

# THE LOUSE MANIFESTO

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On a blistering December day in 1919, an embattled Vladimir Lenin rose to address the Seventh All Russia Congress of Soviets. Midway through his speech on the state of political affairs in his fledgling government, he exclaimed, “Either the lice will defeat socialism or socialism will defeat the lice!”<sup>1</sup>

## Pests and politics

Lenin’s new Soviet state faced crushing setbacks. On one front, his Red Army fought a lingering civil war against an unrelenting White Army that sought to reinstate the tsarist regime. On another front, Russia suffered an “unfettered violence of typhus, cholera, dysentery and tuberculosis,” with typhus alone killing two million to three million Russians between 1917 and 1922.<sup>2</sup>

An exasperated Lenin described typhus as “mowing down our troops,” and its lice vector as a “scourge...assailing us.”<sup>1</sup> Lenin’s Bolshevik party needed to focus its efforts on defeating an epidemic that weakened the masses before they could realize their ideal Soviet state.



The typhus louse shaking hands with death poster, 1919. Colour lithograph by O. Grin, Wellcome Collection.

The Bolshevik apparatchik settled on a dual approach. With a new department of health and the People’s Commissar of Health Narkomzdrav, the party set out to create a *sanitarnoe prosveshcheni* or sanitary enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> Its leader, Dr. Nikolai Semashko championed a Soviet medicine where physicians were “as much at home in sociology as biology,” and where “social hygiene” involved the “influence of economic and social factors on the health of the population.”<sup>5</sup>

Pamphlets, posters and lectures reached cities and remote villages lacking basic medical infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> They worked to educate the health-illiterate Russian population on hygiene practices to control the infestation of lice, while uplifting the lifestyle of a healthy and productive Soviet citizen. A review of the materials distributed during this campaign reveals a subtle yet intriguing messaging. In the Bolshevik’s effort to alleviate the burden of typhus, the disease and its most foul accomplice, the louse, became a symbol of the antiquated Russian state. A symbol that threatened the legitimacy of the new and zealous communist institution. Thus, by eliminating the louse, the Soviet state sought to emblematically eliminate old Russia, and usher in a modern society.

### A small enemy

The body louse, *Pediculus humanus corporis*, is a pesky vector for a number of diseases. Its human host offers the parasite a reliable blood meal for up to five times a day.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to its name, the body louse does not live on the human. The Russian term *platyanaya vosh* or clothes louse is a more suitable label, as lice choose to make their home within the inner folding of clothes, venturing to human skin only to feed.<sup>2</sup>

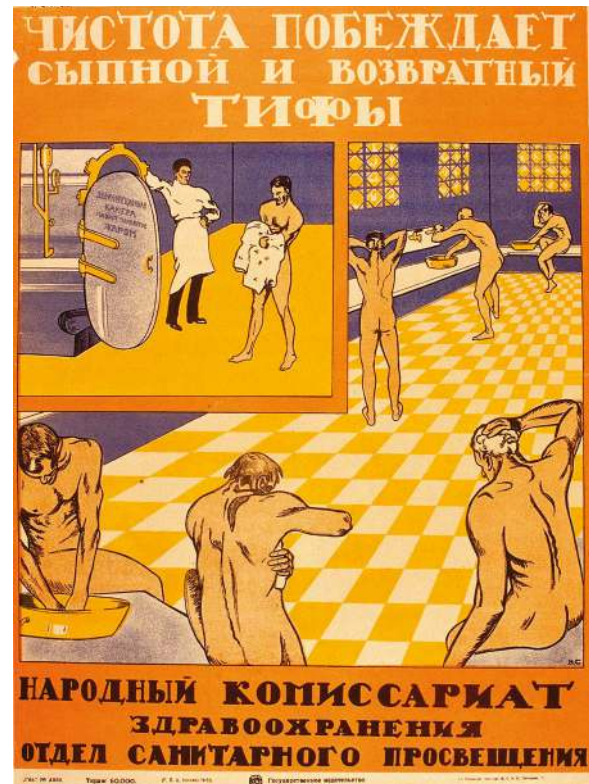
Since the louse cannot withstand high heat, it thrives in colder climates and takes advantage of the ample layers of thermals, sweaters, and coats. As the new Russian railroads and bleak rural economic prospects encouraged mobilization into cities in the 1900s, the increasingly crowded transportation and living spaces became hotbeds for transmitting body lice from human to human.<sup>6</sup>

Within the *P. corporis* resides the *Rickettsia prowazekii*, the causal agent of typhus. The transmission of bacteria from vector to host occurs when the louse breaks the skin to feed. Subsequent exposure to the insect's fecal matter or the crushed insect itself provides sufficient entry for the microorganism. The bacteria can survive in fecal matter for up to 100 days, thus a lack of sanitation can exacerbate the risk of infection.<sup>7</sup> To manage the outbreak of typhus, efforts to control body lice infestations are key. Since the louse ultimately depends on the human host for survival, the simplest recommendation is to remove and leave infested clothing unworn for a week. Additional delousing methods include bathing regularly, washing clothing in boiling water, and vacuuming furniture in contact with infected persons.

### Bending the narrative

Armed with the knowledge that sanitation would be critical to their anti-typhus campaign, Semashko placed great emphasis on social action to combat the louse. The Narkomzdrav encouraged citizens to use the *banya* or public baths to “cleanse the body...from casually acquired lice” before they had “sufficient time to multiply.”<sup>8</sup> The depiction of a communal effort to clean spotlighted a tactical use of social pressure to force conformity. Though a self-action approach empowered people to participate in a hygienic lifestyle, the insistence on maintaining an idyllic social appearance mechanized the citizen body and placed it under the Soviet government's control.

A grotesque personification of the louse exploited raw fears of typhus. Associations of death with the insect heightened the sense of urgency and emergency during the campaign to encourage compliance. While the images served a cautionary warning of transmission, they also



Men washing themselves in a public or factory bathroom to prevent typhus, and having clothes cleaned in an industrial cleanser poster, 1921. Colour lithograph by V.S. Wellcome Collection.

elevated the Bolshevik's efforts against the louse as heroic saviors of the Russian society.

The Bolshevik's depictions of the body louse resembled their enemies. The White Army took the form of an unnaturally large, white louse. The dehumanization of the enemy as pests was strategic to delegitimizing the White Army in Russian society. Thus, the Bolsheviks isolated their contenders to further cement their power over the state. Historian Edmund Russell describes this form of propaganda as a “shared metaphor,” linking the military and civilian experience during wartime.<sup>9</sup>

Blurring the lines between insect and enemy allowed the Bolsheviks to create a narrative wherein their victory would distance the Russian people from the horrors of their past. Lenin and the Bolsheviks emphasized the models of “perfected, clean futures...using the language of hygiene” to redefine the Soviet state and citizen.<sup>8</sup>

### A clean start

“The Bolsheviks inherited a sick population and an industrially defunct...state,” Tricia Starks declared in her summary of post-civil war Russia.<sup>8</sup> To realize an ideal





Left, poster depicts Russia after the defeat of the White Army when a new white peril threatened Russia in the form of the typhus louse, against which the Red soldiers fought by washing themselves and their clothes vigorously. Circa 1921. Right, poster depicting the typhus louse, against which Russian citizens were urged to wash themselves and their clothes vigorously. Circa 1920. Colour lithograph. Wellcome Collection. Colour lithograph by Kaznacheev. Wellcome Collection.

communist nation, which emphasized citizenship above individuality, the Bolsheviks focused on improving population health under the People's Commissar of Health. The government tackled the body louse, amidst high levels of mortality from typhus that threatened the prospect of a viable Soviet work force.

In the tumultuous origins of the Soviet state, the louse becomes intimately embedded in the discourse of what a new Russia would look like. To shed the country's historic reputation as primitive and agrarian, this emerging state needed to shed the burden of disease, poverty and political instability. Hence, the louse became a convenient metaphor for the antithesis of progress.

To realize the vision of a competitive, industrial Soviet Union, the Bolsheviks ventured deep into the world of health and disease control. As the Russian masses washed off the body louse, they pursued a clean start to their new society.

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