

**Art and the Shaping of Society:
Russian Posters and Constructivism 1917-1924**

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Cover art: Naum Gabo, *Project for a Radio Station*, 1919-1920

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Glossary

Gosizdat	State publishing house
Inkhuk	Institute for Artistic Culture
IZO	Graphic arts department of Narkompros
Litizdat	“Literary-Publishing House,” the military publishing house
Narkompros	People’s Commissariat of Education and Art
NEP	New Economic Policy
Rosta	Russian Telegraph Agency
Vkhutemas	Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops

Defining Revolutionary Art

What is “revolutionary art”? In Russia in 1917 and after, this phrase had two connotations. First, to the Bolsheviks who had just seized power in October¹, revolutionary art was art depicting and glorifying the proletarian revolution. Revolutionary art was often produced by intelligentsia artists because a true proletarian art would take time to develop within the new social order. It was the art of “the various groups and schools of art which have come over to the revolution,”² as Trotsky wrote. This revolutionary art included posters, monuments to heroic revolutionaries, public festivals, and agitation trains (agit-trains) that traveled the country spreading the message of the October Revolution. A wide variety of artists participated in the creation of Bolshevik art. Amidst the fighting and general chaos of the Revolution, the Bolsheviks began to formalize the ideas they stood for by utilizing art’s power of communication. As the Bolsheviks consolidated their government, a formal institutional structure developed, and they used this structure to create an art and a message for their government.

Second, to many avant-garde artists revolutionary art meant art that broke from the traditions of the past to discover new forms of artistic creation. Artists had been rebelling against the conventions of the state-run art academies of Western Europe and Russia for fifty years before the Revolution. They were continually seeking new ways to use form, color and texture to express their visions and emotions. At the same time, this defiant attitude toward artistic traditions often merged with social rebellion. Russian artists wrote of how they wanted to use their art to reshape society as a whole. Pamela

¹ The Bolshevik Revolution took place October 25, 1917 in the old style (Julian) calendar, November 7 in the new style (Gregorian) calendar. All dates before January 1, 1918 are in the old style.

Kachurin advises that this trend should be viewed in the broader scope of European Modernism, “wherein artists decried existing social orders in favor of a non-specific brand of utopia.”³ European Modernists saw their art as a new way to look at the world, both literally and figuratively. Their new perspective on the world gave them a new perspective on its components. Old social interactions were no longer acceptable in their opinion. More than anything, though, the avant-garde rebelled against the society that judged their art to be inadequate. Modernism brought this rebellious attitude to Russian artists who had already been exposed to social revolutionary theory by the Russian intelligentsia. The artists combined the two related modes of thought in their art and their manifestoes, which both called for revolution in a way that was more focused on the art itself than social revolution.

After the Bolshevik Revolution the two concepts of revolutionary art converged in some ways. The avant-garde artists had been somewhat marginalized in Russia under the tsarist regime because they opposed the academic styles. These artists, who had been rallying for social change, saw the political revolution as a chance to pursue their artistic revolution. When the Bolsheviks came to power, the revolutionaries realized the effectiveness of art to convey their message in a society that was largely illiterate. They utilized artists of all movements to help transmit news and political messages in the form of posters, festivals, and even through culture-building activities, like the founding of museums. The Bolsheviks saw education as the key to changing society and pursued education through art. However, not all artistic styles meshed with the Bolshevik ideas of

² Leon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution (New York: International Publishers, 1925), p. 14

³ Pamela Kachurin, One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: The Retreat of the Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1998), p. 21

what revolutionary art was, and there was some controversy, particularly in the first years after the Revolution, as to what art was and was not in step with Bolshevik thought.

Two movements stand out as exemplars of Russian revolutionary art. Bolshevik poster art of the Civil War era, 1918-1921, and Russian Constructivism, an avant-garde movement that was at its peak during the first years of NEP from 1921-1924, were both effective in communicating their messages of change and optimism.⁴ They created art not only as an artistic process, but also as an educational one. To these artists, art was a social science. It was an analytical way of going about a change in society. This leads me to propose a definition of revolutionary art specific to the October Revolution: art based on a theoretical belief that art can bring about a fundamental change in society and individuals in a collective socialist system. Both poster art and Constructivist art set about this goal by creating an image of the future and a memory of the past. However, they were clearly different groups of artists with different results. Their distinct training backgrounds and historical contexts help explain their different results from similar goals.

Problems of Revolutionary Art

In the years after 1917 there were many different interpretations of what art was in line with Bolshevik and Soviet ideology. Interpretations varied both with time and contemporaneously. To understand the characteristics of poster art and Constructivism that gave these artists the same goals, we must first examine the problems of defining the revolutionary art of the October Revolution. In 1935, Walter Benjamin observed, “[Mankind’s] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own

destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order... Communism responds by politicizing art.”⁵ While art at all times is in some part shaped by the prevailing political climate, the Bolshevik Revolution focused artistic production on politics, and this caused many tensions and problems within the artistic sphere. Art was politicized both in its production and in its content. In this section we will address the politicization of artistic production, and in the later sections we will address content.

Politicizing Public Art

Public art was omnipresent in Russia during the Civil War years of 1918-1921. From posters to shop windows to huge festivals, art was a part of daily life. Government-sponsored posters and festivals appeared soon after the Revolution. Artistic dissemination of news and ideology was one of the Bolsheviks’ priorities, and posters became the primary means of accomplishing this goal. Artists drew on a long history of traditional and commercial arts to develop an effective poster style.

Russian poster art came out of the tradition of the *lubok*, a traditional form of printed image, the Russian icon painting, pre-revolutionary advertising posters, and satirical cartoons.⁶ The Russian *lubok*, an illustrated woodcut or broadside that first appeared in the 17th century, “typically combined illustrations with text, and its subject matter included religion and folklore as well as political developments and social issues of the day.”⁷ Russian *lubki* (the plural of *lubok*) often presented stories in a series of

⁴ Periods of Soviet history are often referred to by the economic plans in effect at the time. Thus, the Civil War era is also referred to as the period of War Communism, just as the 1920’s are often called NEP, the New Economic Policy.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968, originally published 1935), p. 242

⁶ Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 1

⁷ *ibid.*

panels and had moral messages. They informed peasants about current events and other social issues. The lubok was the beginning of mass consciousness in society, but paled in comparison to the degree of circulation of posters in the age of mass reproduction.

The Russian icon painting, a style of religious painting associated with the Orthodox Church, was also a traditional art form that poster artists adopted and adapted to better transmit their ideas to a wide scope of people. Icon paintings adorned churches and were often seen in the corners of rooms in private houses. The most influential element of icon painting on poster art was color; both types of art “‘coded’ their compositions through use of color.”⁸ This helped create a coherent symbolism and meaning across posters and icons. Russians were familiar with art that had a strong iconography and importance, and this way of viewing art carried over to Revolutionary posters and other art.⁹ The historical significance of the icon in Russian life enhanced the significance of posters, and all art during the Revolution. The icon and lubok, the ancient graphic traditions of Russia, found new life with the rise of mass production of posters and lent their styles and customs to the new age. As Walter Benjamin wrote, in an age of mechanical reproduction, “Instead of being based on ritual, [art] begins to be based on another practice—politics.”¹⁰ The connections with the individual and society remained, but in a different context.

Advertisements and satirical journals were the commercial precursors to Bolshevik posters. Advertisements were an urban form of popular art that was publicly on display in the streets, just like Rosta windows, drawings in the style of the lubok that

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 4

¹⁰ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” p. 224

were posted in telegraph offices and other shop windows with news and political themes. Satirical journals in Russia, like *Iskra* and *Budilnik*, began appearing in 1859.¹¹ However, there was a boom in satirical journals during and after the 1905 Revolution. The Revolution of 1905 radicalized artists and the satirical journals gave them an outlet in the political process that would not necessarily have been available to traditional easel painters.¹² Many of the leading poster artists of the October Revolution, such as Dmitri Moor, began their careers in 1905. Moreover, many of the concepts and themes of Bolshevik posters had foundations in the art of 1905. Whereas in 1905 the enemy was the tsar, in the Civil War it was the bourgeoisie and the Whites.¹³ Many Bolsheviks and illustrators received their training in revolutionary activity in 1905, and this was reflected in both the organizations and the art of 1917. The example of 1905 told them that posters and satirical cartoons were an effective means of communicating revolutionary ideas about society and war. Where lubki and icons provided forms and styles for story telling and iconography, journals provided humor and caricature. The combination of these elements made up the Bolshevik poster.

The Bolsheviks helped transform the lubok and the icon into political documents. The new government established agencies such as Gosizdat, the state publishing department, Litizdat, the military publishing department, and Rosta, the Russian Telegraph Agency, to quickly produce posters with pointed messages. These bureaus were established separate from Narkompros, the Commissariat of Education and Art, which coordinated most other artistic production during the Civil War. Anatolii Lunacharskii, the leader of Narkompros, was an independent thinker who often disagreed

¹¹ White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 7

¹² Robert Williams, *Artists in Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1977), p. 68

with Lenin and the Party elite, and because of this the Party felt the need to ensure that it had more formal control over posters, because these documents needed a homogenous message. Because posters were seen as such important weapons in the Civil War, these agencies were given complete independence from other agencies and access to ample materials.¹⁴ Government printing presses put out over 11 million posters during the Civil War, effectively turning a traditional art form into a political juggernaut.¹⁵ Folk art became revolutionary art.

One reason posters were successful during the Civil War was that they were understandable despite Russia's low literacy rates. By 1920, the literacy rate in Soviet territory was 44.1 percent, up from 28.4 percent in 1897, but still low relative to Western Europe.¹⁶ Posters, with their combination of graphics and words, could reach more people than newspapers or pamphlets because more people could understand them. It also helped that posters demanded less ink and paper than newspapers.¹⁷ Rosta windows were essentially drawings on news and ideological themes that "combined the functions of poster, newspaper, magazine and information bulletin."¹⁸ Posters were the source of both information and rhetorical propaganda to the majority of Russians.

Because posters relied heavily on their pictures as well as their words, the Bolsheviks had to create a system of images. "Like other 'invented traditions,' these iconographic images were consistent and incessantly repeated, and they resonated strongly with mythologies from the Russian past."¹⁹ They drew on lubki, icons, and

¹³ Williams, *Artists in Revolution*, p. 71

¹⁴ White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 39

¹⁵ White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 110

¹⁶ White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 18-19

¹⁷ Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, p. 4-5

¹⁸ Viktor Duvakin, as quoted in White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 67

¹⁹ Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, pp. 7-8

journals to create images that would be familiar but carry a new message. Bolsheviks likewise used traditional revolutionary language and images in their posters. They “usurped” the recognized symbols of revolution, like the red flag, “to legitimize the Bolshevik regime as the sole heir and defender of ‘the revolution’.”²⁰ By adding a revolutionary tilt to traditional types of artwork, the Bolsheviks created a revolutionary art. However, some styles of poster were more widely accepted as in line with the Revolution than others.

The Avant-Garde and Public Art

Poster art was not a stylistically cohesive artistic movement. Artists from many different artistic backgrounds drew posters, designed monuments, and organized festivals for the Bolsheviks during the Civil War. The avant-garde, also called left artists or Futurists in Russia at the time of the Revolution, was one of the first artistic groups to join the Bolsheviks.²¹ They initially had the support of the government. Lunacharskii was, at least initially, tolerant of all artistic styles, and David Shterenberg, head of IZO, the art branch of Narkompros, was a Futurist himself and actually favored left artists as a policy. Until the reorganization of Narkompros in 1921, left artists held significant power within the agency.

Russian modernism was a diverse movement that was heavily influenced by Western European modernism. Many young Russian artists studied in Paris and Germany. These young artists worked with peers like Picasso, whose Cubist paintings

²⁰ Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 70

and collages influenced Russian art when the artists returned to their homeland. In Russia, a group of painters including Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Vladimir Tatlin, and Kazimir Malevich adapted Cubism, Primitivism, and Italian Futurism, creating their own brand of modernism. They exhibited together in 1912, the same year Picasso's works were on display in Moscow.²² When war broke out in 1914, many of the Russian artists abroad returned home, making for an even more innovative artistic scene. Russian avant-garde art reflected the forms and ideas of Primitivism (especially the Russian Primitivism of icon painting), the colors of Matisse and the Fauves, the shapes of Cubism, the dynamism of Futurism, and the abstractions of Kandinsky, the Blaue Reiter, and German Expressionism. Avant-garde artists were also very supportive of the Revolution. They thought a new political order would bring acceptance for their new artistic order. In 1919 Malevich wrote: "Let us seize [the world] from the hands of nature and build a new world belonging to [man] himself."²³ While the avant-garde was generally excited about the political revolution, not all of the Bolsheviks were enthusiastic about avant-garde art.

When left artists participated in public art, the reaction was mixed. Some avant-garde public art was very successful. El Lissitzky, a Suprematist and Constructivist, made possibly the most famous poster from the Civil War, "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge," (1920, figure 1) for Litizdat.²⁴ He effectively created a purely geometric design that aptly complemented a Bolshevik message. During NEP, Constructivists, particularly

²¹ Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, p. 129-30. Futurist and left artist were the generic terms for avant-garde artists in the years following 1917, including Suprematists, Constructivists, Futurists, Cubists, and many others that did not fit into these categories, like Kandinsky and Chagall (Kachurin, p. 6).

²² Camilla Gray, The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), p. 133, and Christina Lodder, Russian Constructivism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 9

²³ Malevich, as quoted in Gray, The Russian Experiment, p. 219

²⁴ White, The Bolshevik Poster, p. 40

Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova (working with Maiakovskii), designed numerous posters for movies, books, and commercial products as well as posters with political messages.²⁵ These artists utilized the poster to experiment with modern artistic techniques like photomontage. However, other attempts at making avant-garde public art were not as successful.

Avant-garde artists were initially involved in other public art projects, such as agit-trains, monuments, and festivals. Beginning in 1918, the Bolsheviks sent trains, the first of which was the *V.I. Lenin*, around Russia decorated with depictions of Revolutionary events and themes. The trains carried some of the leaders of the government and distributed leaflets and showed films to rural peasants.²⁶ The agit-trains were important symbols of Bolshevik power in large part because the train was a symbol of modernity. The first train was decorated with abstractions and other modern art, but observers reported that the peasants did not like or understand these pictures.²⁷ Later trains had more representational decoration.

The public had a similar reaction to Futurist monuments. In 1918 Lenin proposed that cities around Russia should construct monuments to honor the heroes of the Revolution, who included political revolutionaries and artists.²⁸ The monuments were an attempt to legitimize the Bolshevik government by giving it a history and tradition. Lenin wanted to make the cities into classrooms teaching history, Socialist ideology, and a civic spirit.²⁹ Linked to an iconoclastic destruction of tsarists monuments, the

²⁵ Lodder, Russian Constructivism, 201

²⁶ Peter Kenez, The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization 1917-1929 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 60

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Camilla Gray, The Russian Experiment, p. 224

²⁹ Vladimir Tolstoy, "Art Born of the October Revolution," in Street Art of the Revolution, ed. Vladimir Tolstoy, Irina Bibikova, and Catherine Cooke (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), p. 14-15

monument project was much more successful in destroying old monuments than erecting new ones.³⁰ Many of those erected were of poor quality and many more never were built because of a lack of funds during the Civil War. Others, made by Futurists, were “unrecognizable” or worse; “Chagall’s bust of Marx frightened the local horsemen.”³¹ The avant-garde came under attack because ordinary people could not understand their art. Elitist art was unacceptable as revolutionary art, and many in the Bolshevik Party wanted the state to stop funding this non-revolutionary art.

The avant-garde received the most hostility over their designs for festivals. The two biggest festivals of the year took place on May 1, International Workers Day, and November 7, celebrating the anniversary of the Revolution. Festivals were seen as another means to teach the population about Bolshevik ideology.³² However, many festivals, despite Bolshevik reports, were meagerly attended.³³ The Futurists in IZO, namely Natan Altman, organized large parts of the early Bolshevik festivals.³⁴ Some officials objected to the art decorating the cities (in particular in Moscow and Petrograd) and banned the Futurists from participating in future festivals.³⁵ James von Geldern questions whether the public actually disliked and didn’t understand the Futurist art or whether this was simply the “Bolsheviks reacting to a society that did not always act as expected.”³⁶ The fact remains that festivals had the potential to impact many people—enough to make the Bolsheviks worried that they were not sending a clear message. The

³⁰ Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 54

³¹ White, The Bolshevik Poster, p. 113

³² James von Geldern, Bolshevik Festivals 1917-1920 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 86-88

³³ von Geldern, Bolshevik Festivals, p. 91

³⁴ von Geldern, Bolshevik Festivals, p. 98

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ von Geldern, Bolshevik Festivals, p. 101

Bolsheviks clearly had reservations about Futurist and non-objective art in general, in particular about its appropriateness for the public sphere, especially during a time of war.

“At a time when the ideological message to be imparted was crucial... Party and State officials... could not afford to waste an opportunity for propaganda on Futurist abstractions.”³⁷ While some avant-garde art was successful as public art during the Civil War years, most was considered too abstract; the focus was too much on form and not enough on content. Despite avant-garde rhetoric against academic easel painting, this was just what the Bolsheviks considered avant-garde art to be. To the Bolsheviks, it was meant for the museums, not the streets. A young group of avant-garde artists would change this association.

Constructivism and the Politicization of Avant-Garde Art

Constructivism was an avant-garde movement that developed out of Vladimir Tatlin’s experiments with three-dimensional artwork. It began as a movement around the time the Civil War was ending. A group of young avant-garde artists were interested in “the execution ‘of production tasks from the point of view of the new consumer in art.’”³⁸ That is to say, they acknowledged the new social order and tried to create an art to fit it. They were interested in applying the principles of Bolshevik ideology to artistic production. Constructivist art was just what Trotsky described revolutionary art to be: “incompatible with pessimism, with skepticism, and with all other forms of spiritual collapse. It is realistic, active, vitally collectivist, and filled with a limitless creative faith

³⁷ Kachurin, One Step Forward, p. 66

³⁸ V.M. Lobanov, as quoted in Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 67

in the Future.”³⁹ Beginning as an informal exhibition group, the Constructivists formed objects that blurred the line between painting and sculpture and between aesthetics and utility. “The artists stressed the considerations of practical applicability that lay behind their formal and compositional experiments.”⁴⁰ Constructivism was based on many of the principles the Bolsheviks had been advocating during the Civil War, and was clearly a product of the Revolution.

In 1919 Tatlin wrote, “The task... is to find a single form, simultaneously architectonic, plastic, and painterly, which would have the possibility of synthesizing the separate forms of these or other technical apparatuses.”⁴¹ The Constructivists took up this challenge and tried to create constructions that fit this description. They defined a construction as “the combination of lines, and the plates and forms which they define; it is a system of forces.”⁴² Constructions were both technical and pictorial, material and purely artistic. They also defined construction’s counterpart, composition: “Composition is the act of combination according to a set of conventional characteristics. The characteristic which distinguishes [composition] from construction is the absence of the organic quality.”⁴³ A pictorial construction combines spatial and graphic elements that could be constructed in three dimensions, while a composition combines graphic elements that have little or no spatial relation to each other.⁴⁴ Constructions can take on sculptural forms as well as two-dimensional forms. A construction is “the purposeful

³⁹ Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, p. 15

⁴⁰ Aleksandr Lavrent’yev, “The Future is Our Only Goal,” in Rodchenko Stepanova: The Future is Our Only Goal, ed. Peter Noever (Munich: Prestel, 1991), p. 14

⁴¹ Tatlin, as quoted in Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 59

⁴² “Protocol No. 1,” in Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932, ed. Richard Andrews and Milena Kalinovska (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, 1990), p. 65

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 84-5

creation of a new organism.”⁴⁵ It is the transformation of art into life. To Constructivists, constructions were the only true form of artistic expression.

A critical aspect of Constructivism was that the Constructivists linked their artistic ideas and output to the Bolshevik ideology. They spoke the Bolshevik language in their manifestoes, writing about “the blossoming of a new culture,” the evils of individualism and the dangers of revolutionaries in art who have strayed from the task at hand.⁴⁶ However, many avant-garde artists before them had spoken similarly. The difference between Constructivist revolutionary rhetoric and that of other avant-garde movements was that artistically, the Constructivists’ creations were also in line with Bolshevik ideology. Rather than making abstract easel paintings, the Constructivists made art that reflected the industrial age and social relations the Bolsheviks dreamed of. Trotsky argued that “One of the ultimate aims of the Revolution is to overcome completely the separation of these two kinds of activity [intellectual work and physical work].”⁴⁷ Constructivists focused on creating art from industrial materials because this helped link artists to the workers. Moreover, Constructivist art “contained a utilitarian imperative which limited its pure manifestation to the construction of useful as opposed to aesthetic objects.”⁴⁸ Constructivist art was designed to be active and serve a purpose. Unlike Suprematists, who mainly painted abstractions on canvases, the Constructivists were engineers of art, not painters. This crucial difference made Constructivism revolutionary art, while the Bolsheviks rejected other avant-garde movements.

⁴⁵ Aleksandr Rodchenko, “Conclusions on Construction and Composition,” in Art Into Life, ed. Andrews and Kalinovska, p. 66

⁴⁶ Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner, “The Realist Manifesto,” in Russian Art of the Avant-Garde Theory and Criticism, ed. John Bowlit (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 61

⁴⁷ Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, p. 11

⁴⁸ Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 83

Because the Constructivist movement began around the time of NEP, it necessarily had different goals and different means of achieving its goals than both poster artists and avant-garde movements during the Civil War. Throughout the Civil War, many artists' actions were driven by a need for food. Many artists left Moscow and Petrograd for regional centers like Vitebsk because of low food supplies in the largest cities. In the beginning of 1918 starvation forced many left artists into working for the government, the only steady paycheck available.⁴⁹ This was true of poster artists as well; Rosta was said to pay very well.⁵⁰ But NEP provided an opportunity for a new artistic movement that was free of the restrictions of the Civil War years. With the end of the war, artists did not have to struggle as hard for everyday sustenance and they could also expect more funding for schools that may have been ignored during the tense war. This meant that they could realistically create a program of action that involved social change and implement it. Constructivists worked mostly through state art and technical institutes, which solidified their place as part of the system while allowing them enough freedom to work on their own projects.

Constructivists learned from the problems of the avant-garde before them. They politicized their non-objective art to create a new kind of revolutionary art. Constructions were active revolutionary tools that expanded Bolshevik ideology into avant-garde life. With social change as a goal, the Constructivists stressed utility over aesthetics. To fashion a new society and a new art, Constructivists needed to mold new artists. They, like poster artists, turned to education to create the revolutionary artist.

⁴⁹ Kachurin, One Step Forward, p. 43

⁵⁰ White, The Bolshevik Poster, p. 80

Creating the Revolutionary Artist: Education and Art

The Bolshevik rhetoric on art was closely linked to the Party's thoughts about education. This was so much so that Narkompros was the organization in charge of both artistic life and education. The Bolsheviks' goal of reshaping society could only be attained through education, and art education was a way to create a new cultural sphere. However, different groups disagreed on the appropriate path to establish a proletarian culture.

Artists educated other artists mainly through a system of art institutes. They taught their pupils the essential skills needed to be an active member of the new society.

Pamela Kachurin writes:

Narkompros invested pedagogical activity with tremendous importance, in that the training of new teachers and young students was the key to building the Socialist state. Art education was valued in that new cadres of artists could be trained to carry out state commissions and propaganda.... Because of the emphasis on training young people, IZO was given a substantial budget to open and operate studios. By Summer 1919, a network of thirty State Free Art Studios was operating under IZO.⁵¹

An official commitment to education gave Constructivists and other left art groups a place to profess their views, and the vast array of different institutions allowed them to stay out of the direct gaze of people outside of IZO who might not approve of their movements. "Members of the non-Bolshevik cultural intelligentsia were faced with two options: embed themselves in institutions and try to adapt to the new conditions, or emigrate."⁵² Narkompros in general, and IZO in particular, were less stringent in their commitment to Bolshevik orthodoxy than other government agencies. Left artists could still work at art institutes "to a large extent due to lack of direct control imposed by

⁵¹ Kachurin, One Step Forward, p. 94

higher authorities, coupled with the fact that individuals at the helms of art institutions accommodated subtle shifts in policy in order to appear useful to the regime, to the country, and to the economy.”⁵³ Lunacharskii and Shterenberg in Narkompros at least initially supported them. The Party was not necessarily pleased with this, as is evidenced by the reorganization of Narkompros in 1921, in which Shterenberg lost most of his power, but during the Civil War era and beyond the Party elite held little actual control over Narkompros’ actions. This meant that left artists like the Constructivists could design their own programs at the schools they taught at.

The Constructivists agreed with the Bolsheviks that education was the means to a new society. Inkhuk and Vkhutemas were the Constructivists’ means to their goals. Controlling Inkhuk, the Institute of Artistic Culture, after Kandinsky’s departure in 1921, the Constructivists designed a curriculum for the study of art. The Constructivist program was based on the object and taught “the ‘constructive method’ and art as the ‘organization of life.’”⁵⁴ This program transferred to Vkhutemas, the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops, where the faculty was split between Constructivists and traditional painters and sculptors. The theory behind Vkhutemas was that “the most practical path towards the realization of the new synthesis between art and life, art and technology, lay through the creation and training of the ‘artist-constructor,’ whose training—partially technical and partially artistic—would enable him to participate fully in the ‘constructive’ work of forming a socialist environment.”⁵⁵

⁵² Kachurin, *One Step Forward*, p. 93

⁵³ Kachurin, *One Step Forward*, p. 139

⁵⁴ Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 81

⁵⁵ Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 109

Vkhutemas was divided into separate workshops: plane and color, graphics, volume and space (sculpture), space and volume (architecture), and the wood and metal faculty. Conventional teachers dominated some workshops, like the sculpture and the plane and color workshops, but the Constructivists held sway over others, particularly the wood and metal workshops. In general there was a balance between the different movements, but there was certainly tension among the faculty. Vkhutemas and Inkhuk were the perfect places for Constructivism to flourish because they were, to some degree, under the radar of the Bolsheviks who wanted to see an end to “Futurism.” Vkhutemas was an art and technical school. Unlike movements such as Futurism and Suprematism, which focused on innovative easel painting, Constructivism combined art and technology in ways that were innovative and in line with Bolshevik ideology. Constructivists taught art students to be both artists and engineers, which, along with agitational art, was exactly the type of program the Bolsheviks desired in an art school. The school program was a means of attaining Constructivism’s goals.

Constructivist educational plans came into conflict with those of Proletkul’t, the proletarian culture movement. Whereas Constructivists essentially taught artists to be workers and engineers, Proletkul’t wanted to teach workers to be artists. Lunacharskii, a founding member of the Proletkul’t movement, declared, in his first statement as Commissar of Enlightenment, “The people themselves, consciously or unconsciously, must evolve their own culture.”⁵⁶ Proletkul’t wanted to help the proletariat create a totally new culture, a new art that reflects the new society. However, “Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders realized that old and new must coexist temporarily until a new

⁵⁶ as quoted in Sheila Fitzpatrick, The Commissariat of Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 89

proletarian spirit would emerge dominant in the cultural sphere.”⁵⁷ There was considerable debate within Proletkul’t about whether, as Lebedev-Polianskii, president of Proletkul’t, believed, “only the proletariat could participate in the creation of proletarian culture”⁵⁸ or if the intelligentsia could participate as well. The former position won the debate and Proletkul’t set about trying to find proletarian artists. Proletkul’t was a different approach to solving the same problem that Constructivists were trying to solve: how to create proletarian culture. The variation demonstrates the variety of organizations, educational practices, and interpretations of culture and social change in the fledgling Bolshevik state.

Despite different opinions on what constitutes revolutionary art, some common threads run throughout. Education is the universal method for producing changes in society and culture. The driving force behind the revolutionary art of the October Revolution is the vision of the potential greatness of the future. While each person has a different idea of what the future will bring, revolutionary artists agreed that the Revolution hailed the coming of a better world. Going hand in hand with this was the destruction of the old.

Drawing the Future

Marxism, at its core, is a doctrine of the industrial age. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx describes the fall of the bourgeoisie and the rise of the proletariat in terms of industrial development: “The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and

⁵⁷ Kachurin, One Step Forward, p. 26

⁵⁸ Fitzpatrick, The Commissariat of Enlightenment, p. 97

appropriates products.... [The bourgeoisie's] fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”⁵⁹ Marxism was originally a doctrine of rebellion for industrial workers, a commodity of which Russia had precious few. Marx had believed that one of the Western European industrialized countries would see the beginning of the Proletarian Revolution. However, revolutionary intelligentsia like Lenin and Trotsky reconfigured Marx's ideology to suit a nation in which only 15% of the population lived in the cities, and even fewer could be considered proletarians.⁶⁰ Part of the vision of Russian Marxism was to promote quick industrialization. In 1913 Lenin wrote, “cities are the centers of economic, political, and intellectual or spiritual life of a people and constitute the chief promoters of progress.”⁶¹ Cities, the workers that populated them, and industrialism were the focus of Marxism/Leninism, rather than the peasantry that was the demographic majority and whom Lenin included in his rhetoric for practical purposes. Bolsheviks found their identity in an efficient industrial economy and the workers of the Revolution.⁶² The Bolshevik utopia was an industrialized economy based on collectivist principles peopled by a new type of person who has matured in a new, proletarian culture. Artists borrowed this vision. The new art of the October Revolution was, in Trotsky's words, “incompatible with pessimism, with skepticism, and with all other forms of spiritual collapse. It is realistic, active, vitally collectivist, and filled with a limitless creative faith in the Future.”⁶³ The artists of the October Revolution imagined the future and translated it into artistic principles.

⁵⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p. 32

⁶⁰ Bonnell, Iconography of Power, p. 22

⁶¹ V.I. Lenin, as quoted in Richard Stites, Revolutionary Dreams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 197

⁶² The Bolsheviks included peasants in their imagery too, although at times they did so reluctantly. The most familiar example of this is the sickle in the Soviet emblem.

⁶³ Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, p. 15

The New Worker

The proletarian worker was one of the fundamental images the Bolsheviks used to define their new plan for society. As a Marxist ideology, Bolshevism was at least to some degree based on the idea of a proletarian revolution overthrowing the bourgeois social order. While Russian Marxists had tweaked Marx's ideas by including peasant farmers in the class struggle to make their ideology more applicable to the state of Russia in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the proletariat remained the central group in Russian socialist theory.

When the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917 they chose the worker as a symbol for their ideology. "The creation of a compelling visual language proved to be particularly critical in the campaign to establish the 'working class' as the heroic collectivity of the Bolshevik revolution and of world history more generally."⁶⁴ The Bolsheviks needed to create an image of the worker to show the population, many of whom had no idea what a city or a factory looked like, what their vision for the future was and, just as importantly, who was to be a part of the future society. At a time when their hold on power was very much in doubt, the Bolsheviks turned to the artists of Litizdat, Gosizdat, and Rosta to spread their message.

The worker the artists chose to depict became a blacksmith in most cases. The blacksmith was an appropriate choice because both urban and rural people would recognize it, and the blacksmith in particular stands for someone who molds, shapes and refines one thing into another, just as the Bolsheviks wanted to reshape society. Socialist

⁶⁴ Bonnell, Iconography of Power, p. 22

artists had used the blacksmith as a symbol since the 1905 Revolution.⁶⁵ The Bolsheviks continued this tradition, taking it further than it had gone before. The first Bolshevik symbol, approved April 19, 1918, was “a crossed hammer and plough inside a red star (designer unknown). The interior motifs celebrated the alliance of workers and peasants who had allegedly made the Revolution and were now defending it together.”⁶⁶ The hammer was the recognizable tool of the blacksmith. One of the first uses of an image of a blacksmith was in Aleksandr Apsit’s poster *Year of the Proletarian Dictatorship, October 1917- October 1918* (figure 2).⁶⁷ In this poster, a blacksmith and a peasant flank a view of an army of common people bearing red flags with an industrial city and a rising sun in the background. The blacksmith seems more important than the peasant because he is standing victorious on top of tsarist emblems in the foreground. This showed the primary position of the worker in the new society. The blacksmith served as a metaphor for the Bolshevik mission. Blacksmiths built the modern age, reshaping metal into useful industrial materials. The Bolsheviks too wanted to shape the modern age, reforming humanity into a proletarian culture.

The significance of the worker in Soviet posters became evident during the Civil War years of 1918-1921. During the Civil War the Bolsheviks were desperate for soldiers and steel and used propaganda posters to try to recruit workers for the army and the mills. In Soviet war posters, many of which were drawn by Moor or Nikolai Kochergin and produced by Litizdat, workers are depicted as joining the army, doing metalwork, or fighting off the enemies at the gate. The first two actions are to be expected; many of the posters were recruitment posters and male workers were the

⁶⁵ Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, p. 24

⁶⁶ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 85

primary group wanted for the army and for work making munitions. The most interesting posters are those that depict workers, with their hammers and blacksmith's aprons, fighting off the armies attacking Soviet cities. In posters like Moor's *We Will Not Surrender Petrograd* (1919, figure 3) and Boris Zvorykin's *Struggle of the Red Knight with the Dark Force* (1919, figure 4) workers are shown as larger than life, exceeding their roles as laborers and rising to superhuman tasks. Moor shows four huge commoners—two workers, a peasant and a seaman—defending the factories of Petrograd against a miniature depiction of tsarist forces. The message is that the Soviet worker is capable of great feats. The Soviet worker is more than a pawn of the bourgeoisie; he is a force to be reckoned with. This was an important message for the Bolsheviks to impress into the minds of their workers who saw the imminent threat of hostile forces. It reinforced the message that Russia had entered the era of the proletariat, a time when even the lowest worker was more powerful than the strongest bourgeois capitalist.

Zvorykin's poster shows a blacksmith on horseback slaying two knights of the old regime. This poster asserts that Bolshevik Russia is the proletariat personified. With a shield with a hammer and sickle, the smith has become the new Russia. He is the defender of Bolshevism, and therefore of the common people as well. The Bolsheviks seized on the dramatic and urgent circumstances surrounding the Civil War and used the image of the worker to help real workers feel a connection to the government and get involved in the war cause. Even more than this, though, they created the idea of a new Soviet worker, stronger than anyone could have ever imagined because of Bolshevism. The new worker was the worker of the future. It was the basis for the new era.

⁶⁷ Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, p. 23

Posters also helped create a new worker, not just the idea of one. Many posters, both during War Communism and after, encouraged common people to change their ways to become part of a new society, most often by learning to read. Even during the Civil War, when there were hardly any books or organized reading programs, the Bolsheviks printed posters encouraging education. The last years of the Civil War saw a multitude of education posters, with titles such as *Set up Village Reading Rooms* (1919), *Reading is One of a Person's Duties* (1920), *Literacy is the Path to Communism* (1920), and a *lubok*-style poster by A.A. Radakov called *The Life of the Illiterate; the Life of the Literate* (1920, figure 5). Radakov's poster tells the story of two peasants, one who cannot read and is duped out of a cow and money and could not find the shops he was looking for because he could not read, and another who successfully maneuvers these situations because he can read.⁶⁸ Another poster by Radakov stated *Knowledge Will Tear Apart the Chains of Slavery* (1920, figure 6). Learning, and learning to read in particular, was a crucial aspect of the Bolshevik program of transformation of society. A literate citizen was seen as one who could participate in the new industrial way of life.

The Constructivist view of the future was not as explicit as Litizdat's or the Rosta artists'. However, Constructivists held strong beliefs on what the future held and how art would help achieve this glory. They primarily expressed their ideas of the future in the forms their art took rather than in realistic images. The relationship between art and production was the basis for their artistic output. In his essay Constructivism (1922), Alexei Gan declares, "Art is dead! It has no place in the human labor apparatus.... The revaluation of the functions of human activity, the linking of every effort with the general

⁶⁸ White, The Bolshevik Poster, p. 116. White notes that this poster was also criticized because it connected literacy with capitalism, not the new way of life, but judging from Radakov's other works, this

range of social objectives—that is the ideology of our time.”⁶⁹ Gan’s idea of redefining labor and all human activity strike at the root of Constructivist thought. One form of work was no more valuable than any other. Art⁷⁰ was as valuable to society as producing nails or planting a field because all had the same goal of improving society. Russian Constructivism was the art of life. It was beyond art because its art *was* life itself, not just a representation of life. Every aspect of human experience was grouped together by the Constructivists. Thus, the artists became workers and the workers artists.

Equally important in the Constructivist idea of work and the workers was their idea of the collectivity of art and work. Rodchenko, in his “Slogans” of 1921, wrote, “*Any person who has organized his life, his work, and himself is a genuine artist. Work for life... Work amongst all, for all and with all...*”⁷¹ Rodchenko’s idea is that the Marxist organization of labor changes the relation of the worker to society. In a new collectivist relationship workers come together to produce, and their products are inherently artistic because they are creations, not representations. This is because the artist-creators are active members of society, not alienated intelligentsia. Interestingly, another translation of this same passage reads: “The *man* who has organised his life, his work and himself is the *modern man*.”⁷² The genuine artist, the creator of products, can also be translated as the modern man. Rodchenko and the Constructivists argue that the act of production, the act that defines the worker, creates a new kind of person, Modern

probably was not the intent.

⁶⁹ Alexei Gan, “*Constructivism (excerpts)*,” in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Bowlt, p. 223

⁷⁰ Constructivists probably would not agree that all art was as valuable to society as work. Only art with a social purpose, like their art, would be considered useful. On top of this, they did not consider themselves artists, because art was no longer a valid term for what they did. Instead, they would have considered themselves constructors or engineers.

⁷¹ Aleksandr Rodchenko, “Slogans,” in *Art into Life*, ed. Andrews and Kalinovska, p. 71 (emphasis in original)

Man. This person is fundamentally different from other people who have come before: this person has organized his/her life according to Bolshevik principles by adopting a collectivist ethic and has become a producer of real goods (as opposed to ideas or idle art). In doing this, Modern Man has become a Constructivist. Constructivists argued that Bolshevism has a new idea of human behavior but this can only be achieved if the Bolshevik lifestyle is combined with a new view of culture: the Constructivist view.

Constructivists had an idea of what the new worker might look like. Many Constructivists, most prominently Varvara Stepanova and Lyubov' Popova, designed clothing as one aspect of the art of production. The new workers needed functionality in all aspects of their lives, which meant they needed clothing that was appropriate for their particular jobs (figure 7). Popova, commenting on her costumes for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, by Meierkhol'd, wrote: "Putting aside the aesthetic principle of the historical, national, psychological or everyday nature of clothing, in this particular task I wanted to find a general principle of *prozodezhda* [production clothing] for the professional work of the actor in connection with the essentials of his present professional role."⁷³ Her ideas were expanded to other professions, not just actors. The designers were attempting to create new principles by which to design clothing. They needed a new theory of what was important in both clothing and the design process because they believed they were creating for a fundamentally different group of people. Popova rejects the bourgeois classifications that previously defined art, clothing, and society in favor of production, the new standard. Tatiana Strizenova argues that they created their new theory around collectivist principles. "The Great October Revolution eliminated social differences in

⁷³ Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Slogans," in *Rodchenko and the Arts of Revolutionary Russia*, ed. David Elliott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), p.129 (emphasis in original)

clothing for the first time in world history. A new concept came into being: mass clothing for workers.”⁷⁴ Constructivist clothing accentuated the characteristics of the new worker, who was defined by function, not sex. The patterns and fabric were as important as functionality in each article of clothing. Life for the new worker was unified in a general path toward social objectives, and the worker’s clothing was unified in purpose as well.

Constructivism imagined a post-October world where there were no distinctions between art and life or art and other types of work. Like the Civil War era poster artists, Constructivists created a new Soviet worker capable of greater things than was ever imagined. Whereas posters glorified the worker’s might and virtues, the Constructivists glorified the worker in his creative capacities. This difference was because the Constructivists’ focus was primarily on changing the art world rather than changing popular opinion. However, both groups of artists believed that by re-imagining the worker in their art as a new creative and political force they could actually change how people perceived themselves and how they behaved. The belief in the effectiveness of art as a tool for social change was the link of Revolutionary art.

Industrialization and the City

Artists seized on the Marxist vision of industrialization to glorify the machine and its place in art and the future. The city and industrial production were central elements of Bolshevik utopian visions. Even before the Revolution dreams of industrialization and the free city “nourished visions of a new and better urbanized Russia that would allow the

⁷³ as quoted in Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 149

application of technology to the comforts of life.”⁷⁵ Artists too realized the power of the city as symbol and used this in their artwork.

An urban industrial center symbolized the future of life in Russia. Poster artists seized on this and began depicting cities in their works. During the Civil War the Bolsheviks were expending all of their energy and resources fighting the White armies and had little time or money to begin an industrial development campaign. The idea of the factory city was still a dream of future prosperity at this time. The city was going to be the home of the new way of life. Most often the industrial city was a backdrop for an idealized picture of Bolshevik glory. In Apsit’s poster *Year of the Proletarian Dictatorship, October 1917- October 1918* (figure 2), a city stands on the horizon, behind the masses of joyous liberated Russians and fruitful growing fields. The smoke from the factories is merging with the cheerful clouds in the sky, partially obscuring the sun rising on a new era of history. Cities were seen as signs of future prosperity. The image of the city enhanced the Bolshevik’s standing in the eyes of viewers because the city stood for wealth and freedom, not filth and overpopulation. The clouds rising from the city in Apsit’s poster are not dirty air, they are, as Stites puts it, “freer air.”⁷⁶ The city was everything the Bolsheviks had to offer: economic prosperity and freedom from servitude.

Other artists drew on this imagery and expanded it. Dmitri Moor used the industrial city as a backdrop in many of his posters. In *The Tsarist Regiments and the Red Army* (1919, figure 8) he uses an image very similar to Apsit’s to compare the new Russia to the old. What is new is the context in which the city is referenced. Moor uses

⁷⁴ Tatiana Strizenova, quoted in Angela Volker, “Is the Future a Goal?” in *The Future is Our Only Goal*, ed. Noever, p. 26

⁷⁵ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 30

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

the city in a poster about the ongoing Civil War. He is saying that if the Bolsheviks win this war, this glorious landscape is what we have to look forward to; if not, things will go back to how they were. While the Bolsheviks were fighting for their lives and they could hardly afford to look a week ahead, let alone years, their symbolism still relied on their vision of the city and future economic prosperity. In Moor's *We Will Not Surrender Petrograd* (1919, figure 3) and *Death to World Imperialism* (1919, figure 9), Russian workers are defending their industrial paradises against attacking menaces. The still unbuilt city connected so well with the consciousness of the Russian people that it was used in a wholly unrelated context. Rosta windows, like *At the Moment No-one is Poorer than Us* (1920, figure 10), by Cheremnykh and Maiakovskii, illustrated how even during the Civil War the Bolsheviks instilled hope in Russians in the form of the city. The poster tells viewers that "Russia would be 'richer than all in a few years'"⁷⁷ when they had electricity and urbanization. The use of the city as an image during the Civil War years, when the fight for the Bolsheviks' survival overshadowed economic growth, shows the centrality of a vision of the future in Bolshevik popularity and power.

Constructivism was equally devoted to the vision of industrialism and the city. The Italian Futurist movement, brought to Russia in the pre-World War I years, had focused on integrating urbanism and technology into art.⁷⁸ Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova, in their 1913 document "Rayonists and Futurists: a Manifesto," declare: "the whole brilliant system of modern times—our trousers, jackets, shoes, trolleys, cars,

⁷⁷ White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 76

⁷⁸ The Italian Futurists were both visual artists and authors, and when their movement came to Russia it found followers in both areas of the arts. Russian Futurism in visual arts was influential, but never fully caught on, but Futurist authors, led by Maiakovskii, made up an important movement in the Revolutionary era. Around the time of the Revolution the Italian and Russian Futurists broke off their contacts because the Italians moved towards Fascism.

airplanes, railways, grandiose steamships—is fascinating, is a great epoch, one that has known no equal in the entire history of the world.”⁷⁹ Constructivists went beyond this, combining their vision of the glorious future with Bolshevik goals like collectivism and anti-bourgeois sentiment. Constructivists expressed their fascination with modernity and modern technology in their industrial and architectural designs and their new uses of industrial materials in art. Aleksandr Rodchenko wrote in 1920 that “The art of the future will not be the cosy decoration of family homes. It will be just as indispensable as 48-storey skyscrapers, mighty bridges, wireless, aeronautics and submarines which will be transformed into art.”⁸⁰ The future was not only going to be industrial, but it was not going to be bourgeois. Constructivists’ dreams of new forms of creation for the new way of life naturally found a form of expression in the properties and life of the city.

The Constructivist work most closely connected with both the Revolution and the idea of the city is Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (1919-20, figure 11). The monument was to be the tallest building in the world. It was a spiraling iron and glass Tower of Babel reaching toward the heights of proletarian civilization.⁸¹ The monument was never built, but its grand scale and lofty engineering ambitions—each glass section was to rotate at a different rate—made it legendary. Tatlin’s tower was meant to be the epitome of Bolshevism. It was practical, collective, urban, and modern. Government offices would have been inside, as well as lecture halls and a media center broadcasting news and slogans of the day.⁸² The monument was to be economically and

⁷⁹ Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova, “Rayonists and Futurists: a Manifesto,” in Russian Art of the Avant-Garde, ed. Bowlt, p. 89

⁸⁰ Aleksandr Rodchenko, “Statement at XIX State Exhibition, Moscow, 1920,” in Rodchenko and the Arts of Revolutionary Russia, ed. Elliott, p. 8

⁸¹ Gray, The Russian Experiment, p. 226

⁸² *ibid.*

politically useful, not just idle art. Set in the center of Moscow, the monument was going to be the center of the new city, the city of freedom and prosperity.

Other artists following Tatlin expanded on his ideas. The Constructivists began making paintings and sculptures that reflected the cities in which they lived. Artists like Rodchenko, Gustav Klutssis, and Naum Gabo designed kiosks and radio towers that would spread public messages like Tatlin's tower (figure 12). Art could be a working part of society in their beliefs. The desire to influence society merged with innovative designs ever further. Painted constructions illustrated three-dimensional structures in two dimensions while evoking the measured and precise forms of machinery. Artists with backgrounds in the graphic arts like Rodchenko, Popova, and Stepanova designed pictorial constructions (figure 13). These constructions often looked like plans for mythical structures or machines. Aleksandr Vesnin wrote,

Just as every part of a machine is a force that has been realized in an appropriate form and material, active and necessary in a particular system, and its form and material cannot be arbitrarily changed without compromising the activity of the system as a whole, so every element of the object constructed by the artist is a realized force and may not be arbitrarily discarded or altered without reducing the efficiency of the system in question, i.e., the object.⁸³

Vesnin compares a construction to a machine with moving parts, each essential to the composite. While pictorial constructions may look like a heap of geometric lines, to their creators they were graphic illustrations of the merging of industrial efficiency and art.

Constructivists also experimented with sculpture and other materials inspired by the industrial city. Metallic sculptures were reminiscent of buildings, lampposts, and heavy machinery. The Stenberg brothers, Georgii and Vladimir, and Konstantin Medunetskii built geometric sculptures reminiscent of scenes of the city: cranes,

lampposts, bridges, and tools (figure 14). Their choices of material reflected their commitment to modernity and the potential they saw in the new media. They also brought the artists closer to the worker; both now worked in constructing metal structures that were practical but also aesthetic. Constructivist sculpture was the sculpture of the industrial age. Furniture, advertisement and clothing artists similarly designed the material goods of the city and the industrial age. Their focus on mass-produced consumer goods showed their belief in the importance of the mass society of the city. All of these utilized modern technology in the production process, particularly advertisements (figure 15). Constructivists were innovators of photography, using photomontage techniques to create an atmosphere of the city and modernity in their advertisements and posters. The constructions of the 1920's were the first step toward merging art and production.

Posters and Constructivist works may not appear to address similar themes, but both drew their inspiration from similar visions of the future. Poster artists, directed by their employers at military and other government printing agencies, depicted their optimism for a new society in clearly recognizable words and images. Constructivist sculptures and designs expressed optimism in their use of materials, their utility, and their concepts, but were not overtly associated with revolutionary messages. Both groups felt they were creating a new vision of the future in their creations. However, they found that to dream a vision of the future they had to recreate the past as a nightmare.

⁸³ Aleksandr Vesnin, "Credo," in Art into Life, ed. Andrews and Kalinovska, p. 68

Creating a Past

Hegel and Marx's ideas on the dialectic and historical materialism introduced the concept of repeated and renewing conflict between competing groups. The theory of class struggle created a dualism of protagonist and enemy in Marxist thought.⁸⁴ The Marxian proletariat necessarily needed an origin and an enemy. To convey their ideas of the future, the Bolsheviks had to create an oppositional past in the public consciousness. Because the Bolshevik hold on power was so tenuous during the Civil War years, the art addressing enemies and the past focused on those groups of people who threatened to overthrow Bolshevik rule and return Russia to the old, pre-Bolshevik lifestyle. Artists who envisioned a new beginning for society and culture based their visions in contrast to their ideas of what the old regime was and what life had been like. Their dreams of the future were clear, but to have a resonance with the public they needed to be compared to an identifiable past. The failure of the old regime necessitated their visions of a new one.

Enemies of the People

Art proved particularly useful in creating and tearing down enemies of the people. The Bolsheviks used art to create resonant images of class and state enemies who were threats to the population. Through the posters of Litizdat, Gosizdat, and Rosta and the rhetoric of the Constructivists, Russians learned who was trying to destroy the dreams of the Bolsheviks and their supporters.⁸⁵ The art community described threats to both public safety and stability and to cultural progress.

⁸⁴ Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, p. 187

⁸⁵ This rhetoric varied among different artistic groups and organizations. Some organizations, like Proletkult, saw intelligentsia artists like the Constructivists as the main threats to cultural and social progress. The Constructivists saw groups like the Futurists as the old style, while the Futurists saw groups

Victoria Bonnell attempts to classify the enemies depicted in Bolshevik poster art. She divides the enemies into internal and external enemies, with internal enemies greatly outnumbering external ones like Woodrow Wilson, David Lloyd George, and Kaiser Wilhelm. She classifies internal enemies in three categories: elements from the old regime (like the tsar, priests, kulaks, and capitalists), political opponents (like the Mensheviks, the Whites and the Poles), and workplace and other villains (like parasites, traitors, deserters, and shirkers).⁸⁶ During the Civil War period, the first two groups of internal enemies were most commonly depicted in posters because they represented the most imminent danger. I will primarily discuss the first group because by creating codified images of the old regime the artists stamped their own views on the history of the Revolution.

The posters depicting the enemies of the people primarily took two forms: the caricature or allegorical poster and the lubok-style story. Aleksandr Apsit and Viktor Deni were the leading caricaturist of the poster designers. Both artists drew on pre-Revolutionary images to put a face on the enemies of Bolshevism. Their most prominent image was that of the serpent. Apsit's posters *To the Deceived Brothers* (1918, figure 16) and *The International* (1918/19, figure 17), Dmitri Moor's *Death to World Imperialism* (1919, figure 9) and Deni's *St. George* (1920, figure 18) depict workers fighting against mythical creatures representing the old regime and capitalism.⁸⁷ The serpent was a useful image because it was shown as trying to choke off and destroy the Russian people and the

such as romantic painters as outdated. There was very little agreement across artistic associations as to who the enemy was, but all of them had an enemy. In the end, the government began choosing sides and declaring whose art professed the correct vision of the future and warned of the proper enemies, and many of the artists discussed here were condemned. This will all be discussed in more detail below.

⁸⁶ Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, p. 191

⁸⁷ Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, p. 195

progress they had made with the Bolsheviks. In *To the Deceived Brothers*, Apsit shows the heads of the tsar and his collaborators on a serpent that is trying to surround and destroy an urban landscape. The Bolshevik worker slaying the hydra connected the picture to familiar Christian imagery (the popular icon image of St. George and the dragon) while demonizing the enemies of the fledgling state. By picturing the tsar and the old regime as serpents Apsit redefines the past with regard to the future. Whereas the Bolsheviks are trying to build a new society of prosperity, symbolized in the industrial city, the tsar was attempting to hold back the unstoppable force of the Russian people, represented in the massive worker.

Likewise, the other three posters depict capitalism as the enemy that is trying to destroy Bolshevism in its youth. The monster of capitalism is strong in each case, but the posters' message is that a united proletariat (or the Bolshevik leaders, represented by Trotsky, in Deni's case) can defeat it. In each poster capitalism is shown as being a foe of the workers—a foe whose time has come. The use of serpent imagery gave the public a sense of how powerful the enemy was, and thus how important unity was. But the images of workers defeating the huge monsters also gave the people a belief that they could indeed emerge victorious.

Similar posters by Viktor Deni and Nikolai Kochergin depicted capitalists as fat, greedy, disgusting creatures with few human characteristics remaining. Deni's *Capital* (1919, figure 19) distinguished him as “one of the first Soviet artists to develop an iconographic image of the ‘type of *burzhui* (fat, like a balloon, an urban type—always in a top hat).”⁸⁸ Deni's image was almost reptilian in complexion and had a spider web behind it. This served to emphasize the evils of capitalism but also added some humor to

the serious poster. The capitalist's clothing and greedy association with money were repeated by Moor and others. Moor's *The Tsarist Regiments and the Red Army* (1919, figure 8) and Kochergin's *Capital and Co.* (1920, figure 20) draw on Deni's images in different ways, but both put greedy capitalists in their historical place. Moor's poster presents an image of the bourgeoisie that was becoming standardized: a man smoking a cigar surrounded by money.⁸⁹ He is sitting with the tsar, a priest, and other figures of the old regime. Kochergin's poster depicts "Capital" as a fat monster on a throne above three tiers of people representing capitalism.⁹⁰ These posters build on Deni's image of the capitalist to place him with other class enemies as defined by the Bolsheviks, whether this classification is appropriate or not. By grouping all the enemies of the Bolsheviks into a single unit, the poster artists have at once created a symbol that may not have been recognizable before and made it equal to the existing symbols of the old regime. While all Russians would have understood the imagery of the tsar, not all would know what a capitalist looked like, and associating an image with a name was an important step for the Bolshevik creation of enemies. Indeed, "In the countryside the peasantry used the word "burzhooi" to describe all hostile forces... The most common peasant understanding of the term was as a supporter of the monarchy and the gentry of the land."⁹¹ The Bolshevik posters had to create enemies by creating their images.

The kulak and the priest were other prominent caricatures of enemies of the Revolution. "The second political poster issued by the Bolsheviks in the summer of 1918 attempted to give precise coordinates for three key figures in Bolshevik demonology,"

⁸⁸ Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, p. 202, quote from V. Okhochinskii

⁸⁹ Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, p. 203

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, pp. 176-7

writes Bonnell. “This poster, created by an anonymous artist and entitled [*Tsar, Priest, and Kulak* (1918, figure 21)] was issued in many different versions designed for particular national and ethnic populations.”⁹² The Russian version showed the tsar flanked by an orthodox priest with long white hair and sharp teeth and a rotund, wealthy peasant. These images appeared in many posters, eventually finding a standard image.

The Bolsheviks considered kulaks, or wealthy peasants, a class enemy because they saw the kulaks as oppressors of the poor, landless peasants. There were many early versions of the kulak in Bolshevik posters. “Whereas the kulak-cum-capitalist had sideburns and a mustache, the kulak with a cap sported an unkempt mustache, beard, and rather long hair. It was the latter version that soon became standardized in Bolshevik propaganda.”⁹³ Peasants had hated their landlords and other rich peasants before the Revolution, but the Bolsheviks had to try to unify this hatred and turn it against those people they saw as dangerous. While some images of the kulak were more like images of capitalists, the Bolsheviks wanted to wage their war against the landowning peasants too, not just the bourgeoisie and large landowners, so they configured their idea of the kulak to reflect this.

Similarly, the Bolsheviks tried to find the image of priests that matched what they wanted to say about religious figures. Bolsheviks wanted to discredit priests because they carried great influence in Russia and because their program of creating a proletarian society called for the abolition of organized religion. The depictions of priests, like those of kulaks, varied greatly at first, although they were always portrayed as fiendish figures

⁹² Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, p. 188

⁹³ Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, p. 189

with large crosses.⁹⁴ The image evolved during the Civil War years. The priest eventually became an obese, robed man with a long beard who looked “more often foolish than fiendish.”⁹⁵ This caricature suited the Bolsheviks because it exposed religion as foolish and outdated. In posters like Mikhail Cheremnykh’s *Concerning the Toiler, the Priest and the Parasite* (1918, figure 22) priests are seen taking money from poor peasants and workers through trickery and using it to live a life of wealth. The priest is foolish for his devotion to religion and is stupid, not fiendish. The Bolsheviks tried to convince the public of the thoughtlessness of religion, so they tried to marginalize it through their caricatures of priests.

Many artists, especially the Rosta artists, used the lubok style of telling a story combined with caricatures to recount the tale of Russian history. In posters, the lubok was typically a drawing accompanied by text and often told a story in one or more panels. Mikhail Cheremnykh’s *Concerning the Toiler, the Priest and the Parasite*, discussed above, was one of the first government posters to use the lubok style. Lubki like Cheremnykh’s *The Capitalists Cry Out* (1919, figure 23) and Moor’s *Labor* (1920, figure 24) were particularly effective in creating a common history. They told the story of the Revolution from the Bolsheviks’ perspective. Cheremnykh tells how capitalists had been using the proletariat to fight for their own gains and world domination until Lenin came along and taught the soldiers the truth.⁹⁶ The poster promotes the world revolution against capitalist tyrants and asserts that Russian soldiers can and will defeat the ruthless capitalists in the end. Similarly, Moor’s poster depicts five panels. In the top two, peasants slave away in the fields, only to turn their money over to the church. In the

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

middle industrial laborers work under the watchful eye of a capitalist, and finally at the bottom “the working people resolved to end this ‘slave labour’ and work for themselves rather than their oppressors.”⁹⁷ Both of these posters not only caricature and ridicule the enemies of the state, but they also create a history of the Revolution that all can understand. They codified Soviet history to glorify the changes the Bolsheviks had made and show how much better off Russians were in 1919 or 1920 than they were under the old regime. The promise of the future—for the present in 1920 was only marginally better than the past for most due to the war—was visualized as far superior to the horrors of the past.

The Bolsheviks did not create all of these symbols; they borrowed many from the rich Russian iconic tradition. However, the Bolsheviks “used this symbolic system in a different way from the SRs and the Mensheviks of 1917—stressing, unlike them, that its words were meant for action.”⁹⁸ The demonology seen in Russian poster art was inflammatory and absurd to provoke action against the hated groups. Bolshevik poster art was effective in rallying people to cleanse society of the evil elements and to be loyal to the new government. The dream of a new collective, industrial society of workers needed a counterpoint. Artists provided one, illustrating the horrors of the past to make the present seem tolerable and the future divine.

The Constructivists similarly attacked the past, in particular old artistic movements they felt were outdated and did not belong in the new Revolutionary society. They argued that a new era of human life necessitated a new era of art, and both

⁹⁶ White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 25

⁹⁷ White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 46

⁹⁸ Figs and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, p. 185

traditional art and other modes of avant-garde art could not satisfy the needs of Bolshevism.

Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner, Constructivist brothers who focused on spatial constructions and emigrated to France in 1926, wrote a proto-Constructivist document in 1920 called “The Realist Manifesto.” In it they write:

The blossoming of a new culture and a new civilization with their unprecedented-in-history surge of the masses toward the possession of the riches of Nature, a surge which binds the people into one union, and last, not least, the war and the revolution (those purifying torrents of the coming epoch), have made us face the fact of new forms of life, already born and active.

What does Art carry into this unfolding epoch of human history?

Does it possess the means necessary for the construction of the new Great Style?

Or does it suppose that the new epoch may not have a new style?

Or does it suppose that the new life can accept a new creation which is constructed on the foundations of the old?⁹⁹

They cite the events of the Revolution as “purifying torrents” cleansing society of the dirtiness of the old culture. They ask whether a new idea of human nature and human society can possibly come out of the existing forms of art, whether old art can beget new life? In answering no, they give class reasons as an explanation. They continue: “In spite of the demand of the nascent spirit of our time, Art is still nourished by impression, external appearance, and wanders helplessly back and forth from Naturalism to Symbolism, from Romanticism to Mysticism.... The attempts of the Cubists and Futurists to lift the visual arts from the bogs of the past have led only to new delusions.”¹⁰⁰ While there are no specific references to the bourgeoisie here, Naturalism, Symbolism, Romanticism, and Mysticism were all associated with the old styles of easel painting. These were the classical schools of painting, the styles of the Petrine tsars and

⁹⁹ Gabo and Pevsner, “The Realist Manifesto”, p. 209-10

Western Europe. Rhetoric against these trends was neither uniquely Russian nor unique to the Revolutionary era.

The critique of Cubism and Futurism, however, is notable. While the tsarist styles were clearly labeled bourgeois, many Cubists and Futurists, including David Shterenberg, director of IZO, supported the Revolution, even though their Party backing was fading by 1920. Gabo and Pevsner were implying that Cubism and Futurism not only failed in their Revolutionary goals, but they furthered the cause of bourgeois art. They explained: “One had to examine Futurism beneath its appearance to realize that one faced a very ordinary chatterer, a very agile and prevaricating guy, clad in the tatters of worn-out words like ‘patriotism,’ ‘militarism,’ ‘contempt for the female,’ and all the rest of such provincial tags.”¹⁰¹ They argued that Futurism, which claimed to be reshaping graphic representation by depicting the speed of modern life on the canvas, failed at fundamentally changing anything, most importantly society. It was tied up in bourgeois social constructions like patriotism and militarism—the problems in society, not the answers. Futurism could not escape the canvases that held its paint. As Trotsky wrote in 1924, “Futurism carried the features of its social origin, bourgeois Bohemia, into the new stage of its development.”¹⁰²

What is the significance of this attack? Futurism was a precursor to Constructivism, as much as the Constructivists didn’t want to admit this. Indeed, Tatlin, one of the greatest influences on Constructivism, wrote, in 1920, “What happened from the social aspect in 1917 was realized in our work as pictorial artists in 1914, when

¹⁰⁰ Gabo and Pevsner, “The Realist Manifesto”, p. 211

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, p. 130

‘materials, volume and construction’ were accepted as our foundations.”¹⁰³ Tatlin refers to the rise of collage and other Cubist techniques in Russian art around 1914, when Picasso and Braque showed their works in Moscow. Italian and, to a lesser extent, Russian Futurism tried to depict movement and modernity, particularly industrialism, in their paintings. They had a goal similar, if less developed, to Constructivism’s. However, to legitimize their position in the artistic world the Constructivists needed to be doing something new and different, as well as something Revolutionary. (more?- maybe in rev art section)

There were further attacks on the art of the past. Some Constructivists associated old art with those attributes of people and society that were attacked in the poster art of the time. Aleksandr Rodchenko wrote, “The (clear) expression of individualism and its objectives is always expressed by composition.”¹⁰⁴ In his writings Rodchenko and the Constructivists had always contrasted composition and construction as opposite forms of expression. Constructivists clearly favored constructions, but Rodchenko’s statement takes this one step further. To Rodchenko, compositions represent not only the art of the pre-Revolutionary era, but they are a result of the capitalist, anti-proletarian, anti-collectivist values that were prevalent before the Revolution. Individualism, the social trait that was the trademark of bourgeois capitalism, had to be stamped out of art as well as the rest of society.¹⁰⁵ Rodchenko declared that not only were compositions out of date and reactionary, but the people who made them were too.

¹⁰³ Vladimir Tatlin, “The Work Ahead of Us,” in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Bowlt, p. 206

¹⁰⁴ Rodchenko, “Conclusions on Construction and Composition,” p. 66, parentheses in original

¹⁰⁵ As early as 1913 Mikhail Larionov, a modernist painter, decried individuality in art in favor of communal production (Gray, p. 137). While the rhetoric wasn’t new, it was nonetheless guiding and influential in the Constructivist movement. This simply emphasizes the point that each group of Russian artists had its enemies and used inflammatory language to attack that group. It also confuses the validity of Tatlin’s quote about the events of 1917 having been present in art in 1914. While few would argue that

Konstantin Medunetskii and Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg continued Rodchenko's thoughts, arguing, "The great corrupters of the human race, the aesthetes and artists, have destroyed the stern bridges along that way and replaced them with a huge dose of sugar-sweet opium—art and beauty.... After weighing the facts on the scales of an honest attitude to the earth's inhabitants, the Constructivists declare art and its priests illegal."¹⁰⁶ Not naming any artistic groups in particular, the three Constructivists condemned the art of the past, comparing it to a religion. As discussed above, the Bolsheviks equated religion with the old regime, demonizing priests and their system of taxation. By comparing old styles of art to delusional drugs and decreeing old art's priests illegal, the Constructivists established a rhetoric against the old art that made it a class enemy in itself. Unlike Constructivism, which was firmly collectivist, old art was individualistic in its expression of emotions. Old art was similar to a religion because its purpose was to deceive the viewer with aesthetic beauty rather than to truly represent life as it was lived, like Constructivist art. Old art was bourgeois art.

The Constructivists' formation of an ideology was at least in part politically based. As early as 1919 the government had all but condemned certain forms of modernist art.¹⁰⁷ While Futurists and other left artists were still in power at Narkompros, there were growing pressures from outside the organization to limit the more non-objectivist trends. The Proletkul't movement still had powerful members and was popular within the government. The Constructivists, just materializing around this time,

pre-Revolutionary art was not revolutionary in the art world, it certainly is debatable whether or not it had the same social consciousness before the Revolution as after. Despite Larionov's manifesto and other writings of the same sort, I would argue that the Revolution developed the social consciousness of art further than before the Revolution and made it a necessary aspect of the production process, from conception to execution.

¹⁰⁶ K. Medunetskii, V. Stenberg, and G. Stenberg, "The Constructivists Address the World," in Art into Life, ed. Andrews and Kalinovska, p. 81

were developing an ideology in a somewhat hostile environment. It would be hard to believe that these factors did not influence their thought and their rhetoric. Therefore it is not surprising that they chose both the art of the old regime and the art that was quickly falling out of favor as their targets. However, many Bolsheviks, including Lenin, believed that “The only socialism we can imagine is one based on all the lessons learned through large-scale capitalist culture.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, declaring that “the legacy of the artistic culture of the past is of no value for the communist forms of constructivist structures,”¹⁰⁹ as the Constructivist Working Group of Inkhuk did, was not political orthodoxy and was risky, although it did separate the Constructivists from other out-of-favor avant-garde groups.

Poster artists and Constructivists both redefined the historical paths leading to the Revolution. They named and ridiculed their enemies, declaring them anti-Bolshevik and anti-Revolution. Enemies allowed posters and constructions to express the promise of the new era because one cannot be different without a measure of comparison. Grotesque capitalists, ruthless kulaks, and ignorant Futurists paved the way to the right path. Each of these enemies was necessary in their own time; the proletariat needed the bourgeoisie against which to revolt and the Constructivists needed Cubists and Futurists questioning traditional forms. But by vilifying their predecessors, the artists expressed their desire for a break from the past and a new beginning, which was just what the Bolsheviks had promised.

¹⁰⁷ von Geldern, Bolshevik Festivals, p. 101

¹⁰⁸ V.I. Lenin, as quoted in Carmen Claudin-Urondo, Lenin and the Cultural Revolution (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1977), p. 18

Similar Ends, Different Means: Variation in Revolutionary Art

Revolutionary art was about dreaming of a future. It was about changing society for the better. It was about tearing down the old regime and creating a new one in its place. However, the problems of defining revolutionary art of the period attest to the many different approaches artists could take toward developing a new kind of art. While poster artists and Constructivists both devised visions of the future and the past that reflected Bolshevik ideals, each depicted their visions in a manner consistent with their training and talents. Varying artistic products stemmed from different backgrounds and circumstances.

Revolutionaries in Art or Simply Revolutionaries?

Differences in artistic training can help explain the various approaches to creating a revolutionary art and can partially clarify different reactions to the Bolshevik Revolution. Most poster artists working for Litizdat and Rosta were not trained in formal art institutes. Artists such as Moor and Deni had no formal artistic training; they developed their skills working for satirical journals after 1905.¹¹⁰ Maiakovskii was primarily a poet and a playwright, not a graphic artist. Posters more often took the form of caricatures and line drawings not just because these were the only pictures simple printing presses could produce, but also because these were what the artists could draw. Their style was to make an immediate impression upon viewing. They used familiar styles to connect with people more easily, to appeal to their prior knowledge and make a connection between what the masses knew to be good and what the poster artists believed

¹⁰⁹ “Program of the Constructivist Working Group of Inkhuk,” in *Art into Life*, ed. Andrews and Kalinovska, p. 67

to be good. Posters were supposed to have clear messages combining words and images, so successful poster artists kept their work simple and easily understood, not conceptual and abstract. They did this in part because it was effective and in part because it was what their training had taught them to do.

The Constructivists, by contrast, had much more formal artistic training and worked in an academic art setting. Most Constructivists had attended either art institutes or applied art studios.¹¹¹ They were involved in artists' organizations and exhibition groups, and during World War I they continued their experiments with art. Avant-garde art had political and social messages, but it was more likely to convey them through abstract representations that one had to think deeply to understand. Avant-garde art was not straightforward; it was conceptual. After the Revolution Constructivists were likely to teach other artists in IZO's art institutes. They were members of the intelligentsia by training, and expressed their views in the concepts of their art, not explicitly in representations or words embedded in their art.

Whether an artist had a formal or informal artistic training did affect what the artist's reaction to Bolshevism was to a degree. Those poster artists with little formal training had primarily worked for satirical journals before the Revolution. The journals and newspapers of 1905 were heavily critical of the tsarist regime, but during World War I began publishing patriotic drawings.¹¹² After the February Revolution the artists took advantage of their freedom of expression and began targeting the Provisional Government and the tsar, and after October many sided with the Bolsheviks to produce

¹¹⁰ White, The Bolshevik Poster, pp. 42, 56

¹¹¹ Lodder, Russian Constructivism, pp. 258, 261

¹¹² Williams, Artists in Revolution, p. 76

art for their cause.¹¹³ Poster artists who had worked for satirical journals had a tendency to question authority, but were generally not revolutionaries. They were educated, but not intelligentsia. With regard to his choice of poster art, Moor said he was seeking a medium that could “resound on an equal basis with the speech of a political orator.”¹¹⁴ He wanted his opinion to be heard, and his means of broadcast was government propaganda. Poster artists generally had more autonomy than might be expected, particularly those who worked for Rosta.¹¹⁵ The Bolsheviks’ reliance on the poster gave many artists opportunities for employment and initially increased freedom for artistic journals.¹¹⁶ These prospects encouraged poster artists that their words could create a new reality. While satirical artists may not have been natural revolutionaries, the Bolshevik reliance on their type of art drew them to the Revolution.

Conversely, Constructivists who had received a formal artistic education were unequivocally members of the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia, be they artists, authors, philosophers, or anarchist revolutionaries, had a longstanding commitment to anti-establishment behavior. Avant-garde artists in the direct aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution were enthusiastic about the new possibilities, but many were eventually disappointed. Georgy Annenkov,¹¹⁷ a Futurist, expressed their sentiments:

We were revolutionaries in art. We were rejected by the official critics and by the bourgeois public. When the Revolution came, we naturally thought that all doors would at last be opened to us... This is how our misunderstanding arose. The word ‘revolution’ had turned our heads. We were revolutionaries in art—but only in art.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Williams, *Artists in Revolution*, p. 76 and White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 43

¹¹⁴ as quoted by White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 43

¹¹⁵ White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 80

¹¹⁶ Williams, *Artists in Revolution*, p. 76

¹¹⁷ He is more commonly known as Yuri Annenkov. Annenkov was called Georges after emigrating to Paris in 1924. Kachurin quotes him as Georgy.

¹¹⁸ Annenkov, as quoted in Kachurin, *One Step Forward*, p. 22

The older generation of avant-garde artists were optimistic that they would be accepted in the new society, but realized that social revolution and freedom from political oppression did not necessarily lead to creative freedom. The Constructivists were a second generation of avant-garde artists after the Revolution. They retained the same initial optimism about the Revolution, but adapted their artistic methods and messages to mesh with the social and political messages of the Revolution.¹¹⁹ The Constructivists had natural revolutionary tendencies, but learned to combine the artistic rebellion of their teachers with the Bolshevik social discourse. The Bolshevik influence on Constructivism developed the art further along social lines, rather than inhibiting its growth, as it had done to older movements. More importantly, though, the October Revolution gave Constructivists an overwhelming hope that the future was going to be better than the past because they envisioned artistic freedom in the new society that was not present in the old. The success of the Bolsheviks transformed artists with revolutionary ideas into revolutionary artists.

Historical Context: War Communism vs. NEP

Artistic background explains how individuals expressed similar goals differently, but not why. The political and economic circumstances surrounding Civil War era poster art and Constructivism were as different as night and day. During the Civil War there was reduced economic activity and the government could do little to improve conditions. Many artists were starving, but for poster artists War Communism was a time of great opportunity, constant patronage, and “a sense of participation in the defense of the

¹¹⁹ Paul Wood, “The Politics of the Avant-Garde,” in The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932 (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), p. 9

revolution.”¹²⁰ When artists like Apsit began drawing posters for the Bolsheviks, the memories and utopianism of October were still fresh in everyone’s mind. It was still easy to get swept up in revolutionary zeal. Maiakovskii described the mood: “Comrades, to the barricades! ... Streets are our brushes, / squares our palettes!”¹²¹ War Communism involved “Heroization of the Red Army, a total commitment to the security of the Revolution against the still extant White threat, and, in consort with those defensive tasks, the positive sense of a new world to be built from the ground up...”¹²² Posters were the lifeblood of the regime, manufacturing public support during the worst of crises. To the poster artists, who had yet to be disillusioned by the unfulfilled promise of the Revolution, the future really was as bright as Apsit and Moor depicted it. Despite economic conditions that were poor even compared to any time before the Revolution, people retained their hope that life would improve after the war. In the desperate fight for survival, poster artists helped the Bolsheviks maintain power by continuing to believe the initial vision of the future; without the posters translating this vision to the people, the Bolsheviks might not have retained power. The revolutionary art had succeeded in holding up the regime in a troubled time. However, by 1920 and 1921, when the Civil War was over and Russia was in dire straits, Maiakovskii and many other artists had changed their song: “Comrades, give us a new form of art— / an art that will pull the republic out of the mud.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Williams, Artists in Revolution, p. 76

¹²¹ Vladimir Maiakovskii, “Order to the Army of Art,” 1918, as quoted in Patricia Blake, “Introduction,” in Maiakovskii, The Bedbug and Selected Poetry, ed. Patricia Blake (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1970), p. 29

¹²² Wood, “The Politics of the Avant-Garde”, p. 10

¹²³ Vladimir Maiakovskii, “Order No. 2 to the Army of the Arts,” 1920, in The Bedbug and Selected Poetry, p. 145

The Constructivist agenda emerged out of the trauma of the Civil War. In some ways the end of the Civil War brought renewed hope that finally the government could reach its potential and fulfill its promise of a new society. Constructivism developed out of the hope of normalized life after the Civil War. In the peaceful atmosphere of NEP, artists no longer had to fulfill the urgent needs of a government looking for support. They were free to dream again. The goals of Constructivism, I would argue, were very much shaped by Civil War posters that projected a positive vision of the future to accompany Bolshevik rhetoric. The revolutionary art of Constructivism blossomed during NEP, but was a product of the ideas of War Communism combined with the institutional opportunities of Narkompros, namely Vkhutemas. Constructivism had a chance to develop in large part because of the institutional character of Narkompros. Because the government had just formed and still had not settled into an established bureaucracy, there was significant space for individuals to make their marks on institutions. Lunacharskii's independence from the Party elite created an atmosphere that encouraged experimentation in Narkompros. Lenin said that Lunacharskii was "drawn towards the future with his whole being,"¹²⁴ and he undoubtedly brought his commissariat with him. Under the tutelage of Shterenberg, Tatlin and Kandinsky, who headed Inkhuk until 1920, Constructivism developed in a sheltered arena. At Vkhutemas and Inkhuk the Constructivists could design their own programs with little oversight.

However, at the onset of NEP the political landscape was changing. "The pattern of the state giving sufficient financial support only to those institutions which directly corresponded to its ideological imperatives began in this period."¹²⁵ This policy targeted

¹²⁴ as quoted in Fitzpatrick, The Commissariat of Enlightenment, p. 10

¹²⁵ Kachurin, One Step Forward, p. 157

avant-garde art in particular. While NEP was an optimistic period of a new beginning for Constructivism, it quickly became apparent that left art, as it had been practiced, was dead. NEP was not a revolutionary period; it was a period of a return to relative normalcy.¹²⁶ The revolutionary art of Constructivism blossomed during NEP, but was a product of the ideas of War Communism combined with the institutional opportunities of Narkompros, namely Vkhutemas. The Constructivists, the first generation of artists who had matured since the Revolution, adapted and shaped their goals for the future and their interpretation of the past in light of the political circumstances of NEP. Their revolutionary art remained in a very un-revolutionary time.

The revolutionary art of the Bolshevik Revolution thrived on imagination. Revolutionary art imagined a day when ordinary workers could defend a nation, when artist-engineers could build towers to the sky, and when the obstacles of the present were distant memories. The unmet expectations of the Russian Revolution were hardly obvious to these artists, who, despite the hardships of War Communism and the ever-growing censorship of NEP continued to create art that could transform the world.

¹²⁶ Katerina Clark, "The 'Quiet Revolution' in Soviet Intellectual Life," in *Russia in the Era of NEP*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, and Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 211

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