

The Bear Awakens: A Course Project Exploring Clifford Berryman's *Cartoons about the Russian Revolution*

E. Thomas Ewing

On March 16, 1917, the *Evening Star* newspaper in Washington, DC, published a front page editorial cartoon depicting a bear wearing a peasant blouse labeled "Russia," chasing a dog, "Pro-Germanism," out of a house with a stick.¹ Published just one day after the abdication of the Russian emperor, Nicholas II, this cartoon communicated the idea that the dramatic change in Russia put an end to any fears that the Russians would make a separate peace with Germany. Two years later, on March 30, 1919, a cartoon in the same newspaper depicted Lenin, waving a gun and carrying a torch, standing in front of a devastated landscape strewn with dead bodies and declaring, "I'm fixin' things for future folks."² These two cartoons illustrate the profound change in American attitudes toward Russia as the optimism prompted by the overthrow of a despotic state in spring 1917 gradually shifted towards hostility towards the first communist government in world history in the two years that followed.

In a spring 2023 course on twentieth-century Russia, a number of my Virginia Tech students completed an innovative collaborative history project examining changing American views of Russia through the cartoons of Clifford Berryman (1869–1949), as published in the *Evening Star* (available in the Library of Congress's digitized newspaper collection, *Chronicling America*).³ This project involved primary source research using digitized newspapers, analysis of visual elements in cartoons, and an understanding of historical context in the years during and after the 1917 Revolution. Students worked in groups of three or four to examine selected cartoons and explore articles about Russia published in the same editions of the newspaper.

The outcome of this collaborative work was a series of posters, each featuring a single cartoon, selections of headlines, and an analysis of changing American perceptions of Russia. The posters were displayed in a public corridor outside the classroom located on the ground floor of the university library, thus making the project visible to students, librarians, and other visitors; all the posters are also available online. The project thus combined traditional forms of historical instruction, such as primary source analysis and contextual understanding, with innovative approaches to integrating project-based learning into the higher education classroom. This assignment was designed for a course on twentieth-century Russia, but the materials, format, and outcomes could easily be adapted to courses in American foreign policy and particularly the Cold War.

The cartoons of Berryman were ideally suited to this assignment because Russia was frequently the object of his attention, from the first Russian Revolution, which overthrew the Tsar in February 1917, to the end of the civil war and the establishment of Soviet power four years later. Already well known as the creator of the Teddy Bear cartoon, Berryman frequently used the image of the bear to symbolize Russia, which provided important visual connections among these cartoons over this period of

time. Berryman's cartoons are easy to locate on the first page of almost every edition of the *Evening Star*, which was published six days a week. Digital versions available from the Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* collection make this newspaper easily accessible to instructors and students. Each cartoon features prominent visual elements, yet most also included text that amplified and complicated the images.

Prior to the semester, I reviewed every issue of the *Evening Star* from the spring of 1917 to the fall of 1919, two critical years in the history of twentieth-century Russia. I selected eighteen cartoons as the most historically relevant, visually appealing, and complex in content. The cartoons were grouped thematically and chronologically, and each of six groups was assigned three cartoons from a distinct historical period. The chronological periods and thematic groupings included (1) the overthrow of the Tsar and the establishment of dual power in the spring of 1917, (2) the struggle for power among revolutionary parties in the summer of 1917, (3) the Bolshevik seizure of power in the fall of 1917, (4) the peace negotiations with Germany in the winter of 1918, (5) the Russian withdrawal from the war in the spring of 1918, and (6) the civil war and new Soviet state in 1919.

Students received the assignment and groups began meeting during the first week of the semester, and a portion of almost every class was set aside for continued collaboration for the next six weeks. After reviewing the



Evening Star, 11 July 1917



Evening Star, 11 August 1920

cartoons, each group researched news articles about Russia published in the *Evening Star* during the weeks before and after each cartoon was published. Limiting the research to a single newspaper and a specific date range helped the groups focus on historical events in Russia as well as changes in American foreign policy in the two years from the spring of 1917 (when the United States entered the war on the side of Russia and against Germany) to 1919 (including Russia's separate peace with Germany, the Armistice in November 1918, and the struggle for power in Soviet Russia). These research materials were incorporated into the posters in two ways. First, images of key headlines were used to illustrate the posters, and second, the content of the articles was used to prepare the written sections on each poster.

The poster included a title, introduction, historical context, and analysis. Each section had a limit on the number of words to ensure that the posters had a good balance of visual and written elements. Students wrote sections in a shared document, thus allowing for multiple participants to contribute content and revise drafts into a final text. The poster design, set by the instructor, included a single image of the cartoon, taking up about one-third of the whole poster, several headlines, and the three written sections. This format ensured that posters would be visually engaging and easily accessible to viewers, while also requiring a substantial amount of original research and collaborative writing. Designing the posters using shared presentations allowed all the students in the group to contribute to the final version, which was reviewed by the instructor and by other groups before being finalized for printing. I designed two posters to serve as bookends for the exhibit so viewers could be introduced to the exhibit regardless of which way they were walking in the hallway.

The printed posters were displayed on a wall outside the

classroom in a relatively high-traffic hallway on the ground floor of the library. Students in the course thus had the opportunity to view the posters as they entered and left the classroom twice a week, providing them with a reminder of the work they had completed in the first six weeks of the semester. The posters remained on display for the rest of the semester, exhibiting innovative work completed in a history course about twentieth-century Russia.

As part of the assignment for this project, students completed a self-assessment with questions about their contribution to the project, the nature of collaboration in their groups and the outcomes of the assignment. These responses, submitted as part of the graded assignment (and thus not anonymous) provide useful observations on cartoons as primary sources, on posters as a format for research projects, and collaboration as a desired skill to learn in college classrooms.

A recurring theme in students' comments was the challenge of interpreting cartoons as historical sources using visual imagery that integrated texts and symbols to comment on current political events. Students noted that cartoons render complex events easier to understand, yet critical reading and thinking skills are needed "to interpret the meaning behind the cartoon," as each cartoon included "a substantial amount of information in a relatively small space" and presented "very complicated and elaborate issues in a much more digestible way."

As with any primary source, cartoons provide observations on events as they happen, yet they also convey a particular, highly opinionated, often satirical, and sometimes cynical point of view on these events. As one student noted, cartoons "explain political dynamics through images that simplify complicated subjects down to the basic premises," while another student wrote that cartoons "can have a deeper level . . . rather than some goofy picture making fun of a certain event." The "exaggerated caricatures" in cartoons require an interpretation of "symbolism," so students learn to "pay close attention" to details, as everything "is there for a reason" and the artist did not "draw things randomly." Several students stated that using cartoons as primary sources can make "learning about history more interesting," and a student who self-identified as a "visual learner" commented that cartoons were more rewarding than the usual assignment of reading a textbook.

The format of the posters also promoted thoughtful assessments from students. Many students observed that the combination of images and text required students to organize and present information in a focused, limited, and targeted manner, balancing accuracy with visual appeal. The word limits for each written section encouraged them to write concisely in ways that synthesized complex concepts and extensive information into accessible presentations. Posters were contrasted with more familiar formats, such as research papers (one student referred to "the same old assignment of writing a generic paper"), because these examples of "public history" made the work available in a visible space. One student commented that the posters were available to view "in an eye-catching way," while others expressed the hope that "just a quick glance" by those walking along the hallway would "tempt them to learn something they might not have otherwise," thus leading them to learn from the history and also appreciate all the work invested in this project. One student declared that seeing posters on the wall in the library was "extremely cool—I took a picture and plan on sending it to family."

In their self-assessments, students did provide useful suggestions for revising and adjusting the assignment for future courses. While they mostly commented favorably on the structure of the assignment and the time allowed to complete each step, some students asked for more guidance on each stage and more direction in preparing

the final version, while other students recommended more flexibility to allow groups to select cartoons or locate articles. Some students recommended additional measures to ensure good communication within groups, balance the workload within the groups, and account for absent or non-responsive collaborators. For the most part they endorsed the amount of class time allocated to projects, as finding time to meet with partners outside of class often presents a challenge for students balancing coursework, jobs, and other commitments.

This project required considerable collaboration among students, which I have emphasized in all my courses as a way to connect historical content and analytical skills with future professional roles. To address this issue, the self-assessment form asked students to reflect on this question: "What do you see as the value of collaboration skills for your future career?" The responses provide further evidence of the value of integrating a poster project about political cartoons into an upper-level history course. Many students anticipated that their likely field of employment would require considerable teamwork, and thus an assignment requiring collaboration was good training for their desired career. One student wrote that "more practice in collaboration" would improve skills and help with the transition to a workplace; another wrote that "preparing students for what's next" was "ultimately" the purpose of college, so the opportunity to work collaboratively was a valued exercise. Another student wrote, "I love working alone," but could see the value in learning to work with others. One student recalled that job interviews often involve questions about collaboration skills, which suggests that this assignment was directly relevant to the challenge of preparing students for future employment.

This course was taught in the spring semester of 2023, so the project exploring cartoons about U.S. perceptions of Russia developed in the context of Russia's brutal war of conquest against Ukraine. During the course I often drew parallels between the content of the course and contemporary events, noting in particular the close geographic connections between the front lines in 1917-1918 and the current battles between Ukraine and Russia. I should note, however, that Berryman's cartoons addressed broader, recurring themes in twentieth-century Russia, including the failed pursuit of revolutionary goals of democracy, the ways in which the threat of foreign intervention led to increasingly authoritarian political structures, and the consolidation of power by a centralized political movement directed by a charismatic leader. The title of this article, "The Bear Awakens," represents both the revolutionary moment early in the twentieth century and the current situation in the twenty-first, where we are confronted by an authoritarian, imperialist, and interventionist regional state.

Notes:

1. Clifford Berryman cartoon, *Evening Star* (DC), March 16, 1917, p. 1, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1917-03-16/ed-1/seq-1/>.
2. Clifford Berryman cartoon, *Evening Star* (DC), March 30, 1919, p. 1, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1919-03-30/ed-1/seq-1/>.
3. "Clifford Berryman Political Cartoon Collection," U.S. National Archives, Center for Legislative Archives, accessed June 12, 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/research/special-collections/berryman>.

In
the
next
issue
of
Passport

A roundtable on Frank
Costigliola, *Kennan*

2024 SHAFR conference
information

A roundtable on Carolyn
Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain*

and much more!