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## ‘Die, Nazi Scum!’: Soviet Tass Propaganda Posters, 1941-1945

By ROBERTA SMITH

Andrew Edlin Gallery  
134 10th Avenue, near 18th Street, Chelsea  
Through Jan. 14

This lively array of ferocious anti-Nazi posters produced in the Soviet Union during World War II will reward anyone interested in political cartoons, graphic design, wartime propaganda, German Expressionism, Soviet Social Realism or all of the above. The show follows a more extensive one at the Art Institute of Chicago last summer that was the first of its kind in this country. It presents 15 large posters by the little-known Okna Tass studio, a group of artists, poets and writers that coalesced in Moscow in the wake of Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Its members were tasked with combining phrases and images to inspire the Soviet people to fight the Germans in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. How much these images of Germans as raving apelike beasts and Hitler as a frantic, demented twit contributed to their ultimate triumph is anyone’s guess, but it seems possible that the best posters’ exuberant visual force — at once vehement and comic — provided an inspiring goad. They usefully illuminate the relationship between form and humor, and between humor and courage.

The Okna Tass artists produced 1,240 designs in multiples from 100 to 500 during the 1,418 days of war. They worked in assembly-line groups using a combination of stencils and gouache — which made for exceptionally vivid colors and painterly textures — because wartime shortages ruled out more mechanical means. Going by the works here some artists opted for a relatively sedate Social Realist style; others favored a fiery palette, savage caricature and general hilarity egged on by black, lashing lines. This style is most vivid in the hands of Pavel Petrovich Sokolov-Skalia (1899-1961). In an image aimed at steelworkers, he portrays Hitler deluged in molten ore. In an especially historically minded scene Hitler hops barefoot, in red-striped boxer shorts, behind a one-horse sleigh occupied by Napoleon, who turns to say, “The only similarity between you and me, Adolf, is that we were both beaten by the Russians.” (This line is credited to the avant-garde poet Osip Brik.)

At the very least the posters got under Hitler’s skin. The art historian Xenia Vytuleva observes at the start of her illuminating catalog essay that by July 1941 the Nazis listed 15 members of the Tass studio among government leaders to be executed immediately once the Soviets surrendered.