



The National College of Art and Design  
Department of Visual Communication

**El Lissitzky : Marxist or Communist ?**

by

Rosemary O'Sullivan

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# INTRODUCTION

This is the story of a Russian Marxist, not a Communist. The story of a Constructivist artist, El Lissitzky (1890-1941), and how he tried passionately to spread the ideals of Marxism, to the general body of people in Russia and indeed the whole world.

By taking a selection of his work, and placing these in context with life patterns, I will use a 'new historicism' approach, and relate the history of Russia to his work. Analysing his work, with reflection to the many historic moments that Russia has gone through, I feel there is a definite link between them, and his art, for any change of life would influence any artist greatly.

El Lissitzky as an artist, went through many changes which I feel were in direct line with the changes in politics, family and culture in Russia at the time. The rise of Communism and Totalitarianism, the burying of the Church and the shift toward a military power were just some of the major influences on his work, which he responded to with 'Proun' and with his propagandist approach.

However on first examination of his work, one would be inclined to believe him to be a true Communist. Very little has been written on the subject, and so most of my concepts are ground breaking in this area. Nisbet wrote in *El Lissitzky* "While El Lissitzky cannot strictly be called a Bolshevik (he was never a member of the Communist party), he was content to work for and with the government in the massive task of modernising Russia" (Nisbet, 1987, p.44) and it was this quotation that concretised the image that I had of El Lissitzky not being a true Communist at all.



## Chapter 1



## Russian History

The word "secret" in the English dictionary is becoming unfashionable in the modern context, due to the thawing out of the Cold War. This same warm front has resulted in far more literature becoming available, and secrets being divulged, with the result that more information is accessible about the 'old Russia'. The re-discovery of the land and the people has brought to light the struggle and deprivation they have had to endure for centuries. Even before Communism took its hold, Russia was a nation full of want. Generations of Russians, under the Tsars, had fought persecution on economic and religious levels. Tsars, the ruling force until 1917, predicted quite honestly the type of rule Russia would have to endure for decades to follow.

In order to discuss the man upon whom this thesis has been based, I feel that I must first describe the environment which El Lissitzky experienced. So, while the following brief synopsis of Russian history might seem superfluous, the historical background will be more relevant in subsequent chapters.

The majority of the country were on one level or another, poor. In 1858 there were 19 million state peasants and 22.5 million private serfs in Russia. Alexander II, fearing a revolt because of the unhappiness of the serfs, emancipated them on March 3rd 1861. He is quoted as saying, "It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until the serfs begin to liberate themselves from below" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1974, p.61). Yet emancipation left many of the serfs in a worse position than the one they had anticipated. Up to that point a common saying between the serfs had been, "we are yours, but the land is ours" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1974, p.62). Much of the land they had worked on was treated as their own, but with emancipation the government lands which were given to them were usually smaller and in bad condition. In 1882 the Peasant Land Bank was set up by the government, giving out loans to peasants to help buy land and equipment. Between the years 1877 and 1905 land held by peasants increased by more than 40 million hectares, of which more than half had





been obtained by purchase from landowners and the remainder by the completion of the transfer of the allotted land. Even with emancipation, the struggle for life for both serf and state peasant continued on a daily basis. The conditions that these people were living in could have been vastly improved if they had received government grants, government education and if the government policy hadn't been as 'aristocratic' in nature. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1974, pp. 59 - 63)

The lack of education that these people had to endure was one of the main factors which pulled the country into economic turmoil. The land was the country's greatest commodity and was raped of its full potential. Its' lack of even the simplest farming methods caused it to turn onto itself. Farmers were not taught any of the modern methods of farming, such as selective breeding. But even when selective breeding was introduced it was made even more difficult because of the lack of enclosed lands. Without selective breeding techniques, animals were smaller and thus only contributed to a lower level of production. Simple methods of crop rotation were not enforced or taught, due to the fact that the serfs worked the land and did not own or reap any of its benefits. They themselves had very little incentive to increase production or even to suggest better methods of production to their superiors. A lack of investment by the government duly ensured that any innovative machinery could not be bought as the people could barely keep themselves above the subsistence level, and machinery would have been seen as too much of an extravagance.

Poor ruling decisions resulted in many wars over the 19th Century, starving the land of the men it needed. As a result, the land was left to the women to work on. Without intending any disrespect towards women, they were unable to cope with the many physical demands of working the land, which added to the food shortage problem. The surplus food that was sent to the towns and cities did not meet the demand and the price of food was always high because of these continuous shortages. The low wages and high food prices made life very difficult for those who like El Lissitzky's parents, had to raise a family in such a town.





The poor quality of food heightened the risk of disease and famine. The health system was inadequate for a country which suffered from frequent plights of malnutrition and plague. All this time, the Tsars and those in power, lived very comfortably in their homes, supplying and providing little for a country which was their responsibility as its' leaders. By 1897 only 104,000 pupils were attending University, this figure being less than 0.1% of the actual population. With 73% of these pupils being of children of noble or government official families (Encyclopedia Britannia, 1974, p.64). In rural areas, schools were sparse and were usually only opened during the winter months, as children were not needed on the farm to help their parents. As a result of this, few of these children ever made it to University.

The working classes in the cities lived in miserable houses, were badly paid and over worked with many of them returning to the country for seasonal work. In 1897 a maximum time was placed on the workers of 11.5 hours during the day, 10 hours at night, for both men and women. They worked in bad conditions and trade unions were strictly forbidden.

Over the years Russia was involved in many of the major wars, but when Europe was engulfed with Revolution in 1848, she stood alone among the great powers that were directly unaffected by the revolts. Russia was a nation unloved by many nations, but feared and admired, and there was a mood of intense national pride among its' people. In 1848 with the close of the French Revolution, the Tsar fearing a similar Revolution in Russia placed strict censorship laws on the people. This firmly stopped any real news and views of a revolution seeding and developing in the peoples' minds. But this decision really only put off the inevitable. The government officials at the time were badly educated, badly paid and obsessed with rank which came with seniority. Centralisation of responsibility meant delays in decision making, another factor contributing to the inefficiency of the country.



The laws governing the country were antiquated, discriminating and even contradictory, but they affected large categories of the population. El Lissitzky's parents and later El Lissitzky himself were some of these people who were discriminated against, the reason being that they were Jewish. Not being of the Russian Orthodox faith could be a major disadvantage to advancement within the hierarchy of the time, as El Lissitzky would himself learn. Muslims were treated worse and with less respect than Christians, yet Jews were placed at the bottom of the ladder. Jewish children would have felt this and as they grew up they were never made to feel equal. However a large number of Jews became involved in underground revolutionary movements. In the 1880s legal discrimination against Jews became the official policy of the government. They were not allowed to live within the city limits and only a tiny percentage of them were accepted into the education system in any one year. It was at this time that the police began the practice of "pogrom" or officially sponsored riots that led to the destruction of Jewish shops and homes and to the physical assault on Jews, which in many cases resulted in death. The hatred of Jews was so great that a massacre took place in 1903 in Kishenev and Gomel in which 70,000 Jews were murdered (Schapiro, 1986). This all happened in a country where only half of the population were Russian by language and Orthodox by religion. It was a nation divided by class, money, language and religion and it was destructive and corrupt.



## Chapter 2





## **El Lissitzky is born**

The previous chapter shows the environment that welcomed El Lazar Markovitch Lissitzky into the world during the cold month of November 1890. This chapter will deal mainly with El Lissitzky's own personal history and background, showing what shaped his life and beliefs, thus affecting the way he would react to future events in Russia.

His parents belonged to a discriminated minority. They lived their lives in a small rural country town, facing prejudice all their lives because they were Jewish. His father was a free thinking Jew and saw no real future in Tsarist Russia for himself or his family. This free thinking was one of the major reasons why he tried to make a new life in America for his wife and still unborn child. But interference and influence by the local Rabbi prevented this religious woman from leaving Russia after her husband and so he had to return. El Lissitzky's parents' negative attitude towards the Tsar and their yearning for the prosperity and equality seen in other parts of the world had a great effect on him.

His father was for the most part self-educated because of the lack of educational opportunities open to Jews at the time. He had the ability to speak Russian, German, Yiddish and English and often read and translated Heine and Shakespeare to his family. His mother was a very strong willed woman with powerful religious beliefs which were passed on to her children, as were her beliefs in spiritual gain over material possession. These ideals later forced El Lissitzky into a moral dilemma about whether he should return to a country which he loved and believed in, but which offered him nothing in material gain.

El Lissitzky's father worked as an agent for a glass and porcelain factory, a position which did not reflect his intellectual abilities. It was a sad situation that a man who could speak so many languages and had demonstrated such a quick sense of





learning, could not obtain a job worthy of these qualifications because of his religious faith. Even advancement within the position he held was impossible. They lived in a small market town, in the Pochinok district of Russia, a town built on the railway line between Smolensk and Roslavl. El Lissitzky's parents perhaps held hopes that life would alter in Russia and tried to educate their son for this forthcoming change. Unlike most other children, he attended the provincial school in Smolensk, the district capital, and so stayed with his maternal grandparents for that duration.

One of the greatest disappointments, in El Lissitzky's life was when he was refused entry to study fine art in the Petrograd Academy of Art. El Lissitzky was very much a self-taught artist. Herbert Read suggests that everything points to the fact that El Lissitzky was refused entry to art college, not on lack of merit, but because of racial prejudice against Jews at the time. "The real reason was that Jews were excluded, but knowing this did not soften the blow." (Lissitzky-Kuppers, 1968, p.16) After examining the quality of produced work just a year after his failure to enter Petrograd Academy of Art, I must support Read's hypothesis that El Lissitzky's refusal must have been based on his faith [fig 1 & 2]. He was not, however, going to give up completely on third level education, and so travelled to Germany in 1909 where he studied at Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt (Technology University of Darmstadt), and where he first trained as an engineer and later as an architect. While he was studying, to earn extra pocket money, he would work on his colleagues' projects. With the extra practice, as well as having to work twice as fast to get the work done, El Lissitzky became a very acute and quick draughtsperson. All the extra work would pay off later, and can be seen in the short time in which it took to execute some of his "Proun" projects.

When World War I broke out El Lissitzky, like so many other young men, found himself standing in line at the army registration office. It was here that he first learnt of his failing health, as he was informed he was unfit for military service. The Technology University of Darmstadt, which he was attending in Germany, was evacu-



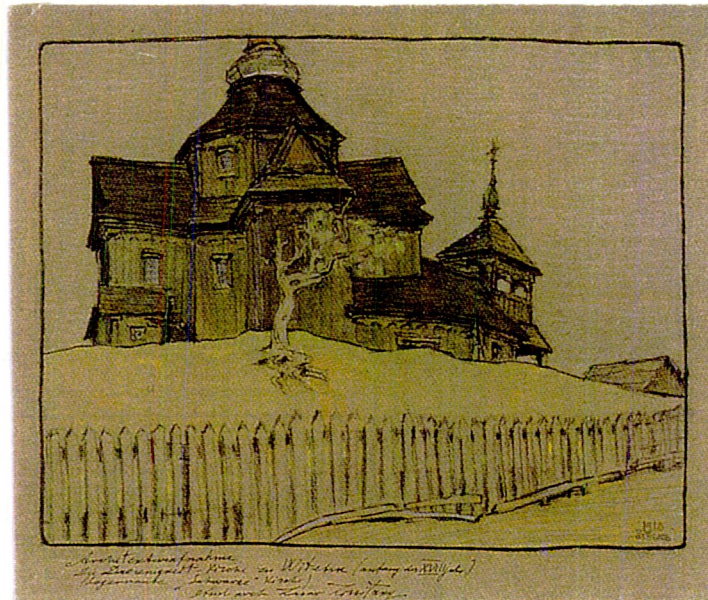


Fig 1: The Holy Trinity church in Vitebsk, 1910.

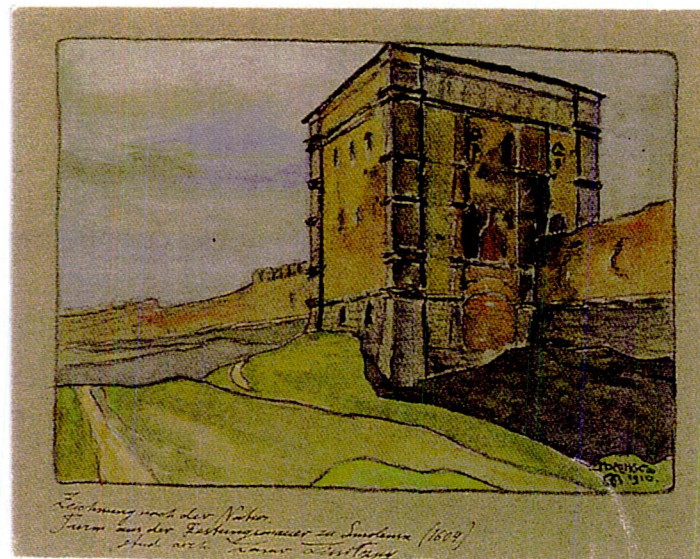


Fig 2: Tower of the fortress in Smolensk, 1910.





ated to Moscow. He qualified in 1915 and received his diploma in engineering and architecture from Riga Technological University. Yet this qualification was not recognised in Russia and he had to resit the equivalent Russian exams. He then began work as an assistant where he gained great experience and knowledge from architects such as Kleis. Kleis was an experienced Egyptologist who had been given the task of laying out the Egyptian Department of the Puskin Museum. This experience helped El Lissitzky to later cope with the problems he encountered with organising large exhibits and projects.

### Jewish Revival:

El Lissitzky's Jewish revival work began during the time when the Tsar was still ruling the people and when the Revolution was only being thought of. Jewish art-work of the time had an overall "folksy" feel to it, possibly because of the widespread discrimination felt in the countryside among Jews. At the time Jews were limited to living outside the city limits in rural towns and villages. Fearing the Purges, they lived together in clusters for safety, and a strong sense of community values were established amongst the groups. However, Jewish people always felt more at home with the townspeople than the backward traditional anti-semitic Russian peasants with whom they were forced to live (Schapiro, 1986, p.273).

El Lissitzky became actively involved with the Jewish Revival movement in Russia, and was obviously under the influence of the artist Marc Chagall. El Lissitzky became a well known illustrator in his own right, especially among the Jewish community. His style at the time was still very reminiscent of Art Nouveau, and was strictly architectural in arrangement. He illustrated seven different children's books between 1917 and 1922. One such book was *Khad Gadya* [fig 3] where El Lissitzky incorporated Chagall's motifs. El Lissitzky's later dismissal of his early Jewish book illustrations shows that his style and attitude to life were to change so much that he did not want to be reminded of his earlier life and work. His wife Sophie said, "The little books were put away and later scarcely mentioned by El Lissitzky" (Bois, 1988, p.174).







Fig 3: Khad Gady, (One billy goat), 1917.



The Jewish people played an active role in almost all aspects of the revolutionary uprising. They were propagandists, organisers and terrorists. They were the founding members of the land and liberty movements, smuggling, illegally transporting literature and arranging escapes. A lot of Jews were members of NKVD (approximately 11%). Wanting to become more actively involved, many changed their Jewish names to Russian ones (Schapiro, 1986, p.286). Others left their faith and were baptised, the majority of these being women, so that they could move more freely within the city limits. El Lissitzky, being a practising Jew, would have known of the Jewish involvement and would have been encouraged to join his friends in the fight for freedom.

### Political change: Lenin

The year 1905 saw Vladimir Ilyich Vlyanov start his rapid climb up the power ladder in Russia. This man, otherwise known as Lenin, would go on to shake the world with his obsession with Communism, and the implementation of his beliefs without regard to the costs. He was a great reader and believed in the book *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx, as did many Russians at the time. No doubt El Lissitzky probably read it at some stage in his life, especially as it was translated into Russian in 1872 (Schapiro, 1986, p.143).

Before the Revolution Lenin had been active in encouraging change in society. He was involved in a number of political newspapers, and had spent time as a Siberian prisoner for his beliefs. On the 17th of October 1905 a manifesto was published: Russia was to have its first elected parliament entitled the 'Duma'. It promised freedom of speech and other political rights. However, this was only a political sham on the part of the Tsar and only kindled further unsettlement in the people. By February of that year famine and death took its toll on the people and they became more unsettled and striked in St. Peterburg. 90,000 workers marched and this number rose to 200,000 the following day. The Tsar, Nicholas II, ordered the soldiers to force the people back, but instead the soldiers joined the workers in their revolt.





At the same time the 'Petrograd Workers Soviet' was formed, and the two bodies ruled Russia together. This was not good enough for Lenin as he did not believe in 'dual power' and felt all power must rest with the Soviets. The party changed its name to 'Communist Party' at about this time and no-one was allowed to belong unless they fully accepted Lenin's ideas. This was the first glimpse that Lenin gave of the full conviction he needed from his comrades, it was all or nothing. It would be a long and difficult struggle to build a Communist State but he believed it would come about. So why did the people at this time decide to follow Lenin and his party? Was it because Lenin stood for Marxism (a classless society) in the eyes of the people? To those it would have meant equality for all. Prejudice would no longer be found in religion. Town and city workers believed everyone would be working for the state and, in turn, there would be no more food queues as everyone would share what they had and work for the good of their fellow comrades. A certain degree of peace was guaranteed in this ideal world where everyone worked for the good of others and had no reason to suspect or be jealous of anyone else. To the sick it meant a better health system, where everyone was given the best treatment available regardless of who you were. To the hungry it meant food, to the poor wealth, and to those hungry for knowledge, education as it would be of benefit to the state to educate its citizens. It was an utopian world that Marx and now Lenin was promising and the people desperate to believe in it voted the Communist Party into government.

1917 was a year of great change in Russia, the Tsar abdicated and Lenin came to power. By the 18th of October the fighting was all over and Lenin declared peace. He was appointed President of the 'Soviet of People's Commissar'. Lenin had to then prove himself as a true Communist and as a man for the ordinary people. He therefore held elections determining the ruling party. However, he could not risk failure and forbade all political meetings by any other party. The Electoral Commissar was placed under arrest and Lenin closed all printing presses which produced leaflets for other parties.





However, many were blinded to Lenin's authoritarianism and censorship by their complete devotion and loyalty to what Communism could offer them. In a country denied peace and prosperity, the thought of a classless society where everybody pulled their weight and received a fair reward for it seemed utopian. The people could not see an obvious dictator in their midst, as they were confronted by a highly charismatic man offering them, both men and women alike, freedom and for the first time in their lives a chance to vote. However, his manipulation of votes was completely overlooked and Lenin gained an unfair advantage.

Lenin's first ecclesiastical legislation on coming to power was entitled, 'The Separation of Church and State' (Hosking, 1985, p.227). With this legislation Lenin separated the Church's power from the state's as he knew of the influence and power the church could hold over its people. This would allow Lenin to pass legislation that would, under normal circumstances, be unacceptable and ultimately lead to a revolt. However, on the part of El Lissitzky and other Non Russian-Orthodox religious members the legislation was welcomed as it meant that they no longer had to fear persecution for their religion. Lenin was perceived as being liberal in allowing this act to be passed and so views on his rulings were coloured brightly by artists and Non-Orthodox Jews.



## Chapter 3



## **Revolution has come**

The country was going through so many changes and people were given the apparent incentives of equality and freedom to battle on for the good of the state. My view is that El Lissitzky saw it in this way and that he was one hundred percent behind the state at this time. Lenin knew things would get worse before they would improve, even from the beginning, and that it would take time to build a new Communist state. He needed the people to hold onto their faith in him and so he turned it about on the people themselves. The people were now his equals, as there were no leaders. They were made to feel like they were making their own choices about their lives, good or bad. Thus Lenin would not be ill thought of for the decisions that he made, as they were not his alone to make but the whole country's. On the 5th of November 1917 Lenin said, "remember that you yourselves are administering the state" ( Hosking, 1985, p. 58 ) and

We do not pretend that Marx or Marxists know the road to socialism in detail. that is nonsense. We know what class forces lead along it, but consciously, practically, this will be shown by the experience of millions when they decide to act. (Hosking, 1985, p.57)

El Lissitzky was in the centre of all of this as he was living in Moscow at the time. Later in life he claimed to have designed the original flag used in the revolution, so demonstrating his commitment to Marxism. It is my belief that Communism was always an issue which concerned El Lissitzky, despite what other writers have claimed. There are numerous confessions made by El Lissitzky of his devotion to Marxism, both in his public and private writings. It is sufficient to note that in El Lissitzky's writing he constantly uses 'we' when he proudly refers to the accomplishment of Soviet Russia, showing that he was not detached from, but identified with Marxism.

The October Revolution of 1917 meant to artists the signal for the extermination of the hated old order and the introduction of a new one based on industrialisa-





tion. El Lissitzky was one of the original designers of the time to bring this about. The traditional styles and designs of the bourgeois were now rejected as art of the past. People now felt ready to embrace the future and reject everything in the past. "The revolution destroyed the old form of social life. We are destroying the old forms of art: We are revolutionaries, and we are in step with the revolution" (Hosking, 1986, p.90). The government recognised this fact and Lenin anticipated that he could not use the bourgeois method and style of propaganda but had to find an alternative one. "If revolution can give art its soul," Anatolii Lunachasky proclaims around 1922, "then art can give revolution its' mouthpiece" (Folgarait, 1986, p.75). In recognising that bourgeois art could not be used to promote Communist ideals, the government sponsored and promoted the new Futurist art form. This sponsorship was fully welcomed by El Lissitzky because he became so involved in it helping him in his development.

The government contributed two million roubles to buy modern works of art and equipment and helped set up museums throughout the country. During the period between 1918 and 1921, thirty six museums were established nationwide (Gray, 1962, p. 220). These museums were filled with works of art from various artists in every school. There were angry protests written in 1918, in *Pravda* (Truth) newspaper against funds being spent on Futurist work and not on pre-Revolutionary work.

As a counter argument, however, the various committees setting up these new museums claimed that they were at first going to buy the work that had been rejected by the bourgeois due to its Futuristic feel as they had only bourgeois work in their museum to date. The result of this was that Russia became the first country in the world to exhibit abstract art officially and on such a wide scale. This only acted as encouragement for the "modern artist" at the time. El Lissitzky found encouragement from the government at least during the first decade after the Revolution with this active promotion of modern art. It was as a direct result of this that he produced so much of his experimental graphic work and was allowed to grow in terms of design.



Initially graphic art was incidental to a movement focusing on three dimensional objects. However, by the late 1920s Constructivist artists turned increasingly to agitational posters to stir up public opinion. They helped to convey social and political imperatives that allowed them to participate in the construction of a socialist society. With such a purpose in mind, the Soviet Avant-Garde created strikingly original posters for theatres, cinema, industry and government [fig 4]. A sense of raw power jumps off each page. The political experimentation and turmoil taking place throughout the Soviet Union created one of the most fertile periods in history for innovation in propaganda and commercial art.

Soviet graphics from this time onwards relied heavily on geometry. From this grew a powerful new language for visual communications, which can be called Supremo-Constructivism. Soviet graphics at the time were typified by strong asymmetric layouts and the dynamic use of white space, heavy rules, photography, sans serif typography and photomontage. The simplicity of form, the use of large print, the vividness of its imagery and genuine kinship with popular aspirations, helped to solve the difficult problem of educating the massive population through art.

The point of propaganda is much like that of advertising as it is supposed to convince somebody of something in the most simple and effective way possible. Certainly in the example *Beat the White with the Red Wedge* [fig 5], the slogan is straightforward enough and can not be misunderstood. For illiterate people it would not be possible to read this message and thus understand the concept behind the poster. The imagery is so abstract that you need to be able to read the slogan to understand the message the imagery is portraying. So why was this new style of art complicated as it was, used instead of a visually more realistic picture?

As I have previously mentioned, the government was trying to break away from the ideals the people held to create this new society. In doing so they felt they should use a whole new method of propaganda. This new world could not be read like







Fig 4: Work of Soviet avant-garde graphic designers.  
 Khaz-Push, Nikolai Prusakov and Griogory Borisov, 1927.  
 Battleship Potemlin 1905, Anton Lavinsky, 1925.







Fig 5: Klinom Krasnym bei belykh, (Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge), 1920.



the old visual language. This would have been completely dishonest to the world as it now was.

This new formal language clearly owes its development to Cubism and other movements of 20th Century abstraction. The Russians tried to exploit the ability of abstract art to force the viewer to take part in the 'production of meaning'. By this, I mean it forced people to think and work out the meaning for themselves. Unlike bourgeois art, this new style was not laid out on a plate for the people to understand, and they had to take their own meaning from it. This encouraged them to think for themselves and in doing so helped to reinforce the belief that they were their own leaders which was what Marxism was all about. It was an appropriate style to begin with at ground level. It would not represent the world but would represent the change and new order to come. This Cubist-derived style seemed custom made, finely tuned for the Russian situation and was pushed to its optimum levels before and after the Revolution of 1917.

*Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* [fig 5] was one of El Lissitzky's most successful propagandist works. It has been popularised in modern times for it is still somewhat ahead of its time in appearance even today. The imagery of the poster was very strong. Two thousand copies were printed and posted outside factories and circulated nationwide. The words are only used as a slogan and are placed to re-inforce the dynamic movement of the piece. It is definitely one of El Lissitzky's most sincere and truthful pieces of work. At this time the Civil War was being fought, 'Whites against Reds'. For three years after the Revolution, Trotsky's Red army, made up mostly of peasants fought the Whites Army. The Red Army finally won, but you can see clearly what El Lissitzky was trying to achieve. He was addressing a primarily illiterate section of society and one which had to be persuaded to help with the Red Army's effort. An illustrated image would not have been direct enough at this time. It would have been too typical of the time to reinforce the message, as well as having strong connections with the bourgeois style, a style and era the people were now trying to forget.





The problem El Lissitzky is addressing here has been reduced down to its minimal state and is so emphasised. This emphasis left little doubt as to the message the poster was trying to express.

The poster is made up of three definite colours; white, red and black. White represents the White Army, red is symbolic of the Red Army and black is the void of emptiness. The largest red triangle is been hammered into the white circle by the black type 'KAMHOM' (Red) so that it can be split up. All the red triangles, large and small, appear to be the driving forces which are pushing the white circle into the black infinity of space. It appears as if the white circle is just holding on and one more push and it will fall over the edge. Similarly, the white rectangles on the top and bottom of the poster appear to be falling out into space. El Lissitzky knew the importance of image to his audience and so minimised type, using just four words. The words were given special emphasis, in blocks of uppercase sans serif letters. These were created by El Lissitzky himself, to harmonise with the poster's design as well as giving it a sense of movement. Limitations in type setting equipment at the time, meant that the type had to be vertically or horizontally placed in straight lines. The word 'KAMHOM' is most easily read in its contrasting colours of black and white. It is the driving force pushing the red wedge even further into the circle. The red text 'ben' (beat) on the circle is read next with the triangular shape pointing in its direction. The eye is constantly scanning the page as if it has learnt to travel around the page to find information, and so it feels like a game to the viewer. The letters making the words are only crude shapes.

There is another point to be made about the shapes: the triangles suggest a peak, a rising power with a cutting point or edge. It helps to drive out the white circle and progresses forward, whereas the circle appears to have little power and little point. This can be related to the political situation at the time as the old political situation seemed to have little point. The new era of Communism had the upward swing in power as had the red triangle. Its hardened shape was a result of the peoples' backing





behind it. Being at its peak and the people being the wide force spreading out behind it in the form of a triangle.

At this time El Lissitzky's job changed, and he moved to teach at Vitebsk. El Lissitzky was in fact beckoned by the government to go and teach there, as there was now a shortage of staff. As a good Marxist, El Lissitzky willingly went. This was El Lissitzky's most impressionable period. He had been waiting for change in his homeland for so long, and now he was looking for change in his artwork.

In 1918 Moscow was electrified, one of the many changes Lenin was introducing in the process of creating a new world. The traditional styles and designs of the bourgeois past were left behind and people now felt ready to embrace the future, rejecting everything negative which they regarded as everything of the past. El Lissitzky was at this time working alongside Malevich in Vitebsk and took to heart Malevich's own ideas and teachings. From this El Lissitzky tried to build his own world in his own personal style and so began to set out on the road of experimental work. His training as an architectural engineer came into practice even more so than ever before. He began building on paper, unsure of what the results would be and called it 'Proun'. Proun was the name given to his style and it was the abbreviation of what he hoped to achieve, 'Project for the Affirmation of the New', which was coined in 1920 - 21. What was happening around him in the country could not but have affected him. He was trying to find a new style of art, not just for himself, but also as a form to express Communism.

### *Proun Work:*

Proun was not world vision but world reality in 1920. The Revolution had taken place, the rebuilding had begun, everything was new and at its experimental stage. The Prouns were like new worlds, cities and towns which Communism was beginning to build. El Lissitzky described Prouns as a plan "for the new Communist cities of the future" (Elliot, 1986, p.15). Prouns lived their lives in cosmic space obey-



ing the laws of mass, weight, speed, tension and the forces found in electromagnetic fields. They are utopian worlds of non objective reality similar to the utopian world now being sought out by the new Communist people, a world with equality and which is plentiful.

It was during the time that El Lissitzky termed his work Proun that he also changed the names of his works. These were changed from coded military names such as 'A1' and 'A2' to explicit architectural titles such as *Bridge* [fig 6]. This was so the ordinary person could understand them and recognise what they stood for at first glance. His style was no longer at the experimental stage and El Lissitzky, confident of what he was trying to achieve, felt it was time to disclose their names.

When we look at Proun 1A, 1919 [fig 6] we can recognise it now because of its name *Bridge*. The construction on the left travels through the picture to the right, passing over a void of pale blue which perhaps is the sea, space, or the unknown. There is a definite direction in which this construction is travelling, with its growing structure under the base forming on the right. The smaller structure on the right-hand side appears to be almost pulling or restraining the bridge in some way in order for it not to float entirely out into the infinity of space. Usually the colours used in El Lissitzky's Proun reflect the appropriate material that would be used in building technology such as grey for concrete and brown for wood. He also expresses the quality of his material and its tactile surface, that is the smoothness of glass or roughness of concrete.

We also sense the structure of the architecture itself and its contents of volume, mass, weight and weightlessness and so on. If we therefore follow the guidelines of the article in *The Structurist* (No. 31, 1991-92, p.58-59), by Wolpert Vladimir, we can easily dissemble the structure shown in the brown area stretching across the centre of the plane. It resembles a wooden surface, while the black /grey shade on the left appears to be the shade of a concrete surface giving the impression of strength and sta-





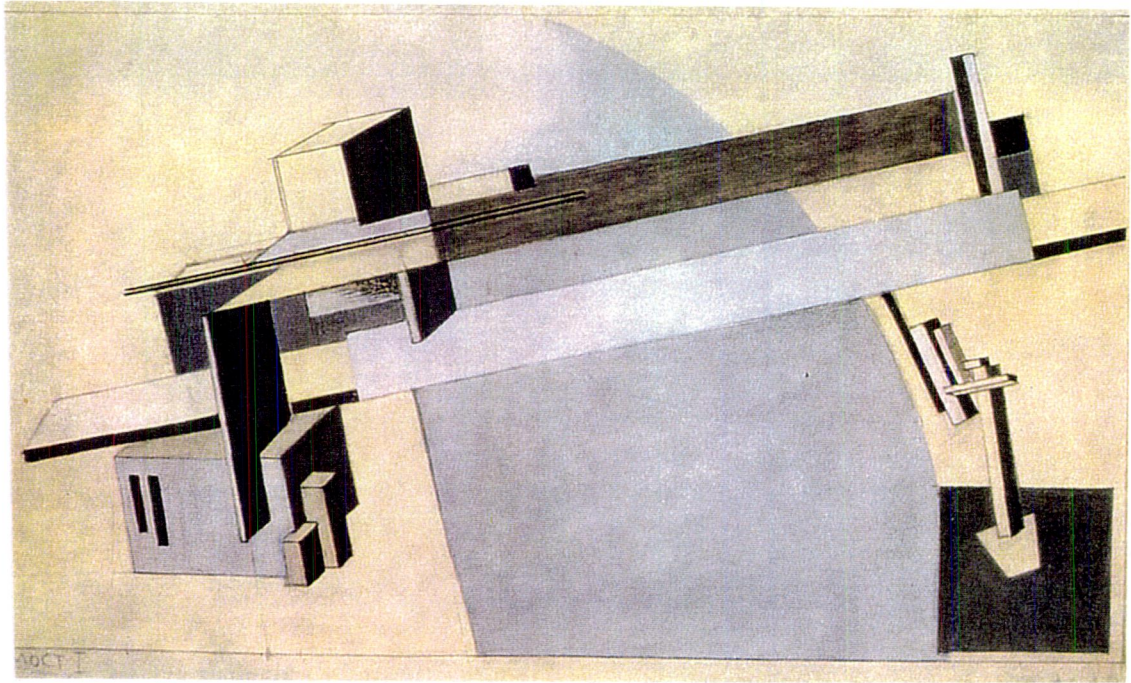


Fig 6: Proun 1A, (Bridge), 1919.



bility. The lighter grey / blue of the bridge gives it the appearance of weightlessness, as if it is almost floating high above the blue sides, yet floating in the lighter plane.

### Communist or Marxist Books:

In 1920 El Lissitzky began to work on one of his most famous pieces, a small children's book entitled *About Two Squares* [fig 7]. The book's illustrations are executed in the Proun style and the book can be seen as a metaphor for the Communist Revolution, with the old fighting the new, resulting in an idealised social order. *About Two Squares* was designed in the Soviet Union, under the full influence of Communism in 1920, but was only published two years later in Berlin. El Lissitzky has been quoted as saying: "The traditional book should be flung in all directions, multiplied by a hundred high coloured and in the form of posters displayed in the streets", (Mount, 1993, p.84). He believed that everyone should have the opportunity to learn to read and to appreciate the images.

The relationship between El Lissitzky's Communist ideas and the book are obvious. That is, he was a true Marxist spreading the ideals of Marxism and the idea that the world would benefit under Communism. He designed the book for "all, all children" (Railing, 1990, p.14) stressing in 'all' his belief in equality among every race. El Lissitzky illustrated this little book in a non-objective representational way, so as not to give precedence to any one group or to label any person:

The book was aimed specially at children (who are encouraged to reenact the action with paper, rods and blocks), the story ends with an evocative adverb, with the word "further" (continue) diagonally placed to reinforce the message of action confines of this particular exemplary case. El Lissitzky has not presented the full story but rather an overtone to further development, a catalyst to activity. (Herbert, 1962, p.75)

Perhaps this little book (22 x 28cm) was more than just expressing what had happened between the Red and White Armies. Acting as a commemorative victory book of the Civil War, which had officially ended that same year of 1920. The book would tell the next generation of children what had happened to their homeland, so





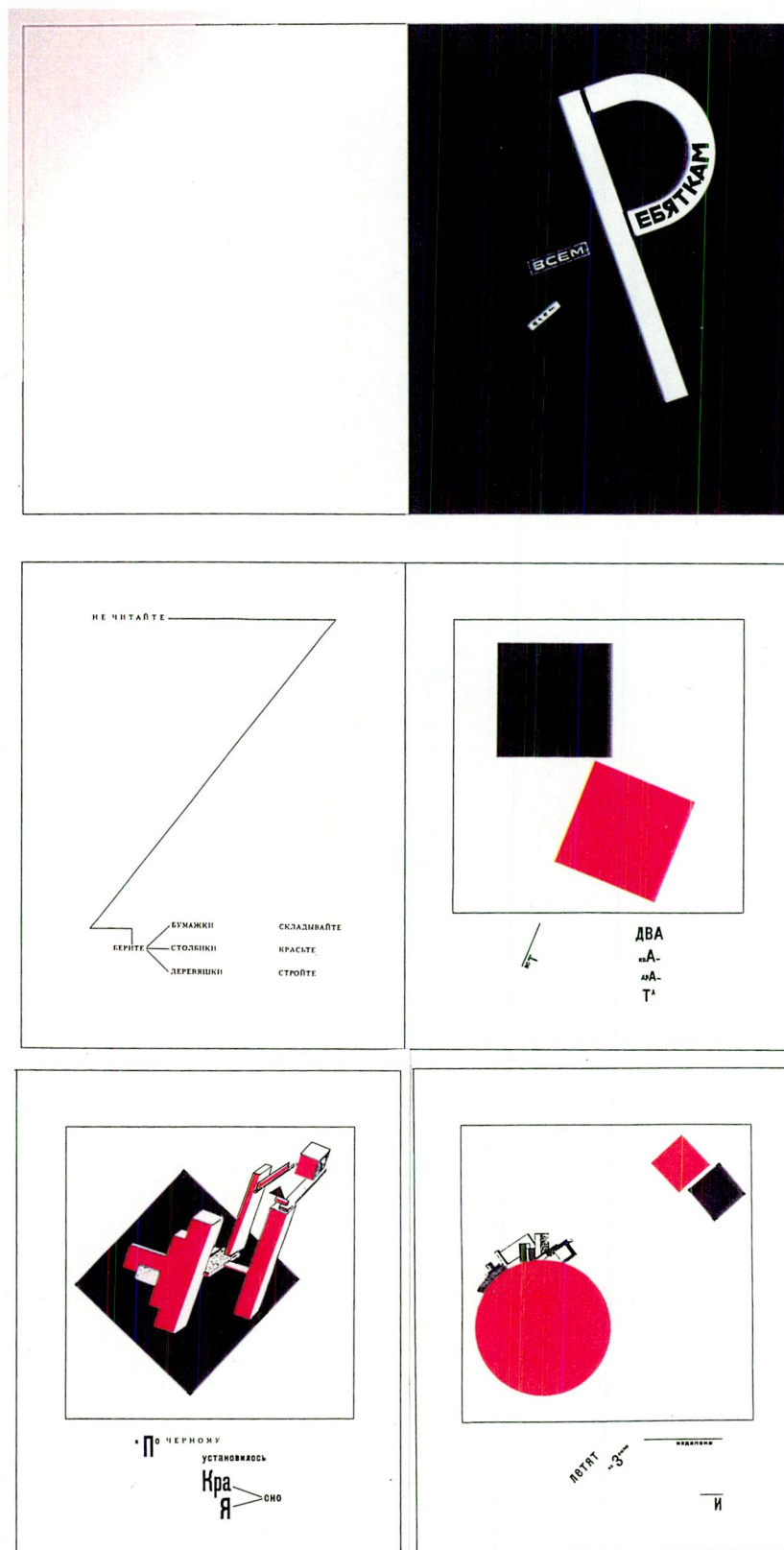


Fig 7: Suprematicheskii skaz prodva kvadrata v 6ti postroikakh,  
(Suprematist story of two square in 6 constructions), 1922.





that they could 'continue' and never stop fighting for Communism if and when it was threatened. The book would also help demonstrate Marx's and Lenin's beliefs in a simple fashion to children.

This book plays a large role in establishing El Lissitzky as a true Marxist, as he was trying to spread his Communist ideas to the rest of the world. To be a good Communist you must not just fight for your own land, but it is also your duty to spread and preach the word of Communism to others. The people whom are most influenced are children. They are the most easily persuaded sector of society, whom you can convert to Communism quickly, subtly and effectively. In describing this book El Lissitzky mentions the idea of interactive or active art, which was very important to him:

In this tale of two squares, I have set out to formulate an elementary idea, using elementary means, so that children may find it stimulus to active play and grown-ups enjoy it as something to look at. (Lissitzky-Kuppers, 1990, p.172)

Another influence we can note that affected El Lissitzky and his work was his being a member of UNOVIS from 1919. In November 1920 a very prominent piece was written by the group (in Leaflet No. 2), which seems to refer to the red square which may perhaps have influenced El Lissitzky's *About Two Squares* or vice versa, as we do not know for definite which work came first:

Let the overthrown of the old world of arts be marked out on the palms of your hands. Wear the black square in your workshops as a mark of the world economy. Draw the red squares in your workshops as a mark of the revolution in the arts. Clear the areas of the wide world of the whole chaos that prevails in it.  
(Railing, 1990, p.7)

El Lissitzky's story of two squares explains the design work and vice versa. It is about two squares that are flying through the endless infinity of space which are held in position by a colossal sense of tension and outer balance. The red square destroyed the black chaos on earth in order to rebuild a new red unity. The black is no longer active and flees into the infinity of space. This is expressed again through the



use of the three colours, red and black on white, and through the use of simple geometrical shapes. It can be seen as propaganda work because of the strong symbolic colour of red being the red of the Communist party, and being the victorious and righteous colour square, winning out at the end. Throughout the story there is a sense of tension and energy. Each page is laid out simply, intertwining typography with image. El Lissitzky made use of three forms of visual language words, numbers and geometrical images, combining them together in an extraordinary book, causing as Railing said: "him to change the very face of our globe" (Railing, 1990, p.4) or so El Lissitzky hoped.

Another children's book *Die Vier Grundrechnungsarten* (The Four Arithmetical Functions ) [fig 8] also made use of these three forms of visual language. This book was not designed as a piece to commemorate the Civil War, nor as a warning to always be on the alert in the future. It instead attempted to predict the future. The book was published six years later when the Bolsheviks were in power and when people looked further and further towards the future. It was a book to help teach children about Communism, through active learning. The illustrations were not worked out in the Proun principles this time, but through the use of typographical elements from the printing case alone. The domestic items usually used to demonstrate how to add, subtract, et cetera, such as apples or oranges, were replaced now by the different countries making up the Communist state. By using just characters from the typography rich set, it gives the illustration a cleaner more academic feel, and it appears more like a school book rather than a book of play and entertainment, such as *About Two squares* [fig 7]. But still El Lissitzky retains an element of fun for the children. The children could have a game to decide what letters and characters were used to illustrate these little Communist men. It had two functions, it not only taught the children their mathematics, but also helped them to recognise the letters that they were learning, in order to read them. It was a multi-task book bringing fun to learning Communist ideas.





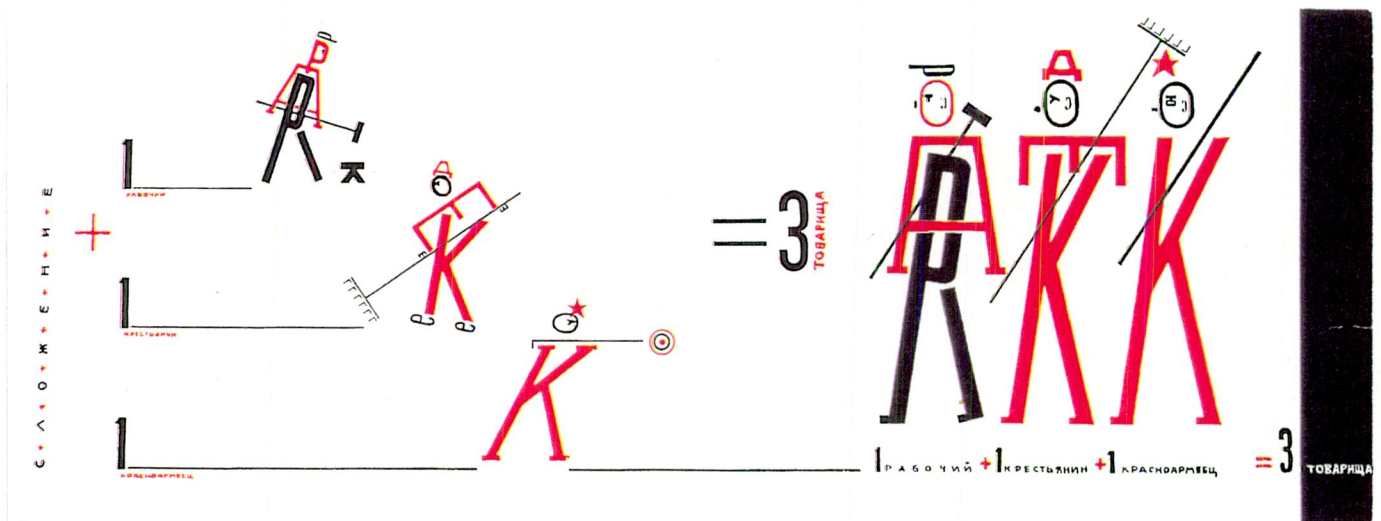


Fig 8: Die Vier Grundrechnungsarten, (The Four Arithmetical Functions),  
1 Worker + 1 Peasant + 1 Red army man = 3 Comrades, 1928.



### People in Active Art:

El Lissitzky felt very strongly about making people more active in art. Lenin had said “you are the ones making the socialism” (Hosking, 1985.). El Lissitzky, I feel, wanted the nation to respond to art in much the same way, to take responsibility for themselves. In 1920 he wanted Communism to come about more than ever, and in working for it expected others including artists to do the same. He saw art as functional and not as the bourgeois idea of being non-functional. Man must live and work, helping and providing for his comrades and for the good of a whole nation, a very Communistic point-of-view. El Lissitzky said “the idea of ‘Artistic work’ must be abolished as a counter revolutionary concept of what is creative and work must be accepted as one of the functions of the living human organism” (Lissitzky-Kuppers, 1990, p.334 ).

Along with the October Revolution of 1917 came the spirit of disparagement, that is the idea of getting away from personal design and invention, which conversely implies the impersonalising of ideas. El Lissitzky saw this as a new time for discovery and a new mode of perception and communication. Perhaps with this air of disparagement came El Lissitzky’s engineering approach to layout, for many of his works appear like the insides of a machine. A new wave of thought was then carried through in his art. People were building or constructing a new world and they approached their art in much the same way. Constructivists believed that the artist should be integrated into society to design handsome, functional, easy to manufacture everyday objects that would reinforce the revolution’s egalitarian goals.

El Lissitzky proceeded to leave behind the old world of individualism and proceeded to work together with other artists as an unit. As a good Communist he left behind the old world of individualism and designed a range of furniture and fittings [fig 9] that would be mass produced for the public. El Lissitzky felt very strongly about everyone working to help Communism work and if this meant diversity and change, so be it. He was willing to change his style of work for the good of his country and expected others to do the same. He said at one of his lectures in 1922:



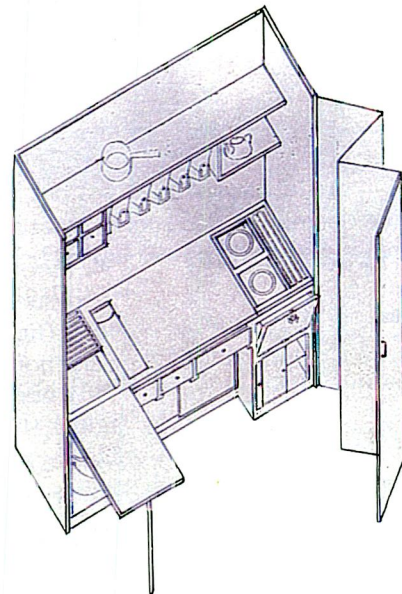
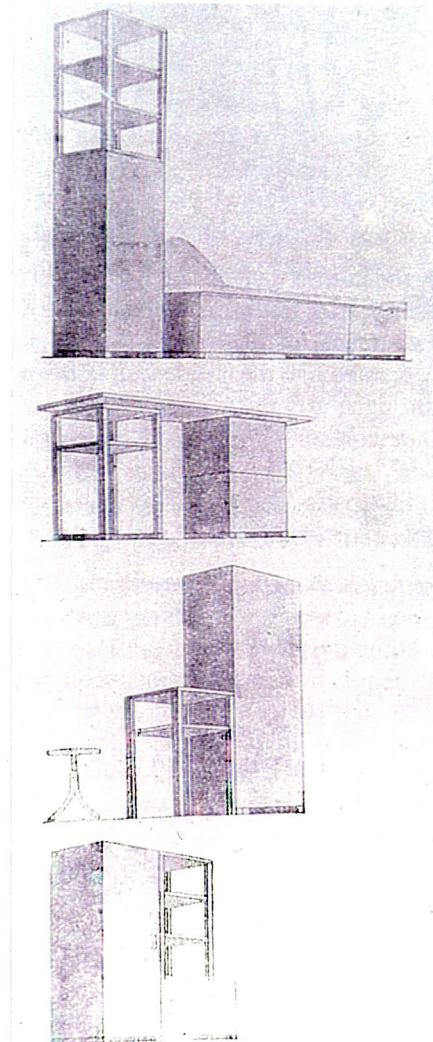


Fig 9: Combination furniture, A set of units consisting of cupboard, storage units, and countertops could be combined horizontally and vertically to form tables, stools, and bookcases, 1929.





In the new order of society, in which work will cease to be slavery, in which there will no longer be small groups producing luxuries for a restricted stratum of society, but where work is being done by everyone for everyone, in such a society work is given free scope and everything which is produced in art. Thus the concept of art as something with its own separate existence is abolished (Lissitzky-Kuppers, 1967, p.334).

El Lissitzky was a teacher and wanted to educate the public on the endless possibilities of art. He firstly had to educate them on the basics. He then encouraged their involvement to decode the artwork and explore for themselves, thus learning to appreciate the work as they learnt and became more aware of it. El Lissitzky joined a group which would travel the country trying to educate and get reactions from people. It was difficult to educate a people about what was happening to their country when the majority of them were illiterate. Perhaps through visual symbols they could learn to educate and inform themselves of their country's plight. A lot of El Lissitzky's work involved a degree of decision making and decoding, such as *Fight the Whites with the Red Redge* [fig 4]. Simple decoding was necessary so as to make sense to the illiterate.

His inter-active art played a major role in his exhibition displays. In a letter to his wife Sophie in 1933, he writes about how you should exhibit your work so as to allow the viewer to become fully emerged in the work:

You go on to enquire on which wall you should hang my work..... when I made my Proun, I did not think of filling one of these surfaces with yet another decorative patch, You should be treating the problem in quite the right manner, as prescribed by common sense, if you wanted to order a cupboard for these documents of my work. Subsequently label will be attached to them, indicating to what sphere of human activity these documents belong and in which year these documents originated. You say that we are hung on walls in museums? It is not my fault that the museum directors are convinced of the perpetual infallibility of their own spectacles so that it never occurs to them to devise another method of exhibiting (Lissitzky-Kuppers, 1967, p.348).

In the Berlin *Proun Room* (1922) [fig 10] the space was still 'linear' although time movement was an integral part of both the conception and the realisation of the room. Visitors were induced to follow a predetermined linear walkway, as was



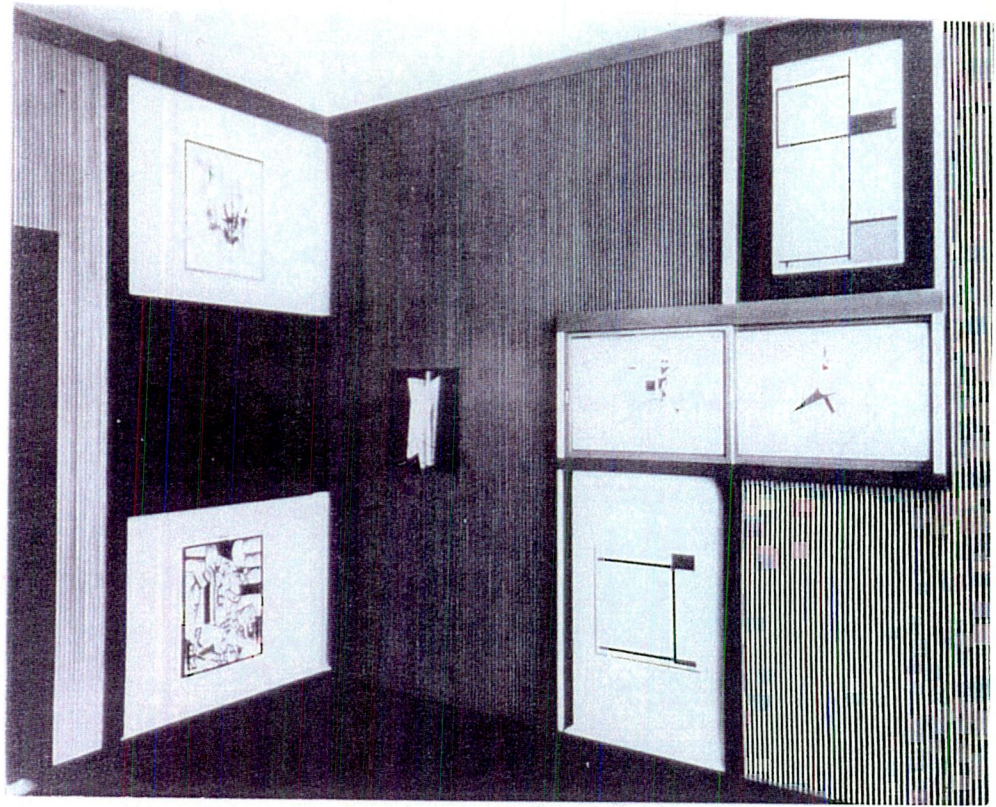


Fig 10: Prounenraum, (Proun Room), reconstruction from 1923, 1965.







stipulated by El Lissitzky himself: "The first form, which 'leads in' someone coming from the large hall, is placed diagonally and 'leads' him to the broad horizontal of the front wall and from there to the third wall with the vertical" (Levinger, 1989, p.233). By his second exhibition room in Hanover (1927-28) [fig 11] he had developed his skill of laying out the exhibition room so well that you no longer had to be led around on a set path. No restriction in movement, therefore was placed on the viewer. El Lissitzky had to learn to trust the viewers to react and view the work themselves while not been led by the hand and thus being influenced by others. The left wall seen from the window appears white. The wall is in fact covered in strips of black and white lines. But the white side of the stripes facing the light source gives the impression that the wall was white. El Lissitzky is playing with the viewer, highlighting that art can be seen as a game as well as having the seriousness of a trick on the eye, a phenomenon discovered during the impressionist or pointillist time. This idea alone gets the viewer more involved in the work, provoking a reaction.

People were now supposed to be living in a free-thinking nation and world, so credit must be given to the viewer. It was only through movement that the viewer could experience and appreciate the changes in the colours of the wall. Moreover, the sliding plates inside the horizontal and vertical frames, encouraged the spectator to move the plates to and fro, and thus interrupting the straight continuity of the wall line. Movement was created in the exhibition when the movement of people occurred, they became an active part of the exhibition.

### New Man:

Now that El Lissitzky was living in Russia a new world of Communism in 1921 he expected more from the individual. He placed higher expectation and standards on man and thus imagined an *ideal man* [fig 12], the futurist Communist man, the perfect creation. El Lissitzky's ideal man represents brute strength, for his design indicated a lot of the structure which would be made up of steel. Strength, but also grace and flexibility created through the curvical make-up of the body. He would have



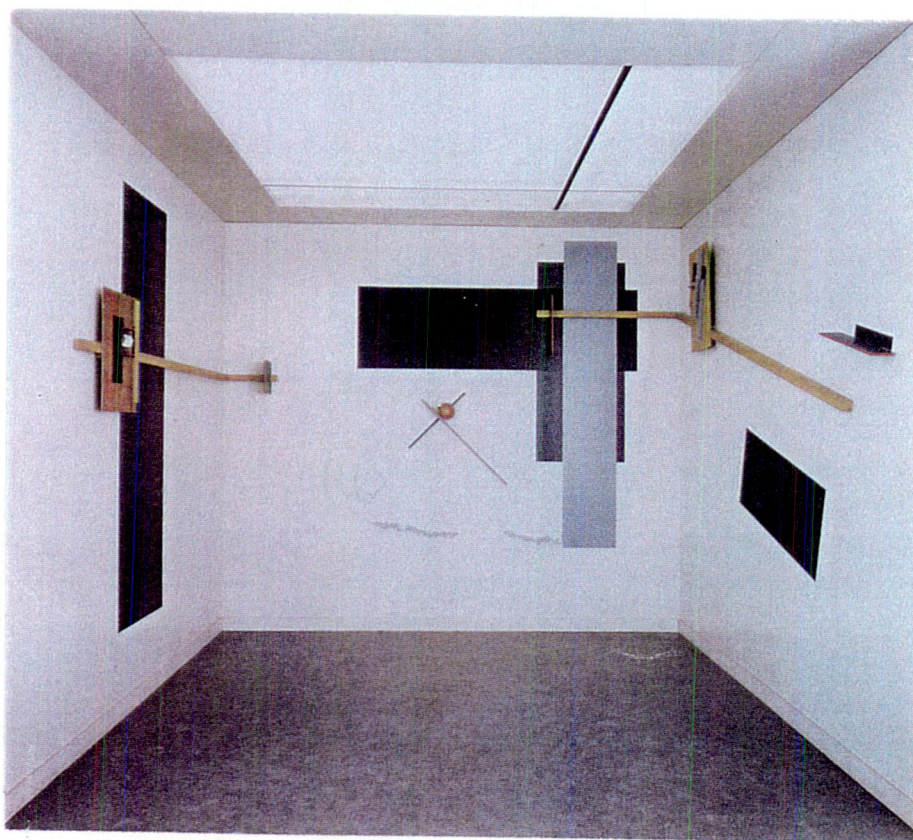


Fig 11: Second Exhibition Room, 1928.





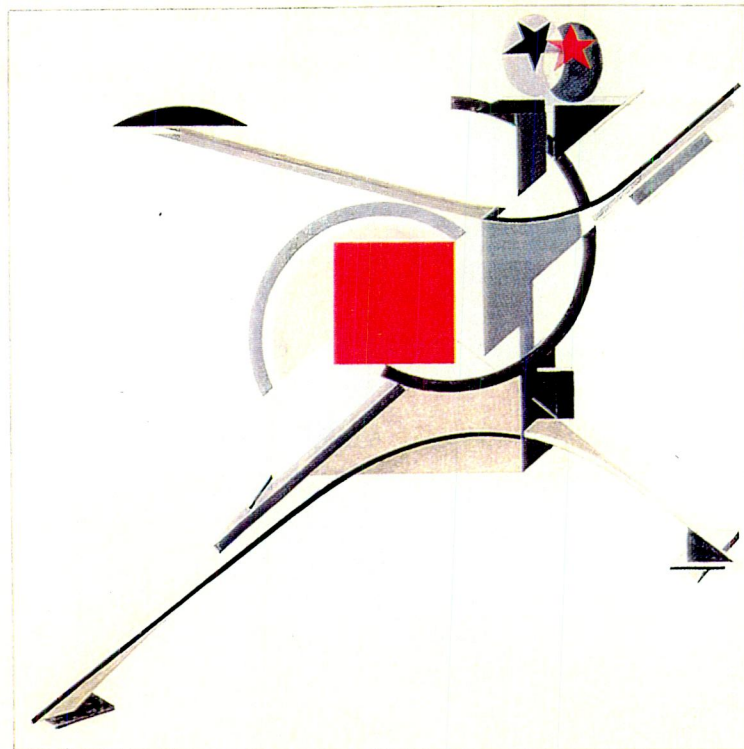


Fig 12: Never, (New Man), 1920/21.





definite Soviet ideas, solid in his thinking, as solid as the red square suggests. All the organs run through the red square, which is protected by the curves of the body. The heart of man is in the form of the solid red square of Communism. All organs connect in some way to this most important feature which is larger in proportion than it needs to be in reality. It represents a Russian Soviet heart which is larger than life. The new man would not be just a man; it represented an entire race. The upper darker curves suggest a woman's breasts and beneath is a dark box, perhaps covering the man's genital area. The two oval shapes standing for a head could be both man and woman, creating them equal but distinctive. One oval could almost be the shadow of the other's thoughts, as their aims and thoughts would be one and the same.

Perhaps El Lissitzky tried to highlight the ideal man and the ideal style of work in this very new type of Futuristic-styled puppetry. His imagination as a Russian artist puppeteer seemed inexhaustible. El Lissitzky had designed puppetry for the avant-garde opera *Victory over the Sun*, performed originally in 1913. At this point in 1921 El Lissitzky tried to envision on stage the future as he saw it. He set the scene in a city square, open and accessible on all sides. The puppets appear to be created out of painted metals and were to perform on a stage that was connected to a switchboard. The controller or leader was in the centre of the stage directing not only the puppets' movements but also the lighting and sound. The sounds included the rushing of Niagara Falls and the hammering of rolling mills. El Lissitzky came up with an ingenious device to portray each character and at the same time produced exquisite geometrical designs of integrated patterns and shapes. The bodies are made up of metallic symbols of the people they represent. For example, the *Globetrotter* [fig 13] has a body in the form of a propeller, symbolising the airplane on which he globetrots. His legs are made in the form of triangles, with one point on a ball representing the globe, and he is holding an abstract image of a railroad cars in his hand, these being associated with transportation. The bodies of the *Gravediggers* [fig 14] literally embody their profession; they are abstract coffins with crosses on top. They represent death, as gravediggers do. The left coffin which is mainly white symbolises, perhaps, those that



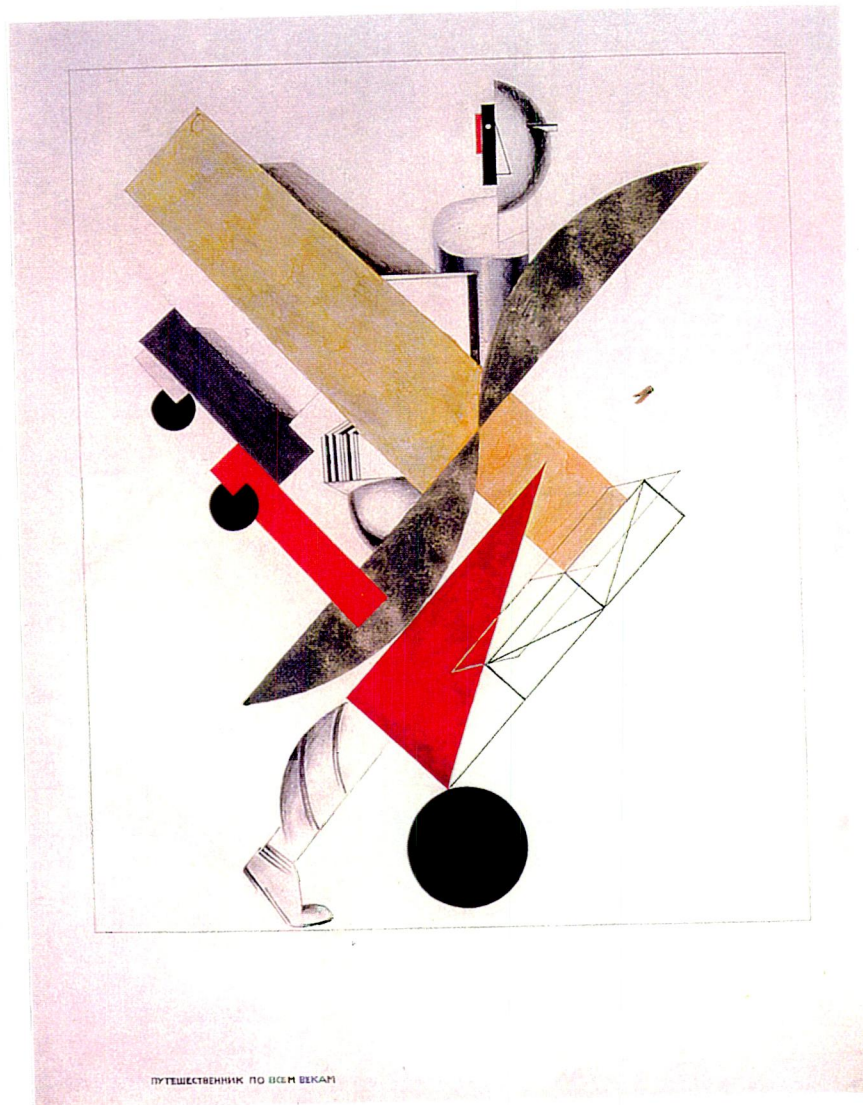


Fig 13: Globetrotter in der zeit, (Globetrotter (in time), 1920/21.







Fig 14: Totengraber, (Gravediggers), 1920/21.



have died young and the left black coffin, people who have died in old age. The cross beside this dark gravedigger could represent a walking stick used in old age, and the larger cross the shaft of the grim reaper. The large black round circle behind the left gravedigger's head is the black void of death follows the gravediggers and the final resting place of their clients. *Victory over the Sun* closes with the words: "The world will die but there is no end!" (Railing, 1990, p.42), a very optimistic statement. El Lissitzky's own optimism was at this time perhaps misguided, which we will see later.

In El Lissitzky's *The Machinery* [fig 15] he has included some of the main characters from 'Victory over the Sun' - *New Man*, *Globetrotters* and the *Gravediggers*. He emphasises the fact that to make the country work, all Russians, men and women, must help in the running of the country. Each has a place in *The Machinery*; the *New Man* stepping out, the *Globetrotter* on an endless loop and the *Gravediggers* standing at the edge of the black circle looking into the empty hole before them all. This could once more be seen as another suggestion of diversity in the work place.

In the picture *The Machinery* could be seen that the gravediggers were diverse in their actions. They may have dug the large hole which they are now peering into, but this time the hole is not a grave but a birthplace for the new machine. The hole may have been needed to stabilise the foundations of the structure. It was not the gravediggers' job technically to dig a round hole, but yet it was still close enough to their job description so as to be able to dig the hole. And from this image I gather that perhaps El Lissitzky was trying to say, that being co-operative and diverse in your work place, you can contribute even more for the good of Communist Russia, than you first anticipate.

### An end to painting:

Towards the end of his life El Lissitzky told a close friend Piet Zwart, that the year 1924 had been the most beneficial year to him because it was during that year that he had decided to give up painting altogether. But his friend and co-worker was





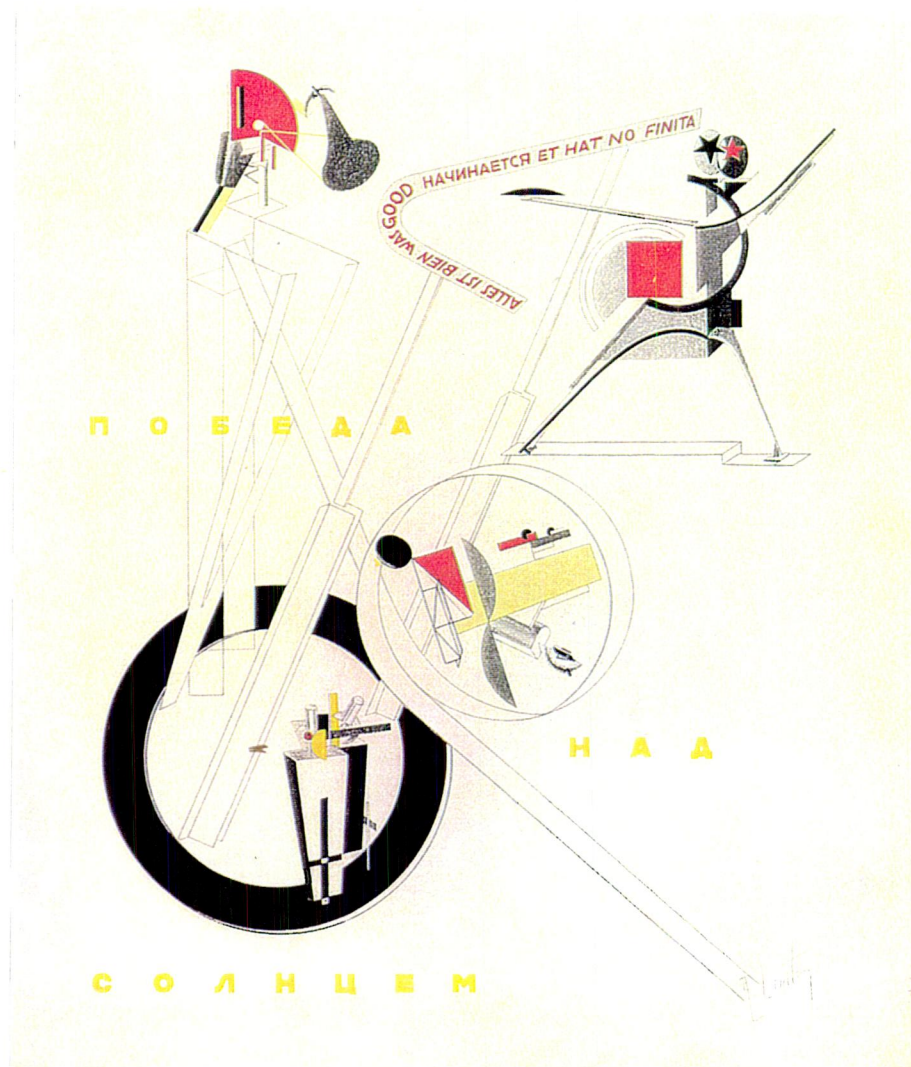


Fig 15: Scaumaschinerie, (The-Machinery), 1921.





also told of his unhappiness with the fact that the public did not accept or understand the ideas of Constructivism and Suprematism. This must have greatly distressed El Lissitzky as these ideas were created and perfected for the people. It was also a year when El Lissitzky was stricken with tuberculosis, which gave him a lot of time to contemplate what was happening back in his homeland while he was recovering in a sanatorium in Switzerland.

It was in that same year that a brief article on photomontage was published anonymously but it was believed to be most probably the work of Rodchenko. The article claimed that posters with photographs were more effective than illustrated posters. "A poster on the subject of famine composed of starving people" the author wrote, 'makes a stronger impression than one carrying sketches of the same.' (Margolin, 1984, p.32). El Lissitzky would have no doubt read this article, especially as he was a friend of Rodchenko and moved in the same artistic circles as him.

El Lissitzky left painting that year but continued to work on a lot of typographical work with the *Pelkin ink Company* and began to introduce photomontage into his advertisements. When he was in Germany from 1922 to 1925 he was away from any strong political influences and seemed to forget about politics. But the full extent of the skill of his photomontage work was not seen until much later. One of his most appealing and optimistic Communist pieces of work was *Russische Ausstellung* (Russian Exhibition) [fig16] for the Kunstgewerbemuseum (Museum of the Applied Arts) in Zurich.

The photomontage carries striking images of a young boy and girl, fused together. They both share the same eye, forehead and cheek. The red type 'USSR' printed in bold red typography across their fused heads stands out in stark contrast to their dark grey foreheads, symbolising, I feel, the idea that young people hold the key to the new Russia. Both the boy and girl have the same ideals and think alike about the future of Russia. There is a light shining up from their shoulders where they are not



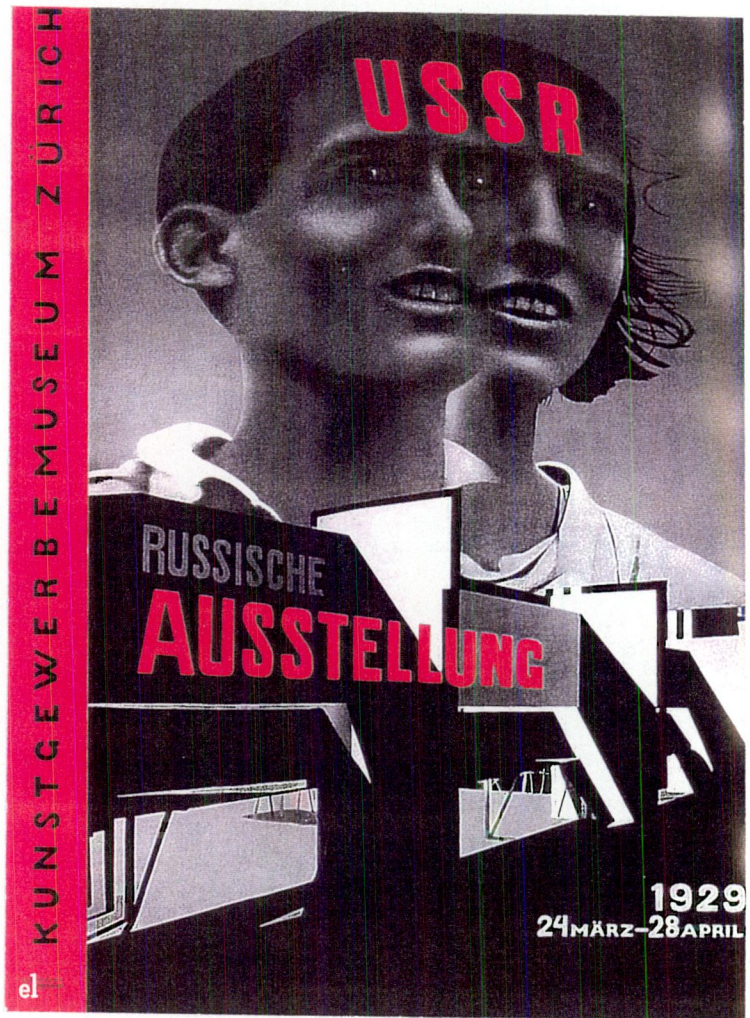


Fig 16: Russische Ausstellung, (Russian Exhibition), 1929.





fused but stand alone representing the different individuals and sexes, where both still hold their independence. They are seen as equals but for the good of the Motherland they are working together. Their mouths are open as if in awe with, I believe, a grin of surprise and happiness written across their faces. There is a sparkle in their eyes of pride; their heads are held high upon their shoulders. They are fresh, clean and tidy with the girl's hair been lightly blown in the wind. The figures are centred on the page, perhaps to suggest that they are at the centre of the universe. The young girl symbolises the historically downtrodden woman who is now man's equal. They are standing behind the architecture rendered by hand in stark contrast to the soft, gentle photograph. The solid modern building is in full shadow with the word 'Russische' (Russian) in grey subtly placed so it blends in with the grey of the boy's neck. The word 'Ausstellung' (exhibition) underneath jumps out in larger red type. 'Ausstellung' follows the lines in the architecture and recedes into the distance. The letters 'USSR' stamped on the forehead of the youths proclaim their origin. If the text was not willing to bend with the picture it would have broken the rhythm of the soft subtle feeling which is created in the picture. The date is placed on the bottom right-hand corner away from distracting imagery. The date is reflected out of the black and is being lined up with the last light grey shadow which is the colour of the text. It adds balance to the corner of the poster making the architecture appear much more solid and strong. The youths and their ideas for the Russian future are larger than life, at present larger than the newest of any modern buildings and so stand far above it. The image alone appears more like a pictorial design and does not draw your attention to it as quickly and as strikingly as when the red vertical bar of text has been added. The red colour enriches the text and the poster. The text running vertically in black along the left-hand side is strong and helps to group all the colours together. All the text is aligned, perhaps under the Bauhaus influence, and all the typography is sans serif, adding to its contemporary modern appearance.



## Chapter 4



## Doubts in Communism

### A Falling Country:

El Lissitzky was in and out of the sanatorium over the next few years and spent a lot of time in Europe. This gave him time to think about the effects of Communism and the lack of unfulfilled promises which he had been blinded by up to now. These negative aspects were now beginning to shine through. The implications of Lenin's orders were beginning to take their toll on the country. What had once been overlooked and welcomed now seemed negative and destructive to the Russian Culture. The separation of Church and State which was legalised in 1918 and which had been first welcomed was now seen as destructive.

All Church land and properties were nationalised without compensation, though congress gave the Churches the right to hire back buildings and sacred objects free of charge. Churches could now be used by the Soviets for other reasons such as concerts or the showing of films. Clergymen or religious people were reduced in social status and were known as 'lishentsy' or 'deprivees', so-called because they were deprived of votes, they paid higher taxes, they carried the lowest level of ration cards and their children were debarred from attending specialist and higher education. In 1930, 163 Christian bishops were active in Russia in 1939, 12 were at liberty. In 1912, 26,279 Mosques were in use; by 1942 only 1,312 were being used (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1974). All religious publications were outlawed by the state censorship and an end was put both to public funeral processions, and to charitable and voluntary social work done by religious orders. The poor and sick now solely depended on the state for help. This added to the ever increasing pressures put on the state. What El Lissitzky himself had suffered because of his faith, such as not being allowed to attend art college, was now happening to others. A blind eye was turned to many of the murders and acts of injustice. What was seen as acceptable during the Revolutionary and Civil War years was now seen with revulsion, disgust and fear. When Lenin was elect-





ed he established a new organisation in place of the military revolutionary committee called the 'Cheka'. The Cheka was the extraordinary commission for struggle with counter revolution and sabotage set up on the 7th of December 1917. The Cheka was to deal with political disobedience 'strictly, severely and mercilessly.' By July 1918 "It became unnecessary for an actual crime to be proven against any person of non-worker and non-peasant origins" (Hosking, 1985, p.76). By November of that same year the chairman of the eastern form Cheka, told his officer:

We are not waging war against individual persons. We are exterminating the bourgeois as a class. During the investigations do not look for evidence that the accused acted in deed or word against soviet power. The first questions that you ought to put are: To what class does he belong? What is his origin? What is his education or profession? And it is these questions that ought to determine the faith of the accused. In this lies the significance and essence of the red Terror. (Hosking, 1985, p.70)

All the dictatorial power the country had fought against was once more surrounding and choking the people. Lenin had called for "a purge of the Russian land from all vermin; by which he meant: the idle rich, priests, bureaucrats, and slovenly and hysterical intellectuals" (Hosking, 1985, p.70). Lenin was terrified of failure and had tried to cover all aspects that could lead to failure by promoting what he believed in. He used the propagandist newspaper *Pravda* (Truth) as one such tool, to promote what he himself believed in on the 31st of August 1918 it read: "The town must be cleansed of this bourgeois putrefaction....All who are dangerous to the cause of the revolution must be exterminated" (Hosking, 1985, p.70).

Lenin had engaged specialists to deal with the economy and re-organisation of the state. On the 26th of October 1917 he abolished all private land ownership without compensation and called on villages and land committees to redistribute the Cossack land. This was greatly welcomed by the people. However, the ideas of the Bolshevik aims of nationalisation mentioned at the 'Peasant Congress' back in June of the same year was not fully explained to the peasants it would directly effect. It was a manipulative decision to trick peasants into agreement. "The land must belong to those



who work it with their hands, to those whose sweat flows" (Hosking, 1985, p.37). However what Lenin had given in one hand he had planned to take away with the other. He introduced collectivisation, where the land and tools were now the property of the state. This was in contradiction to what the serfs and poor peasants had been fighting for in earlier years. Now they owned nothing, not the land or animals. Not even the tools they used to work the land, could they call their own. The land they had fought for was now taken back from them and made the property of the state. Coming from a small rural town El Lissitzky would have sympathised with the small landowners at the time. But peasants who did not give into the regime only suffered further under their hands.

Travelling became more difficult for people, their movements were restricted at all times. Internal passports and dwelling permits (*propiska*) were introduced. This meant that everyone who lived in towns had to register with the police and could not move to a new town without their permission. Passports were withheld from peasants, which allowed the government to control peoples' movement from the villages to the towns. It controlled the peoples' movements just as the Tsar had done to the peasants and Jews just a few decades earlier.

Lenin put all workers under strict military discipline and disobedience meant you were severely punished. The government had been talking about concentration camps during August 1918. By 1922 there were 85,000 people occupying 190 camps. Censorship was strictly enforced and newspapers which criticised the Bolsheviks would have their printing presses shut down. At first you (the new Communist) were encouraged to criticise everything as it was your duty as a good revolutionary. Now all criticism of the party was forbidden; the revolutionary's only duty now was to obey. People were slowly being turned against what they had believed in through the use of force. 'Order, discipline, organisation' became the catch-phrase of the party. People were frightened into doing what the government ordered them to do.







### It Must To Work:

I feel at this stage El Lissitzky was not completely convinced Communism had failed altogether and he was not ready to turn his back on what he had been brought up to believe in and to fight for. He believed in Marxism; it was the leaders that were now failing him with unfulfilled promises. When Lenin died he was represented as and thought of as Godlike. El Lissitzky may have had grave doubts at this stage about the success of Communism but was not willing to give up hope just yet. His son Jen was born and he so wanted the utopian Communistic world to succeed for his sake. "He emotionally linked the future of his own son, born in October 1930, to the future of the Soviet State" (Lissitzky-Kuppers, 1987, p.44). Communism had to succeed for his son and tried once more to help bring it about.

El Lissitzky produced a photomgram of Lenin's head in 1931 [fig17]. He superimposed Lenin's face over a mass of people indistinguishable in detail, in class, but united in a one voice, with single control over a generalised, uniform Russian people. The lowest common denominator was now Russia. The class was neither peasant nor proletariat, but a Russian a non-class. It was almost a piece to praise and to commemorate this great man, so as not to forget all the minds and hearts Lenin had touched. It was a reminder that Communism must succeed. During that same year El Lissitzky produced a cover for the periodical *Artists' Brigade* (Bridada Khudozhnikov) [fig18]. The strong clasp of the hands may suggest clasping or bridging the gap between artists, as is also suggested by the title. But it could also suggest the bringing together and solidarity of Communism, that the nation would try once more to make Communism work. It seems to say that we must make it work for everyone. The men in the background are all pulling together something on a pole the man on the left appears to be standing idly by. Is El Lissitzky implying that to make Communism work everyone must work together with no exception? Nobody should be standing alone; everyone should be pulling at the pole and in that way Communism could succeed.



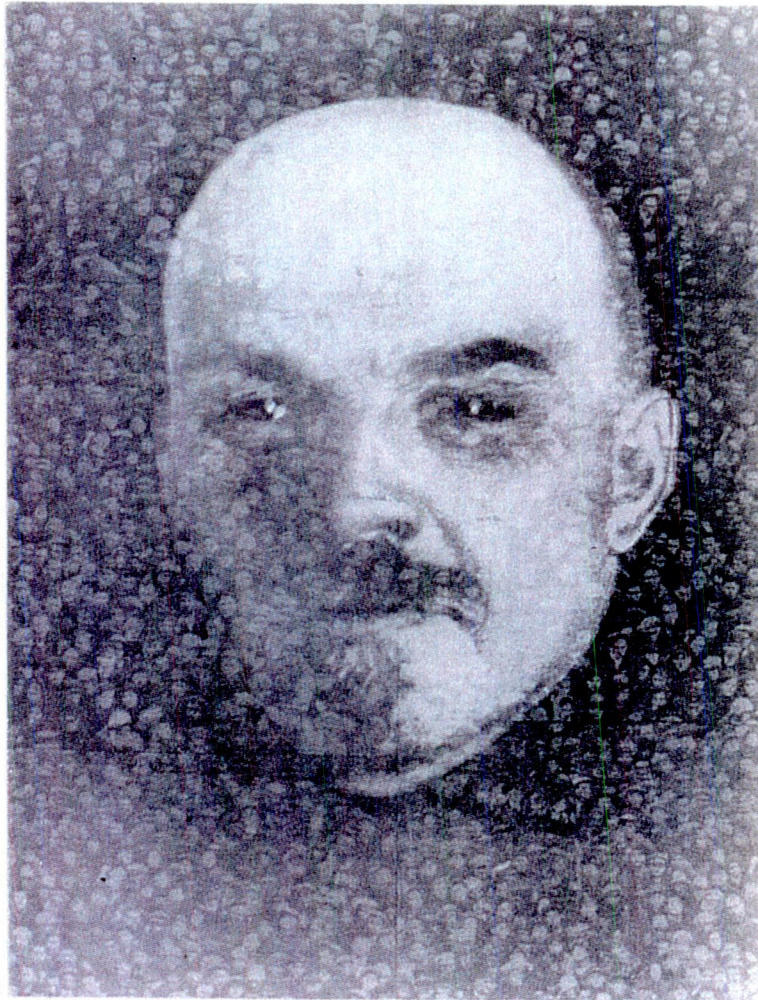


Fig 17: Photogram, 1931.







Fig 18: Cover of the periodical Bridada Khvdozhnikov 'Artists' Brigade', 1931.





El Lissitzky produced a cover for a book, *Russland* in 1930 [fig 19]. It is like a last cry for help from a once deeply Communist man who believed fully in Marxist Russia. The cover of the book is almost a final effort before Communism fell from grace for El Lissitzky. The photomontage has created a sense of depth which the viewer feels he is falling into. There are two figures in the illustration; one is stable and looks up to the other. The other has stumbled off the construction and is falling down into the centre of the page. The sans serif full capitals give the typography a solid base and this, in turn, gives the work the stability it needs to pull the viewer out of the descent downwards through the centre of the page. The number one on the right-hand side reflects how far you can fall, as it floats above the ground wavering above such a great height. It is the overlapping of shadows that creates this depth of field. The stark red colour of the title *Russland* is the first word that jumps off the page to meet you. So there is no confusion as to where this is all happening. *Russland* is one of a series of three related books published, with each cover designed by a different designer [fig 20 & 21]. But in contrast to *Russland*, the themes of the other covers seem to be different. The *Amerika* and *Frankreich* have a more optimistic feel to them. The architecture that is featured on the *Amerika* and *Frankreich* book covers stands alone but gives the impression of shooting up from the ground, suggesting great growth and success in the countries involved. In contrast El Lissitzky's *Russland* suggests a collapse that is about to happen and the seriousness of it.



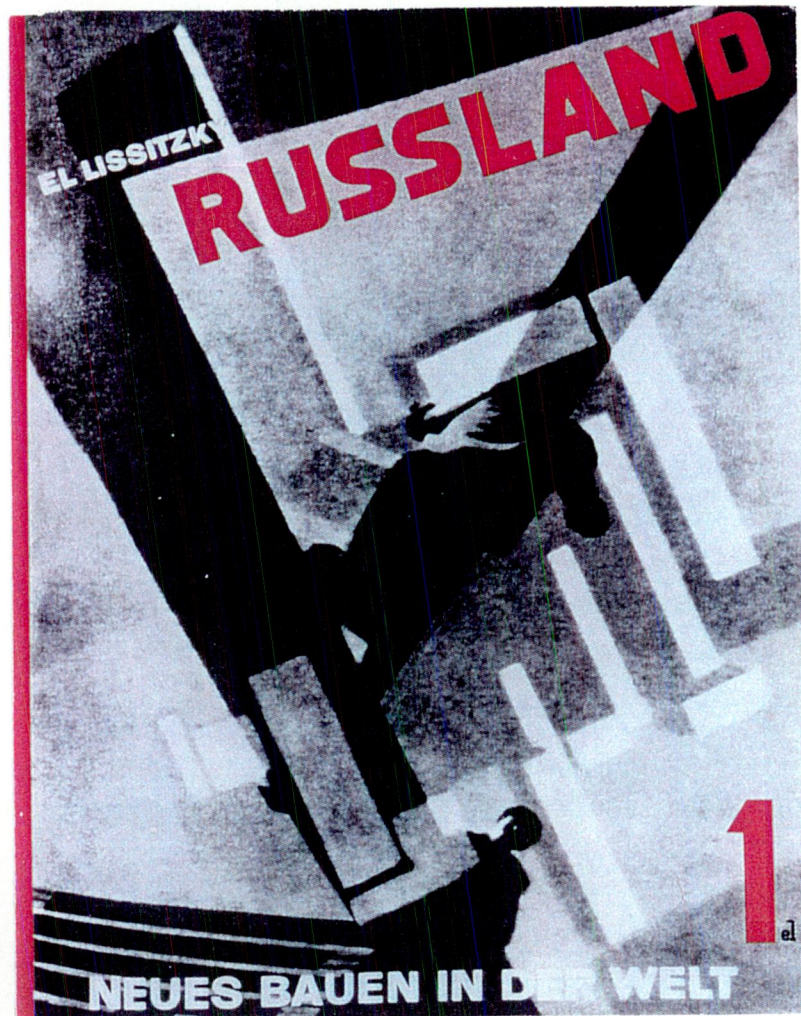


Fig 19: Cover for books in the series,  
Neues Bauen in der Welt, on modern architecture, 'Russia', 1929.





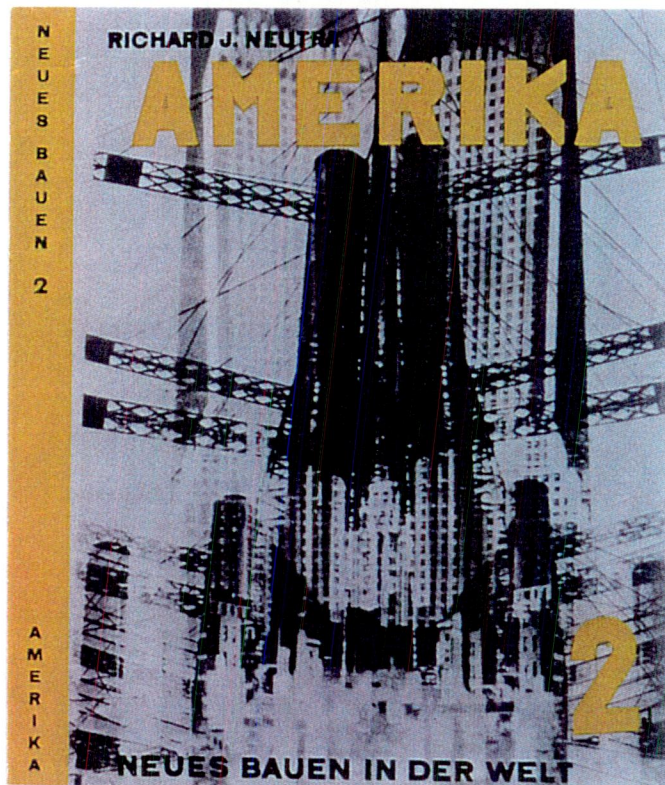


Fig 20: Cover for books in the series,  
Neues Bauen in der Welt, on modern architecture,  
'America', by Richard Neutra, 1929.

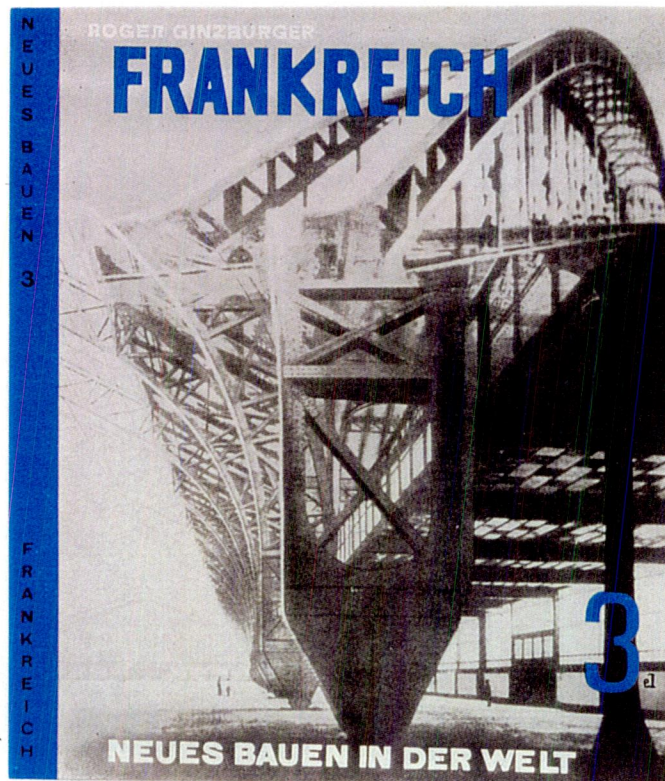


Fig 21: Cover for books in the series,  
Neues Bauen in der Welt, on modern architecture,  
'France', by Roger Ginzburger, 1929.



## Chapter 5





## Lost Faith

The prosperous and optimistic 'twenties' were gone and El Lissitzky now had his eyes opened to what was surrounding him in the 'thirties'. "He understood that the changes in society must be reflected in the work of art" (Subotic, 1991, p.32). He accepted commissions for large exhibitions and he interpreted these commissions like large scale books. He erected a large photomontage putting together ideological and idealistic sequences. In this way photomontage enabled him to meet with the standards which were required of him, as well as having his own input and suggestions in the way the photographs were grouped together.

One of the most striking examples of this is the famous Soviet pavilion at the International Hygiene Exhibition held in Dresden in 1930 [fig 22]. The cover of the catalogue [fig 23] was a clip from the main exhibition wall. The exhibition was to educate the world on the benefits of socialism through propagandist means. It was using propaganda to advertise Russian social life but it could also have been interpreted in a different way I feel. El Lissitzky did not show images of what was happening around him, but told of what was surrounding the people by showing the expression on people's faces in his photomontages. It could be seen as propaganda on behalf of El Lissitzky to show what was becoming of his country. It could suggest that El Lissitzky, I feel has overworked his pieces so much so, that the viewer is subconsciously aware of something being wrong, because of the ordered confusion that is presented. Something more, I believe, is felt to be happening in the artwork rather than what is viewed at first glance. El Lissitzky had introduced a higher form of propaganda that was only seen when the audience took a deeper look and meaning from the work.

If you examine the catalogue cover as an example of this fine tuning of propaganda work, I hope you will understand what I mean. On the right-hand side there is a bar made up of a jumble of Soviet citizens, representing the unity of the Russian nation and of the different communities Communism had spread to. It appears





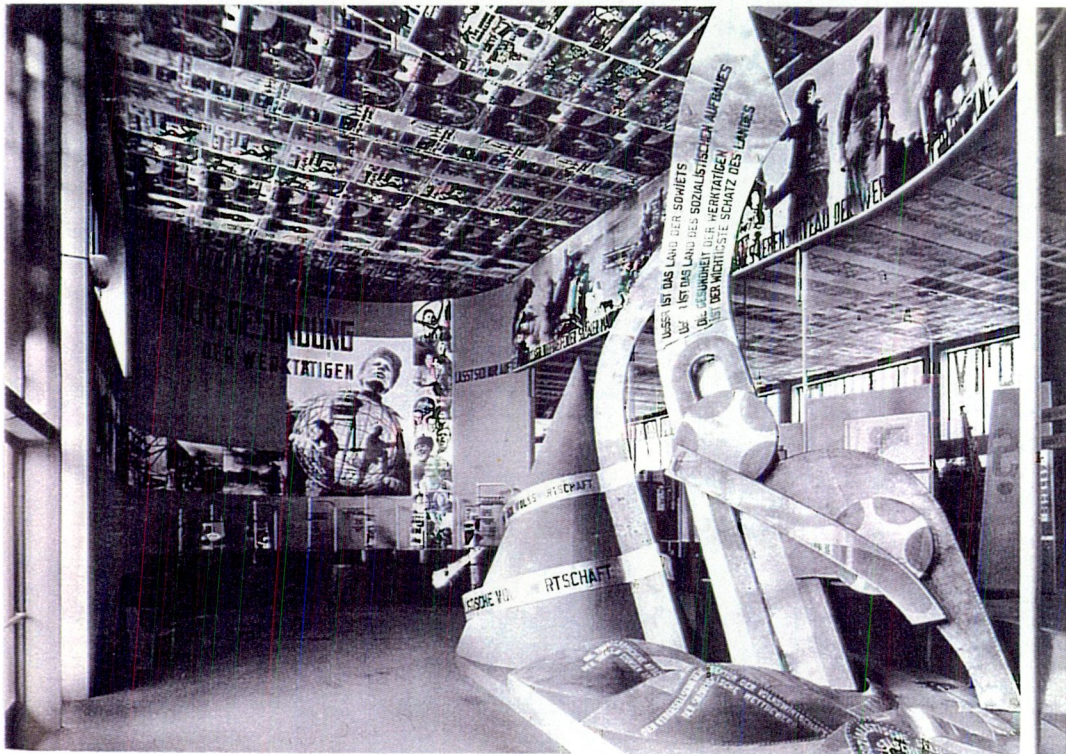


Fig 22: Entrance to the Soviet pavilion at the International Hygiene Exhibition, 1930.





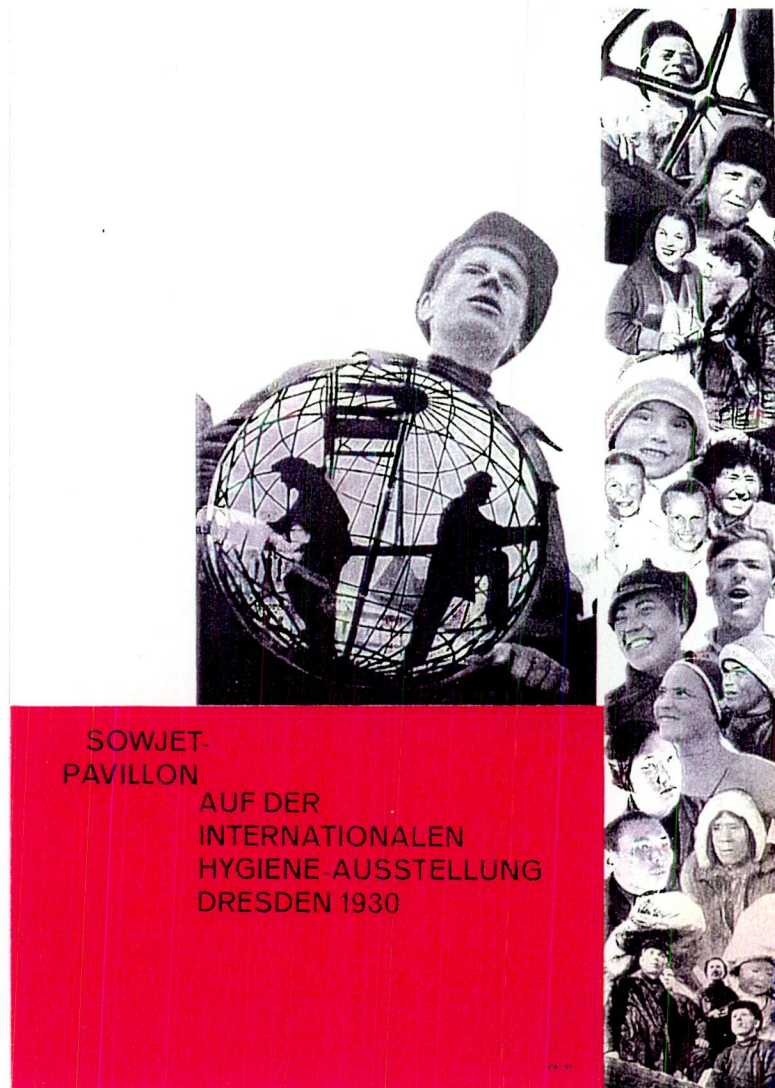


Fig 23: Cover (with Sophie) and layout for 'Führer durch den pavillon der union der sozialistischen sovjet-Republiken', (Guide to the Pavilion of the Union of Soviet socialist republics) at the International Hygiene Exhibition, 1930.



at first glance that these people are happy with their lives; they look like they are all smiling. However, if you look more closely, their faces are worn and weathered by famine and destruction and they are not all smiling. Those that are smiling carry a forced or half grin on their faces. The idea of equality is no longer in the picture as in earlier work [fig4]. The women are not featured as frequently, being outnumbered in the ratio of about 3:1 in the picture. The Russian minority groups have not been given the same status in the picture, reflecting that they have also not been given the same status in life as other Communists. The Siberian and Asian people do not look as happy as the other groups and are featured in the lower half of the picture. The minority groups have been discriminated against as has their own native culture which was by now denied to them by the state. They would not be viewed by the general public as true Russians as they have their own culture and would have appeared different. The globe is encapsulating two figures apparently working harmoniously together on a new world of social democracy while being overlooked by the young Russian. Or could it be read that this young Russian of the future looks fretful, looking down upon the country, not looking up to it. It is a world made out of industrial materials that could not possibly feed the starving people. It is not an agricultural but an industrial programme that seems to have been put in place. Is El Lissitzky questioning the place of Russian Socialism in the world? Has the country been turned away from its greatest asset, the land? Is El Lissitzky saying that everything in the world is now hidden away, that there is no co-operation between fellow comrades. The text is in sans serif, all the capitals are in black and printed on the popular Soviet red colour where a grid system of order is put in place to give balance to the overall work. Stalin had asked or rather had demanded social realism. This work by El Lissitzky could be seen as his response to this demand by giving him social realism but was there more? Is El Lissitzky giving perhaps social and socialist reality?

When El Lissitzky travelled home he would learn of the effects and power Lenin and later Stalin had gained over their audience. This might have played on El Lissitzky's mind, for although he held a strong belief in Marxism, I feel his faith in





Lenin as a leader and implementors of Marx's beliefs was beginning to waver. Did he begin to have doubts back in 1924 when he gave up painting? According to Bois he did, in his article he wrote: "as long as El Lissitzky kept intact the utopian force of his (political) desire, he was able to make full use of the proun principle" (Bois, 1988, p.175).

In 1924 Lenin died and Petrograd was renamed Leningrad. For some time now Stalin had been appointed Communist party secretary and was acting on Lenin's behalf. Towards the end of Lenin's life he realised the mistake he had made by entrusting so much power to Stalin. Stalin was impatient and unlike Lenin he was unwilling to wait for other countries to join them in the Communist faith. He wanted the country to become self sufficient rather than be depending on other countries for support and went about cutting Russia off from the rest of the world. Stalin said "Socialism is one country". He tried to encourage his followers with words such as, "We Communists are.....made of special stuff" (Ross, 1991, p.11). To encourage the people to carry on. This not only affected the country's economically but would also have a great effect on the country's art. Art would be crushed in Russia, there would be no more talks of outside influences, no more new ideas from different schools across Europe filtering through and so, in turn, influencing other artists. Art would come to a halt and only proceed very slowly in comparison to the rest of Europe from now on. The artist was losing what they had been fighting for for so long; freedom of expression which was denied to them by Stalin. They had to execute their work in the realism style. Now they no longer even had the outside influences to help them grown artistically. In 1928 Stalin introduced the first Five Year Plan. He had by now established himself as supreme political figure in the USSR and turned against anyone who opposed his plans for rapid industrialisation, thus gaining the nick-name 'Man of Steel'. Bread rations were introduced and the promises that were made by Lenin now seemed even further away with Stalin ruling with an iron fist. "In general, they [workers] felt that they had been promised bread and peace but given food shortages and civil life nearer to slavery" (Hosking, 1985, p.85).



El Lissitzky returned to Russia in 1925. This must not have been a decision he reached easily but because he was well liked and had by this time set up ties with other artists in Europe, he was allowed to continue to travel. He would travel to Europe acting as a Russian democrat spreading his ideas and returning with new European ideas on art and art materials that were in short supply in Russia. El Lissitzky had tried to spread and encourage Communistic development in Russia and in Europe and had proven at this stage to the government that he was a trustworthy Communist follower.

### *USSR in Construction:*

El Lissitzky began to work on *USSR in Construction*, a magazine in the 1930s. The magazine had been started in the spirit of the Five Year Plan. It was a propaganda magazine whose principle mission was to promote a favourable image of the Soviet Union both at home and abroad. It was published monthly between 1930 and 1940. It was one of the most visually exciting magazines of the 20th Century, thanks to its extensive budget, which paid for lush printing, inventive layouts and photomontage, the use of die-cuts, gatefold, and other experimental techniques. *USSR in Construction*, founded on the initiative of the writer Maxim Gorky, was envisioned as a publication that in the words of the editors would, "reflect in photography the whole scope and variety of the construction work now going on in the USSR" (Margolin, 1985, p.91).

During the Five Year Plan articles emphasised the huge industrial projects - textile mills, coal mines, hydroelectric stations, as well as the collectivization of agriculture. But as the 1930s progressed, it expanded again to cover a broad range of themes that promulgated an image of national unity, heroic achievements and collective well-being. It was trying to spread Communist ideals abroad and to encourage loyalty at home. By the late 1930s it was printed in German, English, French, Russian, and Spanish.





El Lissitzky became one of its most prominent designers and was the first graphic designer to be titled 'artist'. Before then, the term 'layout' or 'composition' and 'designer contribution' were used. El Lissitzky's extensive experience and growing reputation among government officials in the planning of exhibitions must have allowed him substantial leverage in defining his initial role on the magazine. He had a quasi-freelance status, signing a new contract for each job. He was apparently able to some degree choose what issues of the journal he worked on and showed a marked preference for themes of heroic achievement (in sports, industry, endurance and such areas). He showed less interest in the areas of explicitly Communist subjects. Nevertheless, he was still entrusted with Commemorative issues devoted to the Stalinist constitution, to the army, to Soviet Georgia, and to the occupation of parts of Eastern Europe at the start of the Second World War. He was also responsible for other important Commissions, including special albums about the Red Army, Soviet heavy industry and the food sector. These were all major subjects to work on and so would only have been given to a reliable citizen. For all the loyalty El Lissitzky showed, he had never signed up with any political party. "He was never a member of the Communist party.....he was content to work for and with the government in the massive task of modernising Russia"(Bois, 1988, p.164). This was a strange phenomenon for anyone at this stage of Communism to be in. He had never fully committed himself to any movement. The reasons why El Lissitzky may have gotten involved with such a magazine could have been out of gratitude and for stability. He was grateful for the chances and faith the government had placed in him in early years and for the help to promote and thus develop his work. He was no longer alone but was now raising a family and needed a stable income to support them. Or was it from fear and blackmail that he worked for the government? Were the government looking for loyalty from him after years of financing his work.

The magazine did not portray a true-to-life representation of life in Russia; life was not as brilliant as the magazine suggested. What was in fact happening to Russia at the time was reflected in the magazine's original employees, most of which



by 1937 were no longer members of the editorial board as most of them had at this stage disappeared. Things were changing rapidly and with fear. The narrative style which El Lissitzky used in his work had a broad historical sweep and so stayed away from politics. As the narrative shifted thematically within the different issues, so did El Lissitzky's layouts, moving from highly emotional adulation of Stalin to sober presentations of Industrial statistics. In the late 1930s the cult of Stalin demanded an increasing obligation on the editor to pay homage to Stalin; text was no longer enough, now they wanted more images.

*A Montage of building the USSR* [fig 24] which was featured in *USSR in Construction*, [Moscow, no. 10, 1932] is an example of the photo realism El Lissitzky was trying to create. I feel you can again view his work on two levels. At first glance it is a picture of construction workers on a site. But if you examine the work closely, on the level I am suggesting, you can see the expression of anguish, fear and exhaustion on the worker's faces. Their eyes are finding it hard to see through the haze and hatred of this cold country. The horse's head is lowered and walks downward. Animals sense death before their human masters and perhaps this is what is being sensed here. The ground is covered in mud or rock; the sky is filled with the metal cages of industry. The one tone of sepia suggests the colour of rotten decay. It is by no means an optimistic piece, carrying the story of doom and destruction. I am not implying that the work was viewed in this way by the public in 1932 but subconsciously even to El Lissitzky perhaps it suggests this message of destruction.

Since Stalin had come to power, equality had begun to take a back seat. After 1917 divorce and abortion became freely available and women gained more control over their own lives. But Stalin's government reversed this doctrine. Wedding rings became available once more, divorce was made expensive and the concept of illegitimate children was re-introduced. Stalin said "So called 'free love' is a bourgeois invention." (Hosking, 1985, p.213). By 1937 women were beginning to have to settle for second best. Education syllabuses under Stalin were much more traditional, recog-







Fig 24: Montages from Building the USSR, 1932-7.



nising national heroes. Single sex schools were also re-introduced. It is clear in the design and layout for *USSR in Construction* ( no. 9-12, Sept.-Dec. 1937) [fig 25] that women were beginning to lose the fight for equality. It is a very loyal Communistic composition where a Russian couple are standing on a globe; they have conquered the world. They stand side by side with an arm raised holding what appears to be a hammer. They have built the CCCP and so can stand proudly above it, a strong and muscular examples of a hard working man and his wife. The man stands strongly in the wind with his biceps protruding. The woman, however, is not given such emphasis as you cannot see her in her full glory as she stands behind her husband. She stands in the shadow by his side as the glory of conquest is given to him. Was this sub-consciously done as a reflection of what was happening in Russia at the time, or was it a conscious statement, undetached because it was reality in Russia and nobody could see anything unfamiliar about it. It casts doubts were people so changed that they now were indifferent.

In 1937 in *USSR in Construction* El Lissitzky used a heroic approach as it was the twentieth year of the anniversary of the Revolution [fig 26]. The black stallion with its rider in native costume bolts up on his hind legs as if to stand to attention honouring the USSR. But why then was a black horse used instead of a white horse, as for centuries white has represented good conquering over the evil dark side, or black? As the decade progressed, El Lissitzky's subjects shifted from heavy industry to the agricultural sectors. In all areas, he worked for enormously influential people and probably owed them for some measure of protection from revelations of the worst excesses of the brutal purges. If El Lissitzky crossed the line of censorship at any stage he was probably protected to a large degree by these clients. For "Lissitzky was certainly aware of the devastation being wrought on Soviet Cultural Life in those years" (Nisbet, 1987, p.45) and if El Lissitzky would otherwise have been at equal risk of the purges as anyone else.







Fig 25: USSR im Bav, USSR in Construction.



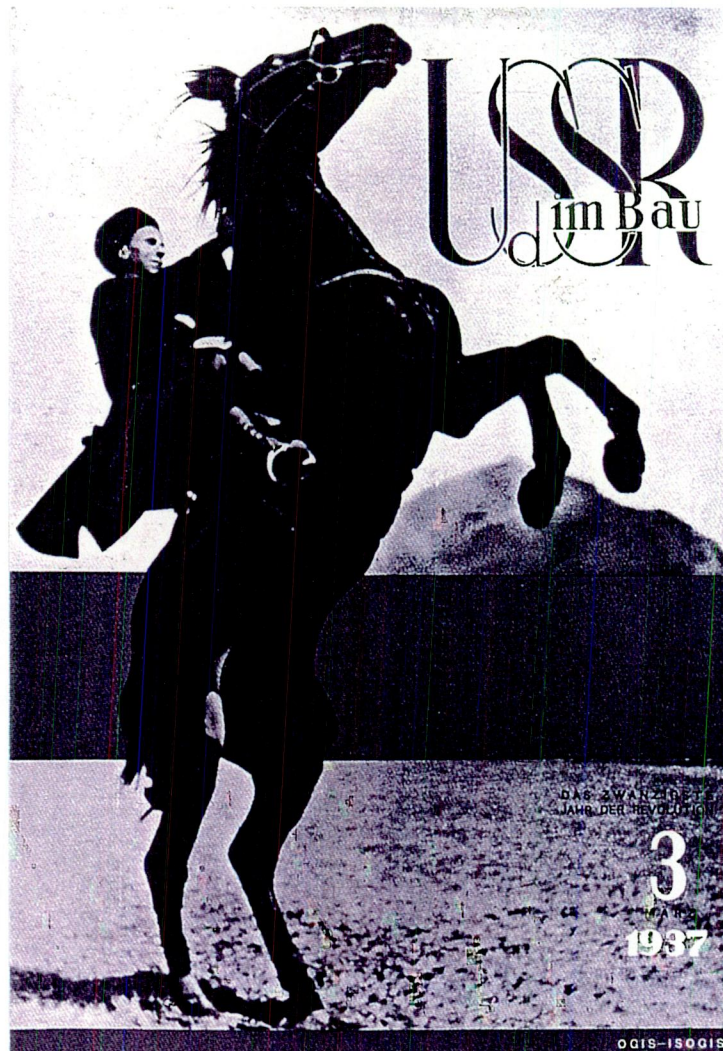


Fig 26: USSR im Bau, USSR in Construction, 1937.





The cover of a later issue seems to carry a more optimistic piece by El Lissitzky, *Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia*, (no 2-3 in 1940) [fig 27]. If you examine the work carefully again it could be suggested that the embrace appears too optimistic and the kiss is suggesting something sinister. The picture is felt not to be true to life but carries another message. Both countries, Ukraine and Belorussia, are personified as these two men. The love for each country and the unity of each country has been so firmly established that it is through the personification of the countries that both embrace and kiss. Although this may or may not be so, distress is felt by the viewer as it is such an unusual sight to see two men kissing. Is El Lissitzky trying to tell us that reality is disturbing and reality does not always follow the norm, that man does not always love a woman? It is fate and we can do nothing to prevent the situation from happening.

One of the best examples of work by El Lissitzky supporting the idea that he now had lost his faith in the government whether consciously or sub-consciously in the poster *Davaite pobol'she Tankov* (Produce more tanks), [fig 28], designed near the end of his life. It is a propaganda piece created during the turmoil of World War II. A parallel could be drawn up between this posters layout and approach with a similar poster executed just twelve years previously. The children in [fig 12] have grown up over the past twelve years and are no longer 15 and 16 years old but are grown men and women. The two individuals representing the nation have by now experienced life and have had their eyes opened to the changes in their country. They no longer think together or in the same way as they are no longer fused together. The woman is standing behind the man and not by his side, as if she is of a lower status to him. Their goals in life appear now to have changed; the man is looking ahead and upwards, the woman is looking directly forward. The glint from both their eyes are gone. The man is frowning and squinting now that he has glasses; things are no longer as clear to him as before. The glasses are an obstruction stopping the man and woman from fusing together. Both the man's and the woman's appearance is still tidy, the woman's hair is very precisely styled with no room for the wind to blow through her hair which loses





Fig 27: USSR im Bav, USSR in Construction.







Fig 28: Davaite pobol'she tankov...(Produce more tanks...), 1942.



her sense of freedom. A grin appears on both their faces, too serious for a smile which might reveal too much. There is a greater percentage of the man seen, rather than the woman. The tank also obstructs the view of her. This poster has been made up of a series of layers: the bottom text, the tank, the people, the aeroplane and the uppermost text with a backdrop of a factory. In the factory the workers appear to be working on parts for the plane or tank. There are eight men at work and only one woman, which suggests that the women aren't given the same opportunity to work. The factory benches where the people are working could be viewed as a collection of skyscrapers promoting once more industrial city life. Both the plane and the tanks are given a red star as an added extra. El Lissitzky does not want to fuse the Communist star to the tanks but keeps them quite separate as they have a large white border surrounding them. The stars can stand alone with thick white cut out borders and it is the driving force on the front of the tank. The tank is driving up to the band of text, and to its audience of people with its guns pointed ahead. The stars can be seen far below on the wings of the plane. The most important text on the bottom of the poster is shouting out its message. It grows in size in its red triangle, ending with an exclamation mark. The message is trying to be shouted out, yet both the man's and woman's mouths are both tightly closed. Do they really want this protection of tanks and plane? If this is so, why don't they speak out? Reversed out of red is the white text, which is in a sans serif typeface in graduating point sizes. The 'Russian' word and star is in red, everything else is just a machine to be manufactured in grey. The people even appear to have become machine like in that they say nothing and do not or can not react. The men and women carry fear in their eyes, they appear as if they don't want anything else to happen for they aren't looking forward, they are afraid to look too far into the future. Afraid of what lies before them. This is no way to live a life in a country that promised so much to them as youths.

### *Final Year*

At the very end of El Lissitzky's life he was working on two very political pieces which today still remain unfinished. Both are directed at the Nazi party and





were designed in 1941. Russia had signed the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact on the 23rd of August 1939 agreeing with the Nazis that they would not invade Russia. This pact was broken. On the 22nd June 1941 Operation Barbarossa took place and 3.2 million German soldiers invaded Russia. It was as if El Lissitzky knew what the country could fear from Hitler, for the propagandist work he worked on was very strong in an emotional sense. Did El Lissitzky see the threat Hitler was posing on the rest of the world? Could El Lissitzky now see through false promises made by dictators. Faced with death himself, El Lissitzky could see that his own country, too, was faced with death.

One of his last pieces of work is called *Hitler, here is thy grave* [fig 29], 1941. It is a drawing for a poster where a skeleton representing perhaps the shadow of death is pointing out to Hitler, the personification of the Russian nation using a military figure that will or must kill him. We can take for granted that this military figure is more than likely Stalin because of the shape of the hat and coat, clothes Stalin was often seen to be wearing. You can barely make out some buildings on the bottom right-hand corner of the drawing. The military figure in silhouette appears to be growing out of them, representing a nation and Stalin would at this time be representing the Russian nation. The other poster did not go into production either, a poster which was on the theme of peace [fig 30]. It shows a baby on a globe surrounded by the flags of the Allied Nations and a Nazi helmet on a skull lying in front of him. There are two preliminary studies of this poster. One is more fully worked up and bears the text:

After the final Extermination of Nazi tyranny, all countries will be able to live their lives without knowledge of suffering or want.  
(Posle okanchatel'nogo inichtozheniia tiranii, se liuduvousekh strankh mogli by zhit' vsiu svoiu svoiu zhizn' ne znaic ni strakh ni nuzhdu)

El Lissitzky's wife Sophie reports that this poster was commissioned to be printed by the USA. So had El Lissitzky turned to another source to work on his propaganda work? Did El Lissitzky feel so strongly about this situation that he turned to another nation to print his work? It would have placed El Lissitzky in a dangerous





Fig 29: Design for a poster 'Hitler here is thy grave', 1941.





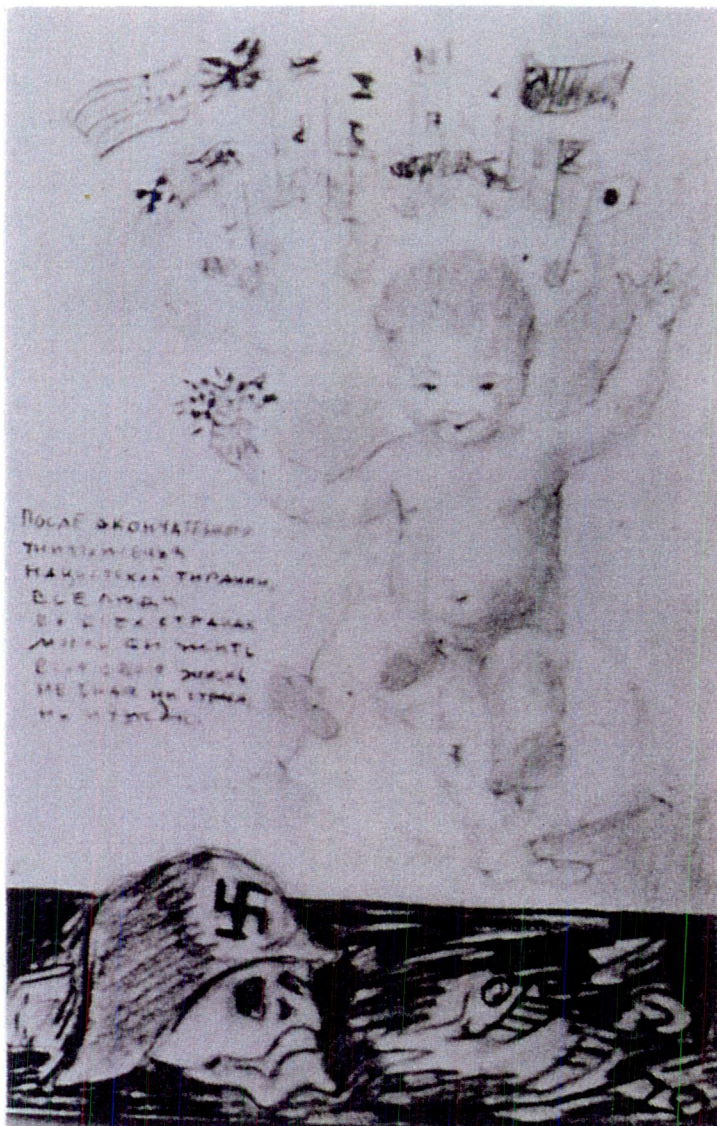


Fig 30: On the theme of peace,

Text: "Posle okonchatel'nogo unichtozheniia nat sist skoi tiranii, use  
Iraudi vo usekh stranakh mogli by zhit' usiu svoiu zhin'ne znaia s  
trakh ni nuzhdu"

(After the final extermination of Nazi tyranny, all people in all coun-  
tries will be able to live their lives without knowledge of suffering  
or want.)



position, turning to another nation for anything. Could he no longer keep his silence, but at the end of his life felt that he had to tell the world of the dangers that lay ahead, no longer hiding and speaking out in a subtle way as he had done previously in his work?





## CONCLUSION

Stalin by now was running the country, Totalitarianism ruled, democracy had died and with it the countries wealth. NEP (National Economic Policy) was a failure and the farming communities disliked and distrusted the new official policy of collectivism which resulted in a lower level of crop production. Famine had hit the bread basket of Russia starving millions a few years earlier, and the country had never fully recovered from it. Russia was being cut off from the rest of the world, as Stalin began to hang the iron curtain around a nation that was living in fear, secrecy and mistrust.

During the earlier years of Communism, El Lissitzky I feel truly worked towards creating this ideal society that Marx had written about in his book *Das Kapital*. His parents background, and how they raised him to be a good Jew, had instilled in him a sense of worth and culture. These were I feel a major instigators in El Lissitzky need for change. With Lenins ascension to power, this change was promised and El Lissitzky clearly demonstrated his loyalty towards the proposed Utopian society that Russia should have become.

However as Lenin rule progressed and indeed when Stalin took over, it is my opinion that there is doubt if El Lissitzky was true to Communism or not. Certainly I feel he realised that Russia was living on lies of another Totalitarian government. All the changes that were proposed to get the Bolsheviks to power never really materialised leaving the people in a worse position than they were in when the Tsar was in power.

As I have said earlier El Lissitzky was commissioned by the government to produce works for the 'benefit' of Communism and Russia. If he had produced obvious art to the detriment of Communist ideals, he work most certainly have been severely punished, even to the point of death.



In this way I feel this final work although propagandist in nature contains subtleties which would pass by the censor but if looked at in a certain light, could raise doubt in the minds of those who had not received what had been promised. The fact that he never joined the Communist party and that he for the most part decided which issues he would work on in the propagandist magazine *USSR in Construction* also helped to create doubts as to where his loyalties lay. His art, his life and his actions all indicate in my opinion that El Lissitzky although he was a believer in Marxist teachings, he was never a Communist. Again this is a ground breaking thesis that is touching on areas that have never been written about before. All my conclusions have been formulated by the writings of other authors on the subject using these writings El Lissitzky art, and the history of the time, this thesis is just another viewpoint to examine his work in different light.





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