recording the ex-



Former tsarist generals are loaded onto the back of a truck after their arrest in February 1917. Earlier that month, workers and other leftists had toppled the imperial government; in October the Bolsheviks would seize power during a second revolution.

cesses and atrocities committed by Leon Trotsky's Red Army and the regime. The first signs of the artist's disaffection with the Bolsheviks actually began to appear in his sketches in *The Graphic* starting in September 1917. For instance, one of his pictures from August 1918 is headlined "Blight of Bolshevik Barbarism" and shows three Socialist leaders being "consigned to the flames by Red Army ruffians." Another image from the same issue is titled "The Chaos Resulting from Leninite Misrule."

Many of Vladimirov's anti-Bolshevik pic-

tures were smuggled out by Western collectors. One of them was a native Russian, Frank Golder, who was acquiring material for the Hoover War Library at Stanford University in California, as well as monitoring Herbert Hoover's Russian relief program. While he was producing his covert art during the 1920s, Vladimirov was also an active member of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia and was teaching at the state-sponsored Industrial Art Studios.

Golder visited the artist on several occasions during this period and purchased as many pictures as he could get, at five dollars each—a significant sum of money in Russia at the time. Apparently some of the pictures were lost in transit, but many arrived safely in the United States, and Hoover himself had three paintings hanging in his Waldorf-Astoria apartment, while librarians at the Hoover War Library pasted over the artist's signature for fear of reprisals against Vladimirov. Had his pictures been discovered by the authorities in Russia, the artist would have been shot. For decades many of his anti-Soviet paintings were kept locked away. Others began



Orthodox priests are forced to clean a barn under the watchful eye of a Bolshevik soldier, in Russian Clergy, 5th October, 1918. Such humiliation was commonplace during the early months of the revolution, when the church was being heavily repressed.



Top left: Protesters prepare to throw a portrait of the tsar on a bonfire during the February revolution. Center: Many of Vladimirov's images depict the atrocities committed by Communists, including this 1919 watercolor showing the execution of a political agent. Bottom: A merchant family flees a city with what few personal items they were allowed to take.



to emerge in the West, including ten watercolors that were sold in New York in 1953, six years after the artist's death, suggesting that this body of work was far more extensive than originally thought.

In the paintings that reached the West, we see a different face on the events in Russia between 1917 and '22. Gone are the heroic revolutionaries, replaced by struggling civilians searching for food, ruthless soldiers pillaging a church, the humiliation of former tsarist generals, and priests forced to work in farmyards. We see secret executions and cruelties toward peasants. One painting shows a portrait of Tsar Nicholas II being tossed onto a public bonfire, and in another, little boys vandalize statues on the grounds of a former royal palace.

In these works, Vladimirov displays a humanity that is wholly absent in his "official" paintings, and shows a real sympathy and an affinity for the victims of the repression. Why he painted them at great risk to his survival is unclear, but he may have felt a duty to record the suffering that was suppressed by official Soviet propaganda. Whatever his reasons, his pictures provide a glimpse of the true horror of the Russian Revolution that history sometimes glosses over.

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