

**From Tsarism to Stalinism :
Metamorphosis of the Artist from
Public Enemy to Public Servant**

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FROM TSARISM TO STALINISM : METAMORPHOSIS OF THE
ARTIST FROM PUBLIC ENEMY TO PUBLIC SERVANT

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between the use of the Internet and the level of social capital in a community. The study is based on a survey of 1000 households in a large city. The results show that there is a positive relationship between the use of the Internet and the level of social capital. This relationship is stronger for those who use the Internet more frequently. The study also found that the use of the Internet is associated with a higher level of trust in others and a higher level of participation in community activities. These findings suggest that the Internet may be a useful tool for building social capital in a community.

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Russia at the time of the October Revolution was, in politics, in life and in art, a series of conflicts, contrasts and contradictions. It attempted to be a monist, materialist, internationally inclined collective but was in reality a series of disparate individual states, each with its own ethnic and national creed. The Revolution set out to demolish the two-class aristocracy and peasant system of pre-revolutionary Russia; instead it produced a four-class division of Party, Proletariat and Peasant, with an Intelligentsia that considered itself superior to all. It undertook to educate millions of apathetic, work-shy, anti-establishment citizens to become dynamic new socialists, despite an almost one hundred percent national illiteracy. The new State was theoretically Marxist but the text-book, in practice, had to give way to reality. It promised liberty, equality and fraternity to the Reds, but ignored such considerations for the Whites. It was all so optimistic, except for the remnants of the ancien regime.

The Revolution was intended not merely as political, military and social but as ideological and cultural, a revolution destined to change not only Russian society, but the entire western world. This was the conviction and certainty of the Communist dream. The nightmare that emerged would affect not only the peasants, the party and the proletariat, but especially those who formulated the cultural policy: the intellectuals of the Great Utopia.

The artists who supported the revolution and who for a while

were supported by it would epitomise the polarity of opposites which characterised all aspects of life in the new Russia. These extremes would be particularly evident in their work: the traditional, conservative easel art of the realist painters and the experimental, exploratory art works of the avant-garde.

The aim of the realists, in the Hegelian sense, was to reflect society as it was; the aim of the avant-garde, in the Saint-Simonist sense, was to lead and to change it (1). A contributory factor to the uncompromising attitude of the protagonists was that the "conservatives were much too conservative and the revolutionaries were much too revolutionary" (2). There were devoted followers in both camps.

Art, being the product of mankind "is determined by nature and culture, geography and race, time and place, biology and psychology and economic and social class" (3). A new art for the new regime was of as much concern to the politicians as were the social and economic issues. The Bolshevik leaders were sufficiently inspired to recruit bourgeois experts to establish the new enlightenment; they would also use past culture as a foundation for the new. This was a direct result of the leadership being in the hands of an intelligentsia, who considered it their duty to inform and teach as well as to govern and lead the people.

This is not what Marx had envisaged. But it was a temporary measure, necessary to bring into being a socialist state where culture was the right of everyone. Politicians, as spokesmen

for culture, played a prominent role in the formation of cultural policy, a policy that it was hoped would create the quintessential Bolshevik art.

Artists who were never before involved in political posturing now clamoured for attention from the Party. The art of the Realists, the reflectionists, the traditionalists was part of the image of older Russia; it could hardly be considered the art of the Revolution. The art of the avant-garde, abstract, geometric with no recognisable representative image, born of the Revolution, would be the new art in the Worker State.

While remaining within the bounds of art history, it is the primary intention of this study to place the artists of early twentieth century Russia within the social, economic and political milieu of their times and thereby juxtapose the superstructure of art to its material base. In this, the main emphasis is placed on the art and events of the post-revolutionary years: the art of the traditional Realists and on the abstract art of the Constructivists. It is not intended to engage in a critical analysis of either school but to situate the art of post-revolutionary Russia in the context of the Revolutionary times.

On the one hand it has been necessary to trace the origins of the Realists back to their nineteenth century roots, their art having undergone little or no change during the period. On the other hand the art of the Constructivists, arising directly out of the Revolution, is given only a cursory pre-revolutionary examination, their contribution belonging to the years immediately following October.

During the course of the study it has been necessary to retrace some steps and repeatedly refer to certain events, in order to emphasise their importance. Where this has occurred it has been deliberate and considered fundamentally essential. It is also important to understand the historical background to the Revolution; thus, the Bolshevik rise to power has been separately and briefly dealt with.

The politicians of the period shared many of the artists' aspirations and, in conducting the country's political affairs, influenced the direction of the artists' lives and consequently their art. These political revolutionaries were a breed apart. Most had an abiding love for the arts and some were indeed artists themselves. They were cultured, much travelled and were committed Socialists. From being a scattered band of professional revolutionaries in exile they became an organised disciplined force, intent on bringing their country out of its inherited medieval feudalism into the modern technological world of the twentieth century.

In setting about this achievement they would make mistakes, take wrong turnings, employ artists and dismiss artists, all in the name of Socialism and the Revolution. Their ruthlessness was total. They would arbitrarily use abstract art for their purpose to-day and realist art when abstraction failed. They and their political and economic policies were as much responsible for the art of Revolutionary Russia as were the artists of the Revolution themselves.

The other group that shared the Politicians' importance in the artists' lives was the theorists and critics of the day. Moscow and Petrograd (4) had always been intellectual sparring partners but there was no time more mentally scintillating than the immediate years before and after the Revolution. The Formalist Critics of the two cities and the Futurist artists and poets held meetings and exhibitions, wrote poetry and prose, staged drama and opera and outrageously advertised themselves. After the Revolution they continued their liaison and befriended the artists of the avant-garde. It was their articles and publications that centred attention on the art of the Constructivists and their spirited and socially committed struggle to become the leading artists of the Revolution.

The struggle for official supremacy between the Realists and the avant-garde lasted less than a decade. It was indeed symptomatic of the power struggle within Bolshevism itself. The Realists represented the old order and the avant-garde the new. While the avant-garde was in the ascendancy there was the political upheaval of the Civil War, of proletarian hegemony and of the revolutionary concept of a Workers' Dictatorship. When more conservative methods were called for in 1921 to get the country back into order, there was a gradual reinstatement of Realism until the return of authoritarianism in the late twenties. By then the avant-garde was not only out of favour but regarded with positive suspicion. One or the other, abstract or realism, would become cultural law and therefore cease to be 'art' (5).

While continuing to remain within the bounds of art history, as mentioned, and bearing in mind contemporary political and social trends this study will attempt to trace the rise and fall of the post-Revolutionary avant-garde artist in Russia and his replacement in Party favour by the once subversive nineteenth century Realist who, at the peak of his new found glory, would lose his artistic credibility and become instead a servant of the State.

INTRODUCTION

FOOTNOTES

1. Saint-Simon (1760-1825), French Socialist, Philosopher.
2. Paul Siegel, Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art.
3. Arnold Hauser, The Sociology of Art, p. 94.
4. St. Petersburg was renamed Petrograd during the war (1914-1918), to counter the Germanic appearance of the name.
5. Donald Kuspit, "Back to the Future", Art Forum, p. 91.

CHAPTER I

When Tsar Nicholas II became Emperor of all the Russias, in 1984, few would have believed he would be the last of the Romanovs, never mind the last of the Tsars. He inherited an Empire that was eighty per cent peasant under one hundred per cent autocratic rule. There was unrest and dissatisfaction throughout the country; conditions were ripe for revolution.

The peasant communes that emerged after the Edict of Emancipation (1) could be regarded as a basis for socialism. Consequently, in 1899, the newly formed Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRP) took the peasant under its wing as the nucleus of the coming revolution. The SRP's immediate intention was to strengthen the commune and to unify the peasant, the intelligentsia and the proletariat (2).

The intelligentsia however had aims of its own. Russia had been exposed to Marx's works since the 1880's and many of the Russian intellectuals now turned to Marxism. In the late 1890's the Marxists formed the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) in London, with Lenin, Trotsky and Plekhanov as leading members. Plekhanov was already a prominent Marxist, whose Group for the Emancipation of Labour in Zurich had attracted many of the future Russian revolutionaries.

In contrast to the SRP, the RSDLP saw no future for the commune or its passive peasant. They turned instead to the industrial work-force that, despite its small numerical power, had earned a high public profile by its strikes and protests.


The industrial work-force was an urban phenomenon, concentrated in groups; the peasantry was too scattered and disorganised.

Lenin's 1902 treatise What is to be done? called for a "tight, organised party of committed members, to spread socialist ideas among the workers" (3) and further argued for a small, dedicated party of active revolutionaries, to prevent infiltration by Tsarist informers and secret police.

Disagreement with Lenin's policy split the party in 1903, at its Second Congress in London. The RSDLP was now divided into Bolsheviks, under Lenin and Mensheviks, under Martov; majority and minority groups.

The extreme element of the SRP now engaged in a policy of government intimidation and assassinated two successive Ministers of the Interior in 1902 and 1904. With the murder of the Tsar's uncle in 1905 came government retaliation and oppression. In January 1905 the Imperial troops had fired on a peaceful crowd bringing petitions to the Tsar. This Bloody Sunday massacre gave rise to a general strike, resulting in the formation of the first Petrograd Soviet (4).

The call for reform resulted in a Tsarist Manifesto, which Trotsky dubbed "paper liberty", tearing the document to pieces in front of the crowd. Trotsky and the Petrograd Soviet took control of the city's affairs until order was restored. The Tsar's reforms included a representative body, the Duma and a Council of Ministers; in reality no more than a Tsarist puppet show.

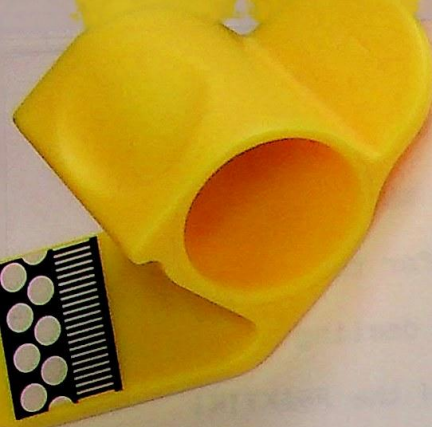


In 1905 the Bolshevik party was not one unified movement, but a party scattered throughout Europe, under multiple leadership. There was the group responsible for the party paper VSPERED (Forward) in Geneva, the section dealing with the new Bolshevik paper Proletarii in Paris and the PRAKTIKI answered to the engineer, Leonid Krasin.

The events of Bloody Sunday showed the general unpreparedness of the Russian people in the face of Tsarist violence. This resulted in the setting up of an Organised Bureau of Majority Committees at the Third Congress of the RSDLP in London that spring. This committee served to unite the separate parts into one organised whole under the three leaders, Lenin, Bogdanov and Krasin.

At the Fifth Congress of the RSDLP in London in 1907, the Party leadership, Lenin, Trotsky, Plekhanov, Stalin and Martov disagreed strongly over financial difficulties and future revolutionary plans. For the next ten years most of the leading members remained in exile, linked to the homeland by printed propaganda, waiting and plotting the revolution.

The European War of 1914 - 1918 brought an unprepared Russia, the French and British side together against the Germans and their allies. The Russian losses were great, morale was low and patriotic loyalty to the Tsar had ebbed as food and supplies grew scarcer.



By February 1917 Petrograd demonstrators were joined by the royal troops and the Tsar dissolved the Duma. A provisional government was formed by the Duma and the Tsar's only option was to abdicate. Petrograd reacted by strengthening its Soviet and called on the rest of the country for support. Lenin returned to Russia in April and Trotsky followed in May.

Although the SRP and the Mensheviks were strongly represented at the First Congress of the Soviets, Bolshevik membership increased from 20,000 to 200,000 between February and the following October. Imprisoned Bolsheviks were released in August and by September the Petrograd Soviet had a Bolshevik majority.

Before the Second Congress of Soviets, due on October 25th, the Petrograd Soviet was demanding the dissolution of the provisional government and "all power to the Soviets". Trotsky immediately formed a Military Revolutionary Committee, which challenged the power of the government. Within days Bolshevik troops had taken the Winter Palace and arrested the members of the provisional government.

Power at last had passed to the Soviets. Lenin, as Chairman of the new government, the Council of People's Commissars, would lead Russia into Communism. Despite opposition from Menshevik supporters, Bolsheviks who had been active in the Revolution would now govern the country, its external affairs and the economic and cultural life of the state.

It all had to be done while the country was torn by the conflict of civil war and every force enlisted to convert the people to the Red Ideology.

The recruitment of art for this purpose and the drive to establish a Bolshevik culture would, for some years, occupy the politicians, the artists and the theoreticians in the aftermath of the October Revolution.

THE GROWTH OF BOLSHEVISM

CHAPTER I

FOOTNOTES

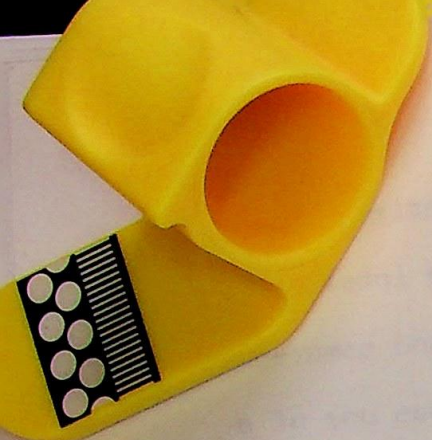
1. The reforms of Alexander II (1818-1881) included the Emancipation of Serfdom in 1861.'
- 2W. McLaine, "Art and the Worker", The Communist Review I, June 1921, pp. 18/19.
2. Mary McAuley, Politics and the Soviet Union, p. 31.
3. Ibid, p. 34.
4. A soviet was a council of workers' deputies. This Ist Petrograd Soviet was formed by the workers from 50 printing works, later joined by other workers.
5. Paul Siegel, Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art, p. 41.

CHAPTER II

Plekhanov:

In common with many of the Russian revolutionaries, Plekhanov's life was not devoted solely to politics. The intellectual tastes of the Party leadership were catholic and comprehensive. Apart from his socialist politics, Plekhanov was one of a body of theorists and critics whose absorption of western philosophy and culture informed his ideas on what constituted art in the new state. Through his political involvement he favoured the commitment of the industrial urban worker over the agrarian, rural peasant and saw the future of Russia in the hands of the proletariat. Nevertheless, he favoured the art of the Realists of the nineteenth century, whose subject matter was rooted in the rural community. Those who relate the thirties non-judgemental Socialist Realism in Russia to Plekhanov, fail to point out that what he admired in these nineteenth century Realists was their critical approach to the society in which they lived and their attempt, through their art, to change it. This relentless concentration by the Realists on the evils of tsardom was later considered by the Bolsheviks to have been a stimulus to revolution among the newly 'freed' tsar's subjects.

Theirs was much more than a Hegelian reflectionist art; in fact it was closer to Marx, in that it set out not just to depict society, but to actively influence it. Plekhanov had been a follower of Chernyshevsky, (1) whose theories on art and its role in society were espoused by the Realists. These theories were in part adapted from Saint-Simon (2), the eighteenth century French philosopher, who regarded art as having a primary role in the restructuring of society.



Those who considered Plekhanov's public denunciation of Cubism in 1912 (3) as reactionary and anti-modern, failed to see that what he rejected in Cubism was its preoccupation with form, an 'art for art's sake', as opposed to his own contention that art should be created for society's sake. For Plekhanov, art was the artist telling the truth as he saw it and in so doing, influencing his fellow man. This mission he saw as fulfilled by the nineteenth century Realists. He would not have recognised in Stalin's Socialist 'Realism' anything but a mockery of the word.

Plekhanov died in 1918 and was commemorated by Lenin in his Monumental Propaganda Campaign as one of the inspirations to the Revolution.

Trotsky:

That both Trotsky and Lenin have written on literature and on art points to a more than ordinary interest by revolutionaries in the cultural foundation of the state. The personal interest of both was inclined towards literature rather than to the visual arts, nevertheless, Trotsky was embroiled, from the beginning, in the theoretical discussion surrounding the nature of revolutionary art.

Trotsky himself epitomised the enigma that was Russia when he said "we have a dictatorship of the proletariat in a country which is inhabited mainly by peasants" (4). He was reluctant to define the new art; although he held strong opinions on what it should not be. Like Chernyshevsky and Plekhanov, he rejected an 'art for art's sake' and upheld the idea that art should be part of life itself;

the "effort to set art free from life, to declare it ... self-sufficient unto itself, devitalises and kills art" (5).

While realising that the new Bolshevik art must be part of life, he was cautious about the leftist, anti-art tendencies. He feared a movement by the artist away from creative contemplation and the mirror of reflection towards an aggressive new art, formed by the hammer, to shape society (6). For Trotsky, art would only change life when life itself would be so altered by the ideals of Communism that it could absorb and assimilate art. With his customary pragmatism he could see that revolutionary Russia would need much time before these conditions were met.

Trotsky, more than any of the other leaders, was aware of this crucial time factor, 'the tortoise perspective' (7). He realised that a new culture, like previous cultures, would not appear overnight. It required a long, slow process of assimilation and it would have to be based on a knowledge of the cultural past.

A theorist himself, he followed avidly all debate regarding the new art in contemporary publications. Nonetheless, he was aware that work, not theory, was what finally mattered. He was also concerned that intellectual theorising resulted in an even bigger gap between the artist and the generally illiterate public. He agreed that experiment and exploration in the fields of art, science and technology would, given time, eventually produce a culture that would rival the cultures of the past, but accepted, what many of the theorists did not, that the common people were, in the

wake of the Revolution, concerned only with literal reproduction and not abstract discussion.

In this way Trotsky was sceptical about an art for the mass of the people being decided by an elite minority. For him there was as yet only revolutionary man; only time, education and material prosperity would provide the art of the revolution.

Trotsky was the revolutionary par excellence. As Commissar for War he trained an unruly mob of indifferent peasants into the five-million-strong disciplined body, the Red Army, which 'beat the Whites with its Red Wedge' (8). As passionately as he believed in the Revolution, so did he believe in complete freedom for art, regardless of whether it was for the Revolution or against it (9).

For Trotsky, Communism, as envisaged by Marx, would free art from all external pressures, material, political and ideological and allow the artist to concern himself only with artistic truth. Thus would art neither be led nor commanded (10) and so, being free, would create the real art of the Revolution.

Although he approved of the revolutionary aims of aspects of the avant-garde, he was doubtful about their formalist concerns. Appreciating form and creating form were part of the value of art, but form, in itself, for Trotsky, was not enough. It was as inconceivable to him as it was for Marx, that art could create without reference to the political, social and economic conditions of the time.

The Formalists ignored the "psychological unity of the social man" (11). As for the Formalist critics and their insistence on the autonomy of the word itself, he did not approve either their Kantian disinterestedness, their irrational 'zaum' (12) language or their many manifestos.

It was one of the peculiarities in the culturalisation of Russia that manifestos and movements appropriated portions of philosophies and theories, and, in giving validity to the part, negated the contribution of the whole. Marx, Saint-Simon, Hegel, as well as Kant were all victims of this fragmentation of their work.

Trotsky shared with the constructivists their reverence for the machine and for technique. Trotsky's machine would free the worker to devote time to aesthetic concerns; technique itself he considered of fundamental importance in the history of culture. It was what brought man from the stone age to the machine age; indeed, what made the Revolution possible.

His loyalty to the international ideal of the Revolution brought him into conflict with Lenin after 1921, and was one of the many bones of contention between him and Stalin after Lenin's death in 1924, when Stalin turned to nationalism.

Trotsky's own political demise coincided with that of the progressive artists. As early as 1903 he saw the dangers of a one-man party in his then criticism of Lenin,

"the party organisation at first substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organisation; finally, a single dictator substitutes himself for the Central Committee" (13).

By the end of the twenties his prophetic vision was realised. Stalin was in power as a sole dictator; the party role was to bow to his whim. He used his position to rid himself of the contentious thorn in his side. In February 1929, Trotsky was deported to Turkey in a cloak and dagger operation that was a forewarning of events to come. For Russia, Armageddon had arrived.

From enforced exile he was one of Stalin's most severe critics when Stalin imposed an official style on the art of the Soviet Union. Equating it with superficial photography, he went further and accused it of deliberately lying, for Trotsky the worst sin in the book of artistic truth. He was the first to openly accuse the Socialist 'Realist' artists of depicting events that never occurred in order to "exalt the leader and fabricate a heroic myth" (14). He saw the pyramid of power as created by Stalin, with its power of veto, having destroyed, not only the art of the Revolution, but the very ideals of the Revolution itself.

Lenin:

Lenin agreed with Trotsky's view that the culture of the past was a necessary foundation for socialist culture. In the early days he also shared Trotsky's international outlook.

Lenin was concerned with the economic urgency of creating the new state and, in order to improve Russian industry, he would recruit experts from the fields of art and technology, whether or not they were part of the old bourgeois regime: "We cannot wait twenty years until we have trained pure Communist experts ... We must compel them (the bourgeois experts) to serve us". (15)

While he left the running of contemporary art matters in the capable hands of his Education Commissar, Lenin in 1918 also undertook a policy of preservation and conservation of valuable relics of tsardom. Any existing monuments of artistic value were to be removed and stored, not destroyed. They would be replaced with commissioned works by modern Russian artists, commemorating international achievers in all the fields of human endeavour. In this way art would be used to extol internationalism as a Marxian concept, rather than nationalism as a legacy of the tsars. The following year he confiscated in the name of the people the great collections of modern art once owned by the bourgeois capitalists. The people could now enjoy the artistic treasures of the past, as the new owners of these palaces of bourgeois culture.

Lenin did not want a compartmentalised culture. In 1920 he rebuked Lunacharsky for sanctioning the setting up of an autonomous proletarian section within the People's Commissariat for Education. He did not tolerate 'parallel organisations' (16) within his departments; there would be one single-minded organisation run by his deputy and directly answerable to Lenin himself. Within the same Commissariat, the avant-garde was given free rein to rise to the challenge of creating a new art for the revolutionary state, so long as it understood who was in charge.

For this purpose new state schools and institutions were set up with the avant-garde artists in the key teaching roles, replacing the more conservative realists. The avant-garde was also given the task of decorating the streets

and squares for commemorative festivals and for street theatre. They were also involved in propaganda and agitational work for the new regime. Although this work was carried out throughout the country, it was primarily aimed at the urban worker and was thus an urban movement and an urban art. Very soon the confidence of the avant-garde, together with that of its worker counterpart, would be undermined. As Marx could have predicted, the economy dictated that Lenin should change strategy.

In the civil war between Reds and Whites, after the Revolution, peasant and proletariat combined for a Red victory.

Although the peasants, under Trotsky, were the physical army of the state, the proletariat, as the supplier of arms was indispensable. Lenin made the proletariat his chosen people, an echo of Marxist materialist contempt for the economic value of the individual toiling peasant.

However, when the war ended the peasant and his produce forced a shift in official allegiance. The town had to rely on the country for sustenance and the peasant, knowing his worth, was not content to play second fiddle to the proletariat. It was also remembered, as Folgarait points out, (17), that the rural population had been the military muscle under Trotsky. Peasant mutiny was imminent, food was withheld and a sullen rural populace forced Lenin to take action. In true Marxist fashion he tackled the base problem and introduced his New Economic Policy (NEP). NEP would give the peasant a degree of control over his farming, in return for which he would supply the urban population with his surplus food.

Lenin now had to concentrate on converting the peasant to economic and ideological socialism, and for this he would need the help of the artists, as he had needed them in his effort to propagandise the proletariat. But this was a different audience, and a more direct, unambiguous message was needed to penetrate the layers of illiteracy born of centuries of tsarist neglect.

Whereas Lenin had welcomed the avant-garde artists in the cities with their abstract, cosmopolitan art, for the rural masses he required an art identifiable as rooted in the peasant ethos. In this way did the Realist artists find official favour, while the avant-garde and its proletarian comrades had to take a back seat. Lenin and NEP (see glossary) also saw to it that funding for artists was cut, art school staffing decreased considerably and the reintroduction of private enterprise meant that artists once more had to court favour in the market place.

It was a far cry from Lenin's dream of a Communist state that would "support the artist while he followed his own creative urge, without interference" (18). From now on, only an art that was of use to the state for political propaganda or economic growth, would be used by the socialist regime.

Lunacharsky:

By his own definition Lunacharsky was "an intellectual among Bolsheviks and a Bolshevik among intellectuals" (19). He also shared with Lenin, Trotsky, Bogdanov and Plekhanov a pre-revolutionary incubation period in Western European countries, which broadened his internationalism and contributed to his cosmopolitanism. Like the other leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution his knowledge of European literature

was comprehensive and his own contribution as an author
journalist and critic was substantial.

Lunacharsky read himself into Marxism as a student in Kiev,
where he spread Marxist doctrine among the railway workers.
He was well-known to the local police as a controversial
contributor to the local press (20). He was arrested
more than once and spent time in jail before going abroad to
study at Zurich University. Although family circumstances
cut short his university career (21), his European years
brought him in touch with the Marxism of Plekhanov and
Akselrod and with the empiriocriticism of Richard Avenarius.

Back in Russia he resumed his subversive activities and met
fellow-revolutionary and future brother-in-law, the medical
Marxist Bogdanov. He was not yet committed to Bolshevism,
but voted with Bogdanov and Lenin in opposition to the
Mensheviks at the Second Party Congress in London. By 1904
he was helping Lenin to form the new party newspaper
VSPERED (see glossary) in Geneva (22). He was now a
Bolshevik by conviction, contributed to Bolshevik propaganda
in the journal VSPERED and helped in the founding of another
Party paper, Proletarii in Paris.

During the winter of 1905 Lunacharsky returned to Petersburg
and helped Gorky (23) to edit two new journals. Although
shut down by the censor and once more arrested, Lunacharsky
was now aware of the task of presenting Bolshevism to the
intellectuals of Russia as a convincing political and social
creed.

In November 1906 Gorky settled on the island of Capri and invited Lunacharsky and Bogdanov to join him. Later in 1908, having encapsulated his theories in his first volume Religion and Socialism, he put his theories into practice by founding, with Gorky's and Bogdanov's help, a workers' school on Capri.

Lenin was not in favour of such arbitrary moves within the Party and was apprehensive that Bogdanov would pose a threat, a leadership alternative. Lenin was also uneasy about Lunacharsky's definition of Marxism as religion and the new worker-culture as an alternative secular religion. But Lunacharsky was aware that the pomp and ceremony of Church and Royalty would have to be replaced by similar street spectacle and public festival in a new socialist state.

The Capri enterprise, The First Higher Social Democratic Propagandist and Agitator School enrolled its first students in summer 1909. Its purpose was to train Russian workers for propaganda, agitation and organisational work and to "strengthen the intellectual energy of the Party" (24). It is important to note that priority was given to ideological rather than military matters. It was the first practical step in the foundation of proletarian culture.

Personal reasons (25) once more determined that Lunacharsky leave Capri, this time for Bologna, where, with the help of Gorky and Bogdanov he re-established his worker-school in 1910. But a series of defections by leading members meant the end of Lunacharsky's practical experiment in proletarian culture.

It was, nevertheless, experience that would be invaluable during the post-Revolution years, when he would once more attempt to establish a proletarian culture under the official sanction of the new state.

By 1911 Lunacharsky had published his second volume of Religion and Socialism and began his public renewal of friendship with Lenin. He also returned to the excitement of Paris, which was then the art capital of Western Europe. It was also the home of many Russian emigre artists, including Diaghelev and his Ballet Russe.

Lunacharsky immersed himself in the art world of Paris, visiting art exhibitions, museums and galleries, officially representing one of the Kiev newspapers. As an art critic he was certainly not revolutionary, but appreciated the experimentations of Cubism, while personally favouring a more conservative style. At this time, in 1912, Lunacharsky's taste ran to realism rather than to abstract art. Yet he enjoyed the company of all the young artists of the Paris art colony, La Ruche, particularly that of his fellow Russians (26). Here he founded a circle for proletarian culture among the Russian workers and introduced them to their artistic counterparts in bohemian Paris. It was his first experience as liaison officer between the intelligent Russian worker and the artists of the avant-garde. Together they would hopefully create a proletarian culture, foreseen by Lunacharsky as early as 1906 on Capri; for Lunacharsky it would be the foundation of the future Socialist State.

It would be five years before he would set about uniting the artists and workers in his own native Russia. Then, as Commisar for the Enlightenment, he would give preference to the avant-garde as revolutionary artists, in his attempt to establish a new art for the worker in Russia. To this end he would bring back from Paris many of the artists whom he had befriended during his exile, among them David Shterenberg, future Head of Fine Art under his own Ministry.

THE POLITICIANS

CHAPTER II

FOOTNOTES

1. Christina Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 19.
I Chernyshevsky (1829-1889), Russian revolutionary and author believed art and society inseparable. His What is to be done?, 1885, called forth outbursts from Tolstoy and Tuegenev. For Chernyshevsky the idea behind a work of art was important; execution was relegated to the background. Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 19. He was an influence on Lenin whose own pamphlet of 1902 was given the same title.
2. Margaret A. Rose, Marx's Lost Aesthetic
Saint-Simon (1760-1825) French philosopher, generally regarded as the father of French Socialism. For Saint-Simon the new society would be formed by an avant-garde of scientists, engineers and artists. He was a major influence on Marx.
3. Robert Radford, Art for a Purpose
In his 1912 talk, "Art and Social Life" in Paris, shortly the publication of Gleizes and Metzinger's Du Cubisme, Piekhanov attacked the Cubists for their emphasis on form rather than on content. The Cubists were defended by Lunacharsky, Lenin's future Minister for the Arts.
4. Paul Siegel, Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art, p. 74.
5. Ibid, p. 13.
6. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison eds., Modern art and Modernism, p. 109.
7. Paul Siegel, Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art, p. 95.
8. This refers to Lissitzky's propaganda poster Beat the Whites with the Red Square 1920.
9. Siegel, Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art, p. 92.
10. Ibid, p. 119.
11. Ibid, notes p. 237.
12. 'zaum' literally means 'trans-rational' or 'beyond the mind' language used by the Futurist poets: intentionally illogical. Kreschenyk employed it in his absurd opera Victory over the Sun, in 1913, important in the evolution of Suprematism. Gorky had written an earlier play Children of the Sun in 1904 whose values were derided by the later Victory over the Sun.

13. Sir Percival Griffiths, The Changing Face of Communism
Trotsky opposed Lenin's attempt to restrict the Bolshevik
Party to active members.
14. Siegel, Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art, p. 53.
15. Christina Lodder, Russian Constructivism
16. Ibid, p. 142.
17. Leonard Folgarait, "Art, State, Class: Avant-Garde
Art Production and the Russian Revolution",
Arts Magazine, December 1985, p. 72.
18. Radford, Art for a Purpose.
19. Robert C Williams, Artists in Revolution, p. 24.
20. Ibid, p. 26.
21. Ibid, p. 38
In 1895 his brother became seriously ill and
Lunacharsky took him to France and nursed him for over a
year.
22. Ibid, p. 41
The original Party newspaper ISKRA (Spark) was now
controlled by Martov and the Mensheviks.
23. This refers to the writer, Maxim Gorky, whose financial
support of the Bolsheviks was unfailing, although he
himself remained politically independent. Gorky was
held up as the quintessential proletarian artist because
of his working-class background.
24. Ibid, p. 50.

25. Ibid, p. 51
Lunacharsky's wife had constant arguments and disagreements with Gorky's companion, the actress Andreeva.
26. Ibid, p. 54
Lunacharsky preferred David Shterenberg's more realistic painting and would later appoint Shterenberg as head of Fine Art in NARKOMPROS (see glossary).

1914, p. 21
Lunacharsky's wife and constant companion and
companion with her in the house, the actress
Anatolya.

1914, p. 24
Lunacharsky's wife and constant companion and
companion with her in the house, the actress
Anatolya.

It was difficult and painful for him to realize that
the revolution in Russia was not only a political
revolution but also a social one. The revolution of 1917
was not only a political revolution but also a social one.

There was a great deal in the world of art. The Academy in
St. Petersburg, which existed and practiced throughout the state,
was directly or indirectly connected with the revolution.

THE ARTISTS - I - THE TRADITIONALISTS

It was not only the revolution with the artists but also
the revolution of the people.

CHAPTER III - PART I

Students of the Academy, including Pabst, Krasov, Pabst
and Gorky, studied in 1917 and received their own education.
Their work not only reflected the social and political
changes of the time, but also reflected the changes in
the world of art. The revolution of 1917 was not only a
political revolution but also a social one. The revolution
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It was politics and social issues as well as artistic concerns that brought Realism into prominence in nineteenth century Russia. The freeing of the serfs in 1861, by Tsar Alexander II, merely opened the door for more needed social reforms. There was unrest also in the world of art. The Academy in Petersburg, which dictated art practice throughout the state, was directly under Imperial patronage. Academy art was a French-influenced courtly style, vaguely based on Classicism. It had no connection whatsoever with the strife-ridden Russia of the people.

Students of the Academy, including Pepin, Kramskoi, Perov and Surikov, rebelled in 1863 and formed their own association. Their work not only reflected the social and political upheavels of the time, but by exposing and condemning injustice it helped raise peasant morale. (See Figs. 1, 2 and 3). Theirs was primarily a critical function and their style a realist one. In that they set out to change society they could be considered as fitting into the Marxist mould; in that they introduced new subject matter in the form of the oppressed, unidealised peasant they could be considered revolutionary; in that they chose to exhibit their works by travelling to different venues, they could be considered popular among the people. At any rate they became an acute embarrassment to the establishment, were considered subversive and were persecuted accordingly. Yet these Peredvizhniki (Wanderers) continued to explore and condemn the conditions that existed in nineteenth century Russia.

Like later Russian artistic movements, they had an intellectual and theoretical support group, led by the critics Kramskoi and Stasov, who helped in the dissemination of their work and their concerns.

The Realists were not only radical in their political ideals; they were, in the context of mid-nineteenth century Russia, truly revolutionary in their art. They had rebelled against the irrelevant art of the Academy and the sentimental works of the Romantics. Theirs was an art of time and place, rooted in the experience of the people. But it was nevertheless more concerned with literary theme than with the material and formal elements of visual art. The Wanderers in defying the Academy had merely questioned pictorial content; it did not occur to them to experiment with form.

The Wanderers were influenced by the writings of Belinsky and his disciple Chernyshevsky, for whom art and its relevance to society were inseparable (1). By 1892 there was a reaction from younger artists against this socio-political emphasis in favour of decorative, aesthetic and formal concerns. This new attitude was endorsed that year by the publication of Dmitry Merezhkovsky's Reasons for the decline of Russian Literature and its new Trends (2). Merezhkovsky called for an end to the economic, political and social preoccupations of Belinsky and Chernyshevsky; young artists were to apply themselves to the artifice of art. Reality was to be dealt with, if at all, by those remaining Wanderers whose numbers were depleted by old age, death and a growing inclination towards nostalgia for the past. Hegel's philosophy was to be replaced by Kant.

These advocates of art for art's sake were referred to as Modernist, Decadent or Symbolist; Russian followers of French trends. The new direction in the visual arts was reflected in literature, where form also took precedence over content. In Merezhkovsky's Symbolist Manifesto of 1893 reality was replaced by theatrically, the occult, the mysterious and the metaphysical. There was also a move towards internationalism in outlook and a new interest in French art.

This internationalism was itself countered by a native movement towards the national values and traditions of the past. Wealthy industrialists like Savva Mamontov were conscious of the insidious industrial threat to the indigenous arts and crafts of the peasant. Mamontov set up a centre at Abramtsevo, outside Moscow, to nurture traditional Russian folk-lore and folk-art. The style became known as the Neo-National Style and looked for its inspiration to the art and architecture of early Russia.

For a time many of the original Wanderers met and exhibited with the Abramtsevo Circle. However, it was the younger generation of Wanderers, Korovin, Levitan, Kuinji, Nesterov and Serov etc., who related best to Abramtsevo. Already dissatisfied with the unchanging values of the early Wanderers, these younger painters favoured the less social-oriented approach to art and found much in common with the folk art and applied arts in Mamontov's Centre. (See Figs. 4 and 5).

As Bowlt points out, they were 'transitional figures' in Russian art (3), having begun as Wanderer/Realists, they continued successfully as Neo-Nationalists.

In their emphasis on picture-making rather than on story-telling, they moved on from the art of Wanderers and could be considered precursors of the World of Art movement; for a time they, in fact, were associated with them. At any rate they were influential in emphasising the decorative and formal elements in a work of art and important, therefore, to the development of Russian Modernism. At the same time they remained representational painters; still preoccupied with the 'what' of painting.

By 1893 the Academy, against which the Wanderers rebelled in 1863, was partially reformed. Repin resigned from the Society of Wanderers and accepted an Academy post as director of the historical art studio. He was followed by many of the senior members. Some of the younger Neo-Nationalist/Wanderers also joined the art institutions. In this way many future members of the Russian avant-garde were initially exposed to the formative influence of the two streams within the Wanderers movement.

It was reaction to the Academy that in part contributed to the formation of the Petersburg World of Art. The journal was founded by the erudite and accomplished Diaghelev and through its pages opened wide the cross-fertilisation of East and West begun by the earlier Symbolists. Eclectic in taste, it nevertheless favoured an art for art's sake and like the Symbolists in their preference for form, exerted a major influence on future trends.

While Repin, at Diaghelev's request had initially contributed to the World of Art, from the beginning it was highly critical of the Academy and the Wanderers. When Diaghelev announced in the eighth issue that many of the Wanderers' works should be removed from the city museum, Repin and his Realist friends could no longer collaborate with the group nor contribute to the journal. While the journal itself ceased publication in 1904, the group itself continued to work and exhibit until after the Revolution (4).

The events of Bloody Sunday brought reality back onto the artistic stage and students at the Academy signed a proclamation demanding democratic elections and government reform.

Repin was among the signatories. Yet, during the unrest of the coming years art seemed to turn a blind eye to events in the world and, for the coming decade, focused its undivided attention on itself.

Young painters like Malevich, Larionov and Goncharova would later develop a Neo-primitive style, influenced by the peasant art of the nineteenth century Abramtsevo movement. (See Figs. 6 and 7). Together with Cubist influence from France and Futurist inspiration from Italy, the new Russian avant-garde developed its own hybrid style, Cubo-Futurism. (See Fig. 8). There was an emphasis on the illogical and the irrational among avant-garde painters and their Futurist literary friends who, through their journal Union of Youth, called into question all authority and order both in art and in life. They were in open rebellion with their old Realist teachers at the Academy in Petersburg and in the Moscow School of Art.



Despite the Cubo-Futurism, Rayonism and later Suprematism of the Russian avant-garde the Realist/Wanderer teachers remained at their Academic posts during the War until the October Revolution brought the Bolsheviks to power. By summer 1918 the new regime had closed the Academy and existing Art Schools. Re-opened in September they were now re-organised as State Free Art Studios. New members of the teaching staff were taken not from among the traditionalists but from the ranks of the avant-garde. Lenin, Lunacharsky and the Bolshevik State were unanimous in their belief in a new art for the new workers' State.


Although the traditionalists had now lost their seats of power and influence in the Schools and Academies, they continued to paint and exhibit as before. They had earlier ceased to concern themselves with social and political issues; by this time they were painting apolitical naturalistic landscapes, portraits and anecdotal scenes that found acceptance among the people and the wealthier art patrons. They went unnoticed in the art world and were ignored by the intelligentsia and the avant-garde, the new rulers of the Russian art scene. Realist themes and style were traditionally associated with rural and peasant life. With the new emphasis on Marxist theory as favouring the urban worker as the ultimate saviour of the Revolution, the peasant and peasant concerns were consigned to the basement, while all that was urban and utilitarian occupied the upper storeys.

The October Revolution had altered not only social and political attitudes; it had also changed artistic consciousness. Within the restructured Art Studios and Institutes there was now a move to merge art and industry and so create an art that would be characteristic of the new revolutionary and proletarian society. Malevich, Rodchenko and other artists of the avant-garde proclaimed, as early as 1920 that the two-dimensional surface was finished, that painting was dead (5). The new art would be an art with a purpose; painting, as an allegedly useless pursuit was dismissed and abandoned.

Despite avant-garde prognosis however, painting merely played 'dead' and waited its turn in the limelight. When the State Free Art Studios were set up in 1918 they contained individual studios, where students could choose their teachers. A majority of students were in favour of traditional representational art and, had their preferences been adhered to, these schools would have been more conservative and less experimental. Despite the authorities' ignoring the voting and an avant-garde system of art-education being imposed, the fine art areas in these institutions remained strongly conservative. Furthermore, all students had to spend time in the basic courses of painting and sculpture and it was here that the trend towards representation was upheld. Friction resulted from this clash between the followers of tradition and the more experimental advocates of new form.

There had always been a strong narrative and thematic current in Russian art and literature and both were missing from the works of the avant-garde. Reactionary streams within the Art Schools began to criticise the avant-garde in general and Constructivism in particular for its nihilism, its concept of man as machine-operator and its glorification of technology and the machine. Many of these critics of the avant-garde were pupils of Rodchenko, Popova,, Klyun, Malevich, Tatlin and other prominent Modernist members. This is significant in that despite their exposure to the optimism, experimentation and art works of the avant-garde, as "former left artists" they now considered the "analytical period in art finished" (6). They formed The New Society of Painters (NOZH, see glossary) in 1920/21 with the purpose of returning to easel art, to traditional representation and to the figurative image. It was the first of many such societies in the 1920's that would constitute the new movement towards realism and away from the abstraction of the avant-garde.

The cry for a return to realism came not only from the dissenting artists. The economic problems facing Lenin after the Civil War were exacerbated by peasant unrest. The disbandment of the Red Army meant the return of thousands of peasants to farms that had been undermanned and neglected during the years of War Communism. The resultant shortage of food for the urban workers threatened the efficiency of industrial production. The peasantry, having been officially ignored in favour of the proletariat, was now unwilling to co-operate in the continuing Party policy of urban preferral. As already mentioned, a change in tactics was required if the peasant was to be converted to committed Communism.



peasant education would necessitate the enlisting of artists in a programme of visual propaganda and oral agitation. The high rate of illiteracy among the rural population meant that such an undertaking would rely primarily on a direct method of indoctrination by word and image. If such an undertaking were to evoke an immediate response among the peasants, familiar and identifiable modes of representation were called for.

The Realism of the Wanderers had traditionally been associated with rural Russia and Lenin was now ready to replace the esoteric geometry of abstraction with the unequivocal imagery of the realist painters. For the Wanderers' new disciples it was time for ideological conflict with the avant-garde.

NOZH (see glossary) was followed in 1921 by another young realist organising BYTIE (Being) (7), whose members called for a return to subject matter, in defiance of the Constructivist condemnation of theme.

The surviving Wanderers and their younger followers held their 47th exhibition in March 1922; afterwards they together formed the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR), with a later and younger offspring OMAKhR (see glossary). AKhRR was as dedicated to the Revolution as was the avant-garde and quickly won official acceptance for its realism and for its revolutionary zeal. AKhRR could be termed non-denominational in its loyalty to peasant and proletariat, soldier and politician. Its 'civic duty' was to 'depict the present day: the life of the Red Army, the workers, the peasants, the revolutionaries and the heroes of labour' (8).

By their own admission, unlike their Wanderer predecessors, they were to be reporters after the event rather than heralds of the future, or critics of the status quo. They also tended towards the heroic depiction of revolutionary themes and were solidly opposed to experimentation or analysis in the pursuit of art. They were adamant about HOW they would paint and equally intransigent about WHAT they would paint.

As one of the most prominent realist groups, determined to be the real artists of the Revolution, AKhRR needed a respected figurehead. Repin had retired to live in Finland, so his colleagues Kasatkin, Arkhipov and Maliutin together with their pupils Grigoriev, Radimov and Katsman now chose Isaak Brodsky as the leader of their Association. Brodsky, with fellow painter Gerasimov, was one of the first to popularise the heroic style, later known as Socialist Realism. (See Fig. 9). It was a style that emphasised academic craftsmanship and masterly technique.

Three young artists, Deineka, Pimenov and Goncharov formed The Group of Three in 1924, as an active avenue towards Revolutionary art. As students they came under the influence of the very broad-minded Favorsky, during his tenure as rector of VKhUTEMAS (see glossary). Favorsky tolerated both the formal explorations of the Constructivists and the aesthetic exercises of the easel painters. Deineka would be one of the foremost propagandists for Soviet ideology during the later years of Socialist Realism. (See Fig. 9)

In 1925 Deineka was again one of the founder members of The Society of Easel Painters (OST), a protest against AKhRR as well as against the Constructivists. Once more many of the members of OST, as students at VKhUTEMAS had been witnesses to the laboratory explorations of the avant-garde and its unsuccessful efforts to fuse its artistic experiments with the industrial production of the proletariat.

The members of OST were more defiantly revolutionary and less tied to tradition than the other easel artists. They were also committed to the new future Socialist State and the workers whose efforts would help bring this Utopia into being. OST was determined to be the artistic mouthpiece of the Revolution and prevailed upon other smaller societies to join its ranks. In 1925 the combined membership of OST and AKhRR proved a formidable opposition for the flagging energies of the avant-garde.

In 1926 there was an order from the Central Committee of the Communist Party to establish a Federation of Organisations of Soviet Writers (9), thus beginning the trend towards centralisation which would make of the arts a single governable unit. By 1929 forced collectivisation and the introduction of the first Five Year Plan were Stalin's methods of dealing with the peasantry, the proletariat and the economy; it was now time to turn his attention to the arts (10).

At the All-Union Congress of Proletarian Writers in 1928 there was official condemnation of avant-garde efforts to create an art in keeping with the ideals of the Revolution. Four years later, at the 17th Party Conference of the Communist Party the members decided that "the confines of the existing proletarian

literature and art organisations are becoming too narrow and are hampering the serious development of artistic creation" (11).

This led to the dissolution of all existing artistic groups and the formation of the Union of Artists in the same year. All those who still wished to devote their lives to the creation of art had no option but to join this Union and have their work dictated by the Dictatorship.

As for the Fine Arts, the ultra-conservative Brodsky was now appointed director of the newly revised Academy. Stalin was opposed to the anarchy of the avant-garde and, orthodox in his own attitude, understood the equally traditional tastes of the rural and urban worker in relation to the arts. It was thus a conservative art that would, for Stalin, best combine the cultural traditions of older Russia and the Marxist ideals of the new revolutionary Worker-State. As a clever tactician Stalin had already observed the gradual return to realism among a sector of the younger artists; he would manipulate this tendency with his customary skill and thereby impose his vision on the arts.

The promotion of Stalin's concept of socialist art was left to his Party colleague Zhdanov, obviously in accordance with the leader's explicit instructions. At the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 Gorky was the first to speak in favour of a realistic art, 'attuned to Revolutionary Russia' (12); he was also the first to use the term Socialist Realism.

Zhdanov claimed that the new artist should "depict reality in its revolutionary development" and represent his own society and his own times (13). This was not to be done with sentiment and nostalgia but in a positive and optimistic fashion, with "revolutionary romanticism" (14). The new art of Socialist Realism would, as its name implied, be Realist, Socialist and also Nationalist (15). It would also transcend class barriers, as the new Soviet State was now allegedly classless. Furthermore, it would eschew the individualism and formalism of the now decadent avant-garde.

In Socialist Realism there would be no emphasis on any particular mode of expression; merely that the subject would itself dictate the style. There was a renewed stress on skill and craftsmanship and the introduction of specific criteria by which the work would be assessed. In this way a successful work of Socialist Realist art would identify with party concerns (partinost), conform to Marxist ideology (ideinost), be rooted in the nationalist tradition (narodnost) and typify the society or individual depicted (tipichnost) (16). With such stringent guidelines, artists, now part of one controllable Union would become pawns in the powerful hands of the Party.

As Socialist Realists, artists would use their art to glorify the Revolution in a style of heroic illusionism that had nothing to do with Realism but everything to do with illusion and myth-making. The new 'Realists' had come a long way from their rebellious and subversive origins in the nineteenth century. From now on they would be no more than conduits carrying the message of Communism to the masses; Stalin's own 'engineers of the soul' (17), obedient servants of a masterful State.

Whereas nineteenth century Realism had the philosophical and theoretical doctrines of Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and Stasov (18) to relate to in their socially and politically critical art, Socialist 'Realism', as an organ of a totalitarian regime, had abrogated its critical responsibility in favour of secure employment by the State.

Trotsky and Lenin would hardly have approved. Marx decidedly would have disapproved, being opposed to State patronage of the art of a past era and to the wider and more sinister issue of censorship by the State (19).

By reverting to the oppressive measures of an earlier regime, the leadership in Stalinist Russia deprived the artist of the independent right to create. Destined to play a lead role in a country that professed to be Marxist, the now official State Artist became but a bit player in a Party production directed by Comrade Stalin.



THE ARTISTS
PART I - THE TRADITIONALISTS
CHAPTER III
FOOTNOTES

1. See I, Chapter 2.
Belinsky (1811-1848), Russian literary critic who supported advanced socially critical artists of the early 19th century. Chernyshevsky was one of his devoted followers. Stasov, art critic who supported the Wanderers in their criticism of the Academy and Tsarist Russia after 1863.
2. Fan Parker, Russia on Canvas: Ilya Repin, p. 107.
Stephen Jan Parker.
3. John Bowlt, The Silver Age: Russian Art of the early Twentieth Century and the 'World of Art' Group, p. 25.
4. Ibid, p. 62.
Because of the high quality of its presentation the World of Art could not continue without the annual grant bestowed on it by Tsar Nicholas II from 1900. With the economic crisis following the Russo-Japanese war the Tsar withdrew his subsidy and ensuing financial difficulties were part of the reasons for its closure in 1904.
5. Alan Bird, A History of Russian Painting, p. 231.
6. Christina Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 186.
7. Ibid,
Lodder refers to 'Bytie' as 'Objective Reality'.
8. Bird, A History of Russian Painting, p. 261.
9. Ibid, p. 246
10. Lenin had died in 1924. Stalin became Party leader in 1928.
11. Bird, A History of Russian Painting, p. 258.
12. Ibid, p. 259.
13. Ibid, p. 267.



THE ARTISTS
PART I - THE TRADITIONAL
CHAPTER III
FOOTNOTES


14. Radford, Art for a Purpose, p. 150.
15. With the introduction of Stalin's Socialism in One Country the idea of the Communist International was replaced by a tendency towards nationalism.
16. Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution, p. 302.
17. Lodder, Russian Constructivism
'engineers of the soul': the term used in Zhdanov's 1934 speech to describe the new artists. Lodder points out a possible swipe at the 'artist-engineer' envisaged by the Constructivists.
18. See notes on Chernyshevsky, Belinsky.
Stasov was the art critic who supported the Wanderers' socially oriented art.
19. Margaret Rose, Marx's Lost Aesthetic, p. 116/117.
One of Marx's first journalistic efforts at the age of 24 was aimed at the artist/king Friedrich William IV of Prussia who, in 1841 enforced rigid censorship to protect Church and State from the critical barbs of the intelligentsia.



THE ARTISTS -

II - THE AVANT-GARDE

CHAPTER III - PART II




Before the October Revolution, Russia experienced an earlier formal revolution in art that was, unlike the Rebellion of the Wanderers, apolitical. This avant-garde movement of the visual arts was an intellectual one, nourished by the cross fertilisation of ideas from the varied international disciplines of science, philosophy, psychology, music and literature. The new ideas were promoted and discussed in the literary publications of the time.

The artists who rejected the concerns of the nineteenth century Realists were the first Russians to give validity to modernist formal qualities in a work of art. Inspired by the French Symbolists and Kandinsky and disseminated through the pages of The World of Art (1), they upheld an art that was removed from society and concerned only with itself. They denied the perceived world objects, substituted in its stead the intrinsic value of line, colour and form and delighted in the discovery that spontaneity and inaccuracy could contribute to aesthetic enjoyment (2).

Theirs was an art of philosophical, psychological and mystical concerns and provoked strong reaction from another group that was more nationalistic, more primitive and more Russian. This was the Jack of Diamonds group.


As the Russian Symbolists allied themselves with The World of Art, so artists from The Jack of Diamonds sought kindred spirits in the contemporary publications of the intelligentsia (3).



Malevich, through The Union of Youth in 1912 met painters who were scientists, writers who were musicians and philosophers who were poets. The result of his collaboration with two of these members was the opera Victory Over the Sun, in 1913 which was crucial to his development as an artist and seminal in the formal growth of the avant-garde in Russia. Kruchenyck's irrational, illogical libretto, Matyushin's dissonant, atonal score and Malevich's abstract geometric design was a creative synthesis of the arts, a concern of the later avant-garde movement. The theme was also in tune with contemporary consciousness; the conquest of the sun, the consequent destruction of reality as perceived and the taking over of the old world of traditional values by the new 'will-be' supermen of the future.

Victory Over the Sun was revolutionary in its use of abstract geometric design, both for the sets and costumes of the opera. His own lighting of the set would provide Malevich with partially revealed forms which would play a large part in the formation of his Suprematist system and the evolution of the Black Square. Furthermore, his stark uncompromising sets would be forerunners of the theatre designs which would become the controversial constructions of the Constructivists. (see fig. 10).


Formal concerns were also the preoccupation of two influential literary groups in pre-revolutionary Russia. In keeping with international trends in the world of science, the Moscow Linguistic circle (4) and the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ) (5) adopted an analytic approach to literature and language. As the Symbolists and World of Art groups denied the importance of content in favour of form, so for the Russian Formalists the word became an end in itself. These groups,



and their publications, would have enormous significance after the Revolution when they would help crystallise the aims and concerns of post-revolutionary art.

The Critical Realists of the nineteenth century were bent on consciousness-raising among the people and, as such, were a source of social and political threat to the Tsar. The avant-garde of the pre-war years was concerned with nothing outside the theory and practice of intellectual pursuits and had neither a political nor a social profile in Russian life. Even during the war years, Malevich was giving "birth to his Royal Infant, The Black Square" (6), and concentrating on attaining his philosophic Throne of Thought. By 1917, the Modernist artists in Russia would experience a cataclysmic shift in their insulated world; they would now have to bring their art into the streets and decide whether their palettes should be either Red or White. It was no longer possible to be an unconcerned 'fellow-traveller' (7).

When the Bolsheviks under Lenin decided to take on the Tsar and his forces, they were not only concerned with victory as such, but of over-turning the whole world of traditional values, as in Victory Over the Sun. The setting up of an unprecedented system of rule would lead eventually to an ideal, where there would be no state government, but communal participation in all decisions and policies. It was Marxist theory endeavouring to become practice. It was not only intended to be national and Russian but to become international and cosmopolitan.



The worker, according to the Communist Manifesto, had no country; the true Bolshevik did not consider himself Russian so much as Communist. Russia was a geographic whole made up of separate ethnic parts, each with its own indigenous language and culture. This was Lenin's dilemma. He must bring together all these divisions into one socialist entity, in readiness for world socialism on an international scale.

The Revolution itself was over and done with in ten days. It would take from three to four years of hardship and work to consolidate the Communist takeover and establish stability in the country. To do this both Lenin and Trotsky allowed themselves to play God with Karl Marx. Instead of a workers' commune, it was necessary to establish a temporary dictatorship, not of the proletariat but of the intellectual wing of the Party. This dictatorship would lead and teach the people the way to socialism.

Both Lenin and Trotsky believed in the 'transforming power of culture' (8) and set about to give to the illiterate masses the basics of a culture of which they had been deprived for centuries. Both men realised that it is impossible to instantly build a culture from scratch and each favoured the harnessing of bourgeois culture as a foundation for what was to be the new culture of the proletariat.

It was to the creation of this proletarian culture that Lenin now turned his full attention. In doing so he would combine the forces of art and technology to bring into being a transformation in the material and economic life of the country. Such a task would require skills in the areas of organisation and reconstruction.




To accomplish his stated aims, Lenin set up a series of Commissariats with responsibility for specified tasks. As Commissar for the Enlightenment, in the newly appointed NARKOMPROS (see glossary) Lunacharsky was in charge of education with special responsibility in the field of art. The old Imperial Academy, with its traditional canons of excellence, was disbanded and with it many of the, by now, academic realists who had ceased their earlier wanderings for the safe teaching-havens of the establishment. There was general agreement that a new art was needed for a new era.

According to Lunacharsky, the proletariat must finally eradicate the sharp difference between life and art which had concerned the ruling class of the past (9), "In the hands of the proletariat art will become a sharp weapon of Communist propaganda and agitation ... in the hands of the proletariat art is the tool, the means and the product of production" (10).

But in the hands of the proletariat there was no evidence of proletarian culture or proletarian art. PROLETKULT (see glossary) was set up, not by Lunacharsky himself but by his brother-in-law Bogdanov at the time of the Revolution, to consolidate the working class politically, economically and culturally. It was the outcome of the Capri and Bologna schools and the leading members retained the ideals of those earlier efforts.

Before he met Lunacharsky Bogdanov had always been interested in mass culture and had been a follower of the nineteenth century Populists, who revived interest in the folk-culture of




the Russian people, their songs, poems and folk-theatre. The Populists also held Sunday schools for workers in an effort to stamp out illiteracy and educate the masses towards true Socialism.

There was divided opinion as to what this workers' culture should be. For some it was the lore, songs and handcrafts created by generations of workers, handed down and added to by each succeeding generation. For others it was art, craft, entertainment and education provided by others for the hard-worked proletariat.

In pre-war Russia there were already facilities available whereby the worker was offered lectures, music lessons, opportunities to take part in drama and choral productions, all in an effort to encourage a genuine proletarian cultural movement. Bogdanov firmly believed that man, as a member of the collective, could evolve to a higher type of individual, defined variously as Communist, Socialist or Collectivist (11) Collectivism was to be aimed at in the new society where the new Socialist man would himself change the old world for a brand new world of his own making.

In his Art and Revolution of 1849 Wagner had claimed that the art of the future would be a "mass art, a popular culture reflecting social values ... a culture created by workers for workers." It was this Wagnerian vision that Bogdanov resurrected in the early days of the twentieth century when he collaborated in the ideological education of the proletariat with Lunacharsky and Gorky on Capri.




PROLETKULT was to be the realisation of all pre-revolutionary efforts at forming a proletarian culture. Bogdanov, as a true Marxist, did not differentiate between art and labour; art, as a product of human labour, was simply another type of work that could employ all the technical means at the workers disposal. In this equation of art with work Bogdanov and PROLETKULT anticipated the Constructivists and their move towards production.

Bogdanov insisted on the cultural independence of PROLETKULT as a separate workers' group, whose membership now competed with the Bolsheviks. Numerically it was a political threat to the Party and Bogdanov's elitism was regarded by Lenin as totally anti-Marxist. By 1920 PROLETKULT was subsumed into the broader based NARKOMPROS and forcibly brought to order.


Trotsky was not in favour of the elitist concept of proletarian culture. He envisaged a cultural revolution 'not for a minority, but for all' (12), and could see that it would not happen overnight. Like all cultures, it would need time to ferment and mature. For Trotsky, proletarian accumulation of culture was dependent on eradicating the illiteracy problem. That in itself was one of the reasons for the recruitment of visual artists in the matter of the enlightenment of the people.

Enlightenment of the people involved the employment of visual propaganda at all levels. Lenin introduced his Plan for Monumental Propaganda in 1918 in order to change the old acknowledged appearance of things and introduce, visually at least, the new socialist-sense of values.



As already mentioned, he commissioned commemorative monuments to be erected all over the city, dedicated to international achievers in the fields of art, science, philosophy and engineering. They also commemorated heroes of the Revolution. They were intended to replace the earlier monuments to Tsardom. Constructed of crude building materials they were meant as a protest against the preciousness and elitism of bourgeois art. The workers themselves had requested the art works and were to the forefront in changing the face of their city. Large areas of canvas were painted by well-known artists of the avant-garde, Malevich, Randinsky and Tatlin, for street festivals and street theatre. Music was also employed. This use of painting, sculpture, music and theatre in an architectural setting was an example of the synthesis of the arts (13) which would characterise the new art. It was already of interest to Kandinsky.


Participation in street agitation brought a sense of collectiveness to the artists taking part. It was a rejection of bourgeois individualism and a step on the road to a workers' art. Most of the artists, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Popova etc., engaged in propaganda and agitation work, came from the recently formed State Art establishments; both students and masters worked side by side. They were equally committed to proletarian art. One of the results of this communal propaganda work was the formation by the Sternberg brothers and Medunetsky in 1919 of OBMOKHU (see glossary) an influential force in the formation of Constructivism.



Because of the State Free Studios' disregard for proletarian culture and industrial life, Rodchenko, the Sternbergs and friends demanded a restructuring of the course. They wanted to be part of the worker-society emerging from the Revolution and were conscious of contributing to the wrecked economy. For them, it was no time for fine art concerns. Art must be hitched to the wagon of state and lend itself to the muscle of the proletariat. There could be no more challenging nor rewarding task than to be part of the country's production force.

By 1920 VKHUTEMAS (see glossary) was set up 'to prepare highly qualified master artists for industry' (14). It is important to note that although the demand for this merging of art and industry originally came from the artists, it was welcomed by the political leaders as a means of improving the standard of Russian manufacture.


Yet there were artists who deplored the new trend towards industry and favoured a less material approach. INKKhUK (see glossary) was the brainchild of Kandinsky who was primarily interested in the scientific study of pure art and the effect of its elements on the human psyche. Set up like VKHUTEMAS in 1920 under NARKOMPROS (see glossary), at a time of social deprivation and imminent famine, it met with scant enthusiasm for its psychological and scientific probings. Within months there was an opposition from the more materialistic members, Rodchenko's followers and the artists from OBMOKHU. When Kandinsky chose to leave, the making of 'real objects' took over from the abstract analysis of art. Some of these 'objects' or 'structures' were made by the Sternbergs and Medunetsky from OBMOKHU as laboratory, or experimental work (See Figs. 11 and 12).



They were not yet objects of utilitarian use, but were made with industrial tools and used industrial methods. Art was finally moving towards the production line.

Following theoretical debate and laboratory experiments at INKhUK (see glossary), the First Working Group of Constructivists was formed in 1921 by Rodchenko, Stepanova, the Stenberg brothers, Medunetsky, Ioganson and Aleksii Gan. (See Figs. 13 and 14). By that time the climate was so antithetical to easel painting that the remaining traditional easel painters left. That only helped to clear the arena for the two warring factions within the avant-garde: the pre-revolutionary aesthetically oriented Suprematists led by Malevich and Puni and the utilitarian anti-art, newly-formed Constructivists led by Rodchenko and OBMOKhU. The Suprematists experimented with spatial concerns on a two-dimensional plane, which entailed 'composition'; by building from the plane into actual space, using modern materials, the Constructivists undertook real 'construction'. Both groups finally assembled under these opposing banners of 'composition' and 'construction'. As there was still ambiguity as to the nature of both concepts (15), Rodchenko, as intellectual leader of the group, declared that composition, as an aesthetic device, was outdated and obsolete in an age of technology and the machine. He proclaimed that the only future lay in works that would be constructed and organised according to engineering principles (16).

From the Constructivists' point of view it was the death knell for easel art at INKhUK and for the artists who favoured it.




Thereafter fine art would be disregarded; construction had won the day. Those who espoused it would turn their eyes to the production of useful objects in the workplace. They would thus form the vanguard of proletarian art.

The factory now became the new cathedral of culture, the mecca of those who would follow in the crusading footsteps of the worker. The Constructivist artist wanted a part in the formation of this new factory culture, but only at the level of 'intellectual production' (17). He sought involvement at the elemental stage of conceiving and designing as well as making the object; he was no longer content to apply his skills to the decoration of already-made works. His goal was a combination of mental and manual skills. All that remained was to find his path to the factory door.

If the Suprematist abstract geometric idiom was a formative influence on Constructivism, it was technology made possible by the machine and the machine created by technology that fascinated the Constructivists. The movement had already been anticipated by PROLETKULT (see glossary) in 1917, when it favoured a technical bias for art.


The common denominator among the Constructivists was their youth, their enthusiasm, their iconoclasm and their commitment to the cause. The new technological materials provided a challenge; they themselves presented a challenge to existing art. They published proclamations, issued ultimatums, and generally enjoyed their controversial role.



Like their predecessors in the avant-garde, the Constructivists believed in the cross-fertilisation of the arts; modern man, as a follower of Marx, was not a specialist, he was multi-faceted. The Constructivists denied the concept of individuality and favoured the collective concept of team-work. They did not, as Lissintzky put it, "reject the past in the past"; what they objected to was the practice of it in the present. They believed implicitly in the Marxist ideal of how art could inspire the worker. Above all, they were involved, in their attitude and commitment, in the building of the new Communist state.

Their nihilistic approach to the concept of fine art led to a total rejection of conventional art forms. In its place they would make real objects for the real world. They would be the 'real' Realists of the twentieth century. Their works would be constructed and structured according to strict principles of economy. (See Figs. 11 and 12). Theory and practice would be combined in 'laboratory works' as a step towards the goal of factory production. The denial of mystique would be emphasised by leaving visible the skeletal process of work. Organisation of geometric elements would replace creative intuition. Everything would be calculated functional and exact.

They would also combine machine technology with artistic skills. The new revolutionary art would be the final step on the ladder "from painting to sculpture, from sculpture to construction, from construction to technology and finally, through technology and invention to production" (19).




Tatlin's Tower, (see fig. 15), as a step on this ladder, was a watershed on the road to Constructivism. Commissioned in 1919, during Lenin's Monumental Propaganda Campaign, it was intended as a monument to the Third International Congress of the Communist Party, to be held in Moscow. It would break completely with the artistic forms of the past: the first true monument to the Revolution. It would use the materials of modern technology, steel and glass, in artistic form. It would be a synthesis of art and technology, in its form and in its medium: a piece of engineering art (20). Furthermore, it would allow the process of creation to be visible, by exposing the basic structure of the work (21). For the aspirations of Communism it would be an inspiration.

Uncharacteristically for Tatlin, it would have a utilitarian purpose; it would house broadcasting and propaganda functions with public meeting space. It was an expansion of Tatlin's earlier work with materials; his aesthetic and formal explorations with metal collage and his corner reliefs.

Regarded at the time as the father of Constructivism, Tatlin repudiated this title. He disagreed with the Constructivist use of the angle in preference to the curve, their rejection of aesthetic value and their permitting the machine to dictate the form rather than the material itself. However, he was a major figure in the development of the new revolutionary art.

Constructivism was, as yet, merely a theory. It was obvious that debate and support was essential to carry it onto the factory floor.




The most important contribution to the dialogue on what the new art should be, took place in the form of the written and spoken word. Lectures were given at INKhUK, papers were read at VKhUTEMAS. Manifestos were published, proclamations declared and discussion and argument followed. But it was the intellectual magazines, Art of the Commune and Lef (see glossary) that brought the various viewpoints into the limelight and onto a public platform. They were also instrumental, if finally counterproductive, as we shall see in clarifying the aims and directions of this revolutionary art for the artists themselves.

* : * *

After the reinstatement of 'Realism', the avant-garde, especially Constructivism, did not instantly die, but lingered, with a modicum of success, in the fields of graphic design, photography and in the theatre.

Ideologically, the Constructivists had no time for the 'useless' pursuits of the theatre (22). In reality it was there they had their greatest heyday triumphs, when the economic constraints of NEP (see glossary) prevented them from experimenting in the 'real' world.

In their construction of sets for the experimental theatre, Constructivist principles were applied. One of their most successful attempts was Popova's set for Cromelynk's Magnanimous Cuckold, produced by Meyerhold in the early twenties (23) (see fig. 16). The polyfunctionality of the 'apparatus' (set), the economy in the use of materials, the synthesis of painting, sculpture and architecture,




the precision and clarity of the geometric forms, and the collective nature of the undertaking, were all concerns of Constructivism. The exposure of the inner structure of the 'apparatus' was also in keeping with their emphasis on the process of production. It was clear that Constructivism had a role to play in the unreal world of theatre, if denied a place on the factory floor.

However, there was an insidious change over the next few years, beginning with Tretyakov's The Earth in Turmoil. Here actual objects were introduced, in a now no longer wholly abstract set. As Lodder points out, rather than Constructivism transforming the everyday environment, Constructivist creativity was now being influenced by the environment itself (24). It was the beginning of a return to realism in the theatre that was, by now, reflected in other areas of artistic life.

It had little to do with external, economic pressures but was, rather, a reaction against abstraction itself. It was as if the form itself was being dictated, artistically speaking, from within the work itself.

This intuitive change in emphasis raises all sorts of questions regarding the nature of abstract forms and their capacity for continued significance and satisfaction. Is it a question of exhausting the potential of purely formal statements?; an incestuous narcissism, that ends up forever content to gaze at its own reflection?



The later production of Inga saw Rodchenko, that most constructive of all Constructivists, turn away from the basic principles of Constructivism, to produce a set in which soft-contoured, covered stage furniture replaced the structural geometry and angularity of earlier sets. This was the antithesis of what Constructivism stood for; here Constructivism was devouring itself.


A new realism was also evident in the Constructivists' use of photography and photomontage. It was commercially successful, especially in the area of the film poster, but was it Constructivism? The return to a recognisable image, although 'made strange'; in the words of the Futurists, was a denial of the Constructivist rejection of a representational image in art.

It was ironic that the one machine that was available and accessible to the Constructivists' skills, would be the instrument of their own dissolution. The camera and the photograph in the sphere of propaganda became the siren that lured the Constructivists away from the hard, angular bed-rock of abstraction, back into the two-dimensional illusory world of the reflected image; a denial of the basic principles of Constructivism.

THE ARTISTS
PART II - THE AVANT-GARDE
CHAPTER III
FOOTNOTES

1. The World of Art, 1898-1904, founded by Diaghilev.
2. John Bowlt, The Silver Age: Russian Painting of the Early Twentieth Century and the World of Art Group
3. Charlotte Douglas, Swans of Other Worlds: Kasimir Malevich and The Origins of Abstraction in Russia, p. 28.
The Union of Youth was founded in 1910. Through its circulation Russian artists could read translations of the Cubist and Futurist Manifestos, Kandinsky's On the Spiritual in Art. Markov's Principles of The New Art and Burliuk's A Sign in The Face of Public Taste.
4. Tony Bennet, Formalism and Marxism, p. 18.
Founded in 1915 by one of the Formalist critics, Roman Jacobson
5. Ibid
Founded in 1916 by another one of the Formalist group, Viktor Shklovsky. The Formalists were concerned with the autonomy of literature as a science, removed from historical and narrative concerns. They rejected the reflectionist theory of Hegel in favour of the Kantian doctrine of 'art for art's sake'. They also advocated the use of 'zaum' (see Chapter 2. no 12).
6. Charlotte Douglas, "Birth of a Royal Infant: Malevich and Victory over The Sun".
Art in America, 62, March/April 1974, p.p. 45/51.
7. Paul Siegel, Trotsky on Literature and Art
'fellow-traveller', a term devised by Trotsky for those who were prepared to follow the ideals of the Revolution in some respects but were not prepared to go all the way.

8. Abbott Gleason, Bolshevik Culture: Experiments in the Russian Revolution, p. ix.
Peter Kewez
Richard Stites
9. Robert Radford, Art for a Purpose, p. 12.
10. Ibid
11. John Willett, The New Sobriety: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period, 1917-'33, p. 39.
12. Paul Siegel, Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art, p. 91.
13. Christina Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 54.
14. Ibid, p. 112.
15. Ibid, p. 146/151
Lissitzky (architect/engineer, pupil of Malevich)
likened 'composition' to a bunch of different flowers;
he compared 'construction' to a safety razor, composed of individual parts.
16. Ibid, p. 88/89.
17. Ibid, p. 95.
18. Lodder, "Exhibitions of Russian Art after 1922", p. 73
Catalogue, "First Russian Show", Annely Juda Exhibition, 1983.
19. Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 95/96.
- 20.
20. Ibid, p. 61.
21. Tatlin's Tower owed its inspiration to the Eiffel Tower and the Saint-Simonist engineers of the 19th century.
Tatlin would have seen it when he visited Paris.

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22. Alma Law, "A Conversation with Vladimir Stenberg",
Art Journal (USA), 31, pt. 3, Fall 1981, p. 226.
23. According to Stenberg, it was he and his brother who originally
submitted the design to Meyerhold.
24. Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 177/178.



THE THEORISTS

CHAPTER IV

after the Revolution there was no place for the bourgeois art object: everything, including art, must serve the Revolution. Artists who were formerly privileged and patronized became, after October 1917, persecuted and despised. The new socialist state was not content to abolish the old art; it sought to destroy it. There was a new mission for the artist: to create a new art, a new culture, a new life. The artist was no longer a privileged class; he was a worker. He was to be a part of the people, to live with them, to work with them, to create with them. The artist was to be a part of the people, to live with them, to work with them, to create with them.

As already reported to the first congress of the Soviet Union in 1917, the people had a new mission: to create a new art, a new culture, a new life. The artist was no longer a privileged class; he was a worker. He was to be a part of the people, to live with them, to work with them, to create with them.

As previously stressed, it was the Revolution itself that changed not only political and social life in Russia but radically altered artistic consciousness among the traditionalists and the avant-garde. The first stage in the post-Revolutionary theoretical debate concerned a revision of the conception of the work of art.

Pre-revolutionary artists like Malevich, Kandinsky and Tatlin had already changed the accepted perception of art by focusing attention on the formal qualities and rejecting the content or subject matter. (See Fig. 17). Content, for them, became the materials with which they created form. Art no longer represented an object; it became an object in itself. These works of art did not have a social or utilitarian purpose; they were self-sufficient and referred only to themselves.

After the Revolution there was no place for the autonomous art object; everything, including art, must serve the Revolution. Artists who were formerly apolitical and unconcerned became, after October 1917, genuinely committed to building the new Socialist State. There was a new emphasis on the word 'use'; 'useless' as a term was actively discouraged. Artists were eager for their art to reach the masses; there was no longer a place for the individual catering for the elite.

As already referred to the first step on the avant-garde road to 'an art' for the people was a putting together of heads; a typical intellectual approach. Soon discussion and theory would threaten the basic creation or production of art.

Art of the Commune was set up by NARKOMPROS (see glossary) in 1918 as the official journal of the Fine Art Department. It was instrumental in bringing Russian artists to terms with the Bolshevik State. Bogdanov, through PROLETKULT (see glossary) had claimed that art was merely another form of labour, to be used as a weapon in the building of Socialism (1); Art of the Commune came to similar conclusions. Edited spiritedly by Brik and Mayakovsky, it encouraged artists to come out of their studios and, on the orders of Mayakovsky's Army of Art, into the city streets (2). Brik, through the columns of Art of the Commune was the first to encourage, in print, the creation of material objects, the essence of proletarian art (3). As for Bogdanov and PROLETKULT, so too for Brik, art was another form of work and if so, the artist not a creator but a 'constructor and technician' (4).

Devoid of mystique, art could now be regarded as the product of labour, akin to industrial work. Once the new concept of art was accepted there could be a fusion of art and production, leading away from the rarified 'picture' and on to the objects of production art. Brik did not determine how art-into-production could be achieved, but this was the start of debate on the nature of production art.

There was now confusion concerning the term 'production'. As a mechanical process it was inconceivable to aesthetically oriented artists like Puni, Dmitriev and Baulin that production itself could be undertaken by artists, an allegiance to the age-old polarity between mental and manual work. If they were to consider applying art in the sphere of production, they could only envisage the practice of applied art. Such decoration of the finished object was acceptable artistic practice;

the making of the object itself was left to the manual, technical expert. (This was the reverse attitude of the later Constructivists, whose only concern was the entire construction of the object, from concept to realisation and whose opposition to applied art was extreme.)

The critic Nikolai Punin clarified the issue by stating that "it is not a matter of decoration, but of the creation of new artistic objects" (5). Although neither Punin nor Brik had articulated what these artistic objects would be, there was a general acknowledgement that the art that pre-dated the events of October was no longer valid in a Worker State.

In his Art of the Commune article "The Creation of Life" Punin the painter, reiterated the traditionalist view that art's function is purely aesthetic; utility's place was in industrial production. He could not see why art was proposed for the factory, when only technicians were required. As neither Punin nor Brik could show the objectors the way to production art, there arose a sceptical body of artists averse to utilitarian aims

There was also growing official dissatisfaction with the Futurist bias of the journal, NARKOMPROS objected to its didactic tone and proprietorial air with regard to the art of the future. State subsidy was withdrawn in 1919 and Art of the Commune ceased publication. But the issues raised in its year of publication would continue to be discussed within the world of Russian art.

So far there was agreement among certain sections of the avant-garde that art was work; production was proletarian work; therefore art and production must combine to produce the new proletarian art of the future. The new art would be production art, the nature of which had to be determined. Production itself was a known quantity; production art was as yet the unknown, but tended towards the material object rather than towards the picture plane. The only opposition to the above speculation came from the easel painters of the avant-garde, Kandinsky, Malevich, Puni and friends.

The debate now continued at INKhUK (see glossary), the IZO (see glossary) centre for the theory and analysis of art.

Inspired by Kandinsky, his spiritual and subjective approach to art clashed with the more materialistic faction led by Rodchenko, Stepanova, Babichev etc., resulting in a change of direction at the Institute. When Kandinsky decided to leave, Rodchenko and his followers took charge and the emphasis shifted from the work of art as a creation on a three-dimensional plane to the art object occupying three-dimensional space.

Difference of opinion now intensified between the easel painters and the object makers; each side was determined to be the creators of the new art. After much discussion the artists of the Institute (6), the younger artists from OBMOKHU (7) (see glossary) and the leading theorists (8) arrived at the opinion that what divided the opposing factions could be termed 'composition' and 'construction'. For the easel artists art was composition; for the object-makers it was construction.

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Rodchenko ended all argument, stating that "composition was an anachronism because it was mere aesthetics and related to concepts of 'taste'" (9). This was of course unacceptable in a revolutionary Workers' State; construction and organisation were to be employed instead. For Rodchenko and his followers technology and engineering would dictate all new forms of art. The new art would end in utilitarian construction.

This brought matters to a head and a final exodus of easel painters from INKhUK left the way clear for the formation of the First Working Group of Constructivists in March 1921. The membership of twenty five included Rodchenko's colleagues from INKhUK, the Stenbergs and Medunetsky from OBMOKhU and the prominent critics and intellectuals of the day (10). Fine art, as 'useless' was, for the moment defeated; the object, as 'useful' had won. The path towards production art had theoretically begun.

If 1921 was the year of Constructivism, it also saw the implementation of Lenin's New Economic Policy and a shift in the emphasis from the proletariat to the peasant. As avant-garde champions of the urban proletariat the Constructivists were afraid they had backed the wrong horse. NEP meant a reduction in funding and commissions for art schools and art works with a consequent loss in positions of authority for the avant-garde. State patronage was replaced by the private market which traditionally favoured a reflectionist art. Finally, propaganda for peasant education would result in a return to pictorial art.

Thus, as theory was developing into practice for the Constructivists and as they geared their art towards industrial production, there was a threat of imminent public eclipse.

Action was needed and was taken by Aleksi Gan with the publication of 'Constructivism' in 1922. Whereas earlier publications engaged in speculation and discussion, Gan's was propaganda in the cause of his colleagues: the ultimate Constructivist apologia.

Gan's book was written to convince the policy-makers that Constructivism was the new revolutionary art envisaged by Marx to help Socialist man realise his human potential. He stressed the fact that Constructivism arose AFTER the Revolution and owed its emergence to the propaganda and agitational work, undertaken for the Bolsheviks by its members. As such, it was the phoenix rising from the ashes of the Revolution. Traditional art, on the other hand, had its roots in bourgeois capitalism and was therefore unacceptable in a Socialist State. Gan equated 'art' with tradition, part of the (unacceptable) spiritual culture of the past (11). Technology, as a modern phenomenon, was the father of Constructivism, which would now replace 'art'. Constructivism combined mental and manual skills, a Marxian ideal; it rejected the 'speculative activity of art' (12).

Gan's publication did not halt the Constructivist fall from political favour, but it is important in its documentation of the Constructivist position in Russian art as interpreted by the Constructivists themselves. There is no more doubt about what the new art should be; there remains only the problem of how it should combine with production.

Karl Ioganson, in his 1922 paper From the Construction to Technology and Invention, concurred in the rejection of 'art' in favour of technology. It was he who detailed the ascent to Constructivism as "from painting to sculpture, from sculpture to construction, from construction to technology and invention" (13).

Brik's 1922 paper What are Artists to do Now?, shares Trotsky's misgivings about excessive theorising. He simplistically suggests that artists make the transition to production by going straight to the factory. As this was the hub of the problem, Rodchenko suggested talks by engineer experts, to help the Constructivists plan for production. He felt, like Brik, that there had been sufficient discussion.

Kushner, who had links with PROLETKULT (see glossary), delivered four consecutive papers on the nature and history of production. Two papers were delivered on The Production of Culture, one on The Role of the Engineer in Production and the last on The Artist in Production. Kushner traced the role of the engineer in production and design. He went on to emphasise the positive contribution to be made by art, in terms of form and material, in the design of industrial objects. This was at least an indication of how art could associate itself with production, without resorting to the field of applied art.

There was now much interest outside Russia in the new direction of Russian art, particularly among German artists, in anticipation of the exhibition of Russian art soon to be seen in Berlin.

In 1922 (14) also in Berlin, Lissitzky published the art magazine Veshch (see glossary) in Russian, German and French. The express purpose of the publication was to inform the West of new trends in Russian art.

The creation of 'real' objects of weight and volume had been the concern of the Constructivists and Lissitzky from the early days of their laboratory works. Whereas, for the other Constructivists art had a social purpose, for Lissitzky, art meant "nothing more than the creation of new objects" (15). Neither he, Tatlin, Gabo nor Pevsner agreed with 'artistic creation reduced to these useful objects alone' (16). It was a more tolerant and less doctrinaire attitude than that of his more single-minded colleagues, but it was not Russian Constructivism as envisaged by the First Working Group of Constructivists.

Constructivism could be considered as a continuation of Malevich's Suprematist explorations into painterly space (17), with one major difference. Malevich's space was extra-terrestrial, indeed it was more conceptual than tangible space. The Constructivists' experiments with three-dimensional space were fused with a fundamental commitment to the building of the new society in the workers' state. Without that vital factor, the art-works of the Russian Constructivists were meaningless and could not be properly assessed.

If the aim of Veshch (see glossary) was to provide a platform for the public understanding of Russian Constructivism, then it presented only half the truth. Instead of promoting an art that had a conscious social and utilitarian purpose, Lissitzky presented an art that was merely concerned with formal and aesthetic issues, the new collective, international style (18).

But in Russia the Constructivists were still constructing their experiments; the fusion with industry remained unrealised. There was now a need for the theorists to resolve the concept of production art and to posit the logic of such a development, given the nature of art and the nature of the new dynamic industrial State. It was also necessary to discredit the obsolete easel painting, the 'object without function' (19), in a would-be Socialist Worker-State.

Individual articles were augmented in 1923 by the publication of LEF (see glossary) by the Futurist poet Mayakovsky, in conjunction with the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the Formalist critics from OPOYAZ (see glossary). International in outlook, it served to consolidate all leftist intellectual opinion within Russia itself and also reported on similar activity in Western Europe, particularly in Germany. Initially acceptable to both Bolsheviks and avant-garde, it provided a forum for artistic debate. It was also influential in shifting the Formalist emphasis from pure artistic concerns to an art that was politically and socially concerned with the times.

Many of the contributors to LEF were familiar with the theories of the French eighteenth century socialist philosopher, Saint-Simon. Inherent in the Saint-Simonist concept of art forming an alliance with science and technology was the idea that art was a product, the artist a producer and the work produced seen as a combination of mental and manual labour.

Saint-Simonism influenced Marxist thought in artistic production and division of labour and led to the Marxist rejection of the 'elitism and isolation of the artist' (20).

The Saint-Simonist notion that art and the machine, in the hands of an intellectual avant-garde, might shape the revolutionary society, appealed to the Constructivists and earlier, to Lenin. As early as 1829 he was known in Russia, but banned as subversive by Tsar Nicholas I. Nevertheless, the Frenchman's works were as well-known to the theorists, the artists and the politicians of revolutionary Russia as were those of Marx himself. They thus contributed, in no small way, to the intellectual level of debate regarding the role of the artist and the significance of art in post-revolutionary Russia.

In his 1923 article From the Easel to the Machine, Nikolai Tarabukin traces the demise of painting by chronicling the gradual disappearance of the representational, two-dimensional object and its subsequent replacement by actual objects in a three-dimensional space. For Tarabukin, the modern search for 'realism' denied the representational image and the consequent emphasis on non-representational two-dimensional form "enclosed art in a narrow sphere" (21). A reaction to the confines of abstract painting led the artist to reject the plane, in favour of constructions in actual space. This, for Tarabukin, was the new 'realism' in art. The Constructivists had chosen this new 'realism' and added a utilitarian aim. Thus, in theory, they were the new 'realists' and worthy artists of the Revolution.

Tarabukin, however, had reservations about the facts. Having rejected painting and art, per se, the Constructivists had adopted the concept of production, without acquiring the basic production skills, thereby denying themselves access to the industrial work-place. Except for their theatre-constructions and agitational stands and despite protestations to the contrary, their work remained within the confines of studio art, while refusing to acknowledge it as such. They were, in effect, castrated artists, waiting, cap in hand outside the factory door. He, together with many of his colleagues, reached the conclusion that the only possible way for art to merge with industry was for a new type of artist-engineer to be trained, who would have the skills of both professions. The new Productivists (the term art no longer applied) would bring art to industry and industrial technology to art.

Arvatov agreed with Tarabukin that easel-painting was not the art of the present or future, but of the past. For him the decline of painting set in when artists forsook the brush in favour of other tools and so "ceased to paint a picture but started to make it" (22). In this way art turned away from illusion and towards technical production. Nevertheless, the art of this pre-revolutionary period was a formal study in aesthetics for artists like Malevich and Kandinsky, with an added interest in the culture of materials for Gabo and Tatlin; it had no utilitarian purpose.

Art, for Arvatov, in the wake of October, must serve society, must be a functional art to serve the 'epoch of industrial collectivism' (23). As for the harnessing of art to industry,

it was merely a question of the elimination of barriers, the eradication of the divisions of class. The bourgeois concept of art would now be subsumed in the working-class reality of industrial technique. This would lead, in proletarian society, to the elimination of the idea of Fine Art as an individual pursuit and its replacement by the collective skills of mass production.

There was now general agreement within LEF that the social role of art was all-important in contributing to a better social environment and that this man-made environment could be shaped, as Tarabukin had suggested, by the artist-constructor or artist engineer. There followed further dialogue, regarding the training of such dual-purpose supermen. It was then suggested that some of the already established state schools could be reorganised to provide the new training and expertise. Model factories could also be set up where these experiments could be carried out.

While LEF was instrumental in bringing the concerns of the Constructivists to a larger audience, it also reasoned that the Constructivists were merely forerunners of the yet-to-be-realised (24) Productivists, echoes of Malevich's Will-Be Strong Men of Victory over the Sun. They were in transit; they had not yet arrived. Until they took part in production in the work-place they were not yet Productivists and their 'laboratory work' was nothing more than an experimental searching that would hopefully result in production art. Meanwhile, the role of the Constructivists was all-important in consciousness-raising towards that end.

Lest the theorising became an end in itself, the contributors to LEF brought the matter to a close by proposing that the existing art schools be transformed into polytechnical institutes, while warning against the tendency to allow the technical aspect to predominate. VKhUTEMAS as constituted, should have been admirably suited to this purpose.

LEF now took on the task of pointing out the short-comings of VKhUTEMAS (see glossary), which had been set up three years earlier, to train artists for industry. VKhUTEMAS, however, had failed to undertake this task and was now totally disunited in its aims. Instead of one strong directional bias towards industry, it still consisted of three separate groups: The Purists, The Applied Artists and The Constructivists (25).

Finally LEF opened its pages to Rodchenko and his Constructivist friends. Together they published the details of conditions at VKhUTEMAS. Installed in 1923 in response to the controversy in LEF, the production workshops were now empty and without machinery; even staffing in that area was reduced; worse, there was a critical scarcity of materials. To add to their chagrin, the painting studios of the purists were thriving, as were the workshops for the applied arts.

There is no doubt that LEF was partly responsible for the reorganisation of VKhUTEMAS in 1926; unfortunately as LEF had warned it now tended more towards the technical rather than the artistic. It was consequently renamed VKhUTEIN (see glossary) in 1928, in keeping with its new technological and industrial direction; by 1930 VKhUTEIN was completely disbanded.

Throughout the debate there was a reluctance to accept that preoccupation by the artists with the concept of production would lead, not only to the merging of art and industry, but to the final submerging of art. There was also the risk that theorising would alienate rather than encourage the workers, for whom the new art was intended. Trotsky, replying to LEF, had commented that theorising took place "on an upper ... and ... quite superficial stratum ... very feebly connected with the working masses" (26). Furthermore, despite their attempts at production, the Constructivists themselves, with their emphasis on formal investigatory exploration, were light years away, intellectually, from the Russian industrial worker. Their values and cultural background, like those of the theorists and politicians, were solidly bourgeois.

Given their energy and commitment, if they had accepted themselves for what they were and as individual artists created art, there is every likelihood that it would have been an art of significance, a revolutionary art, for no other reason than that it was created with passion at the time of the Revolution. Instead, they wasted creative energy on endless theoretical discussion, so concerned with terminology that it was allowed take precedence over their work. Thus the term 'production art' became a formidable Frankenstein, created by the self-appointed theorists who were, for the Constructivists, supposedly clarifying matters of art.

Had they analysed the concept 'production art' they would have seen, as Puni did, that art and production are mutually incompatible; in the last analysis either there is production or there is art.

But they were reluctant to drop one term in favour of the other and their vacillating meant they belonged neither to the realm of art nor to the domain of industry. Such indecision left the Constructivists vulnerable to the consolidated attack of another competing body of artists, who now vied for position as the true artists of the Revolution.

Forgotten during the entire debate, these were the artists who, in 1922, walked out in protest from VKHUTEMAS, joined the Wanderers' forty seventh exhibition and proclaimed their allegiance to the new 'heroic realism' (27). Their first exhibition of Moscow workers at work in their factories could be regarded as both propagandistic and socialist. Proceeds from the sale of the paintings would go towards famine relief in the provinces.

They (AKhRR - see glossary) were formed at a time of growing Bolshevik impatience with the avant-garde, a reassessment of peasant concerns in the wake of NEP and a gradual Party disenchantment with International Communism. AKhRR was opposed to the Western trends within VKHUTEMAS, NaARKOMPROS and LEF, and epitomised what was traditional, national and popular among the people. Their realism was an assault on the 'realism' of the Constructivists; they would also challenge them as the artists and art of the future. They were in complete contrast to the convictions of LEF but firmly believed in their role as representatives of the people.

As traditionalists AKhRR's task was to reflect and mirror life; LEF's artists were concerned with a new environment for a new life.

AKhRR's predecessors, the nineteenth century Wanderers, were national and narrow; LEF's origins could be traced to the eclectic and Westernised turn of the century World of Art. AKhRR's concern with technique was pictorial illusion; LEF's understanding of technique was the industrial machine. LEF denounced the 'picture' and painting as useless relics of the past; AKhRR regarded the picture as a means of informing the present with the help of the past. LEF was theorising about an art that was still in the future; AKhRR was portraying moments of the here and now.

Both sides claimed to be socially concerned, but AKhRR's art, devoid of comment, was mere representation; LEF's art appeared to the public as an artists' art, remote and removed from life.

Realism for AKhRR was an accurate reflection of life; 'realism' for LEF was the creation of objects in space. Finally, revolutionary art for AKhRR was the depiction of revolutionary events; revolutionary art for LEF was an art of new revolutionary form.

Had the times been different, there would have been no need for either group to be submerged; they could have co-existed, evolved and complemented each other. But in post-revolutionary Russia art was abused as ideology and Marxism tolerates only Party Control.

AKhRR, with its clear pictorial reflection spoke directly to the masses and the people and their leaders needed no deciphering code. It was to this unproblematic image that Lenin turned in his efforts to transform the peasant into a productive, profit-making worker. In tune with Party principles and already

glorifying the Revolution, the art of the AKhRR artists would become the unanimous choice of the people and the Party as the highest and only art form of the Revolution.

There had been no consensus among artists and intellectuals regarding the elevation of the New Art. There was no one to question whether the people or the Party were equipped to deal with matters of art. There was neither debate nor discussion to prepare the way for the inauguration of this art. It was simply allowed to grow and flourish until it was ready for Party plucking.

As for the avant-garde, the obscure abstractions of Suprematism and Constructivism had been a complete enigma to all but the initiated during the five years following the Revolution. The conjecture and speculation of their intellectual friends served only to deepen the incomprehension of the people.

Nevertheless no amount of theory, either from Saint-Simon, Marx, Lef, or from the Constructivists themselves, could save the avant-garde from the combined broadside of AKhRR and NEP (see glossary). Lenin did not immediately destroy the avant-garde in general nor the Constructivists in particular. He performed his own expedient euthanasia, removed the life-support and let it gradually ease itself into artistic oblivion.

A new Art of the People, Socialist 'Realism' had arrived. As a final insult to the avant-garde, the new artists would be called 'engineers'; not the type envisaged by the Constructivists, but more sinister 'engineers' of the soul: Stalin's own conscripted army to glorify and perpetuate his name.

THE THEORISTS

CHAPTER IV

FOOTNOTES

Christina Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 75.

1.

Ibid, p. 76.

2.

Mayakovsky was a futurist poet who, with Khlebnikov, Livshits, David Burliuk and Kruchenykh formed the Russian Futurists in 1912, with their Manifesto A Slap in the Face of Public Taste. They were iconoclastic and outlandish in their public behaviour and called for an end to traditional art. Machines, movement and the city were themes of their art. Their worship of technology could be said to anticipate Constructivism.

3.

Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 76.

4.

Ibid

5.

Ibid, p. 77.

6.

Constructivists: Rodchenko, Popova, Stepanova, Ioganson (Karl), Babichev, Udaltsova etc.

7.

OBMOKHU: The brothers Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg and Medunetsky.

8.

Theorists: Brik, Tarabukin, Arvatov, Kushner, Ioganson (Karl), Aleksii Gan.

9.

Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 86.

10.

See 6, 7 and 8.

11.

Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 88

12. Ibid, p. 90.
13. Ibid, p. 98.
14. Ibid
15. Kenneth Lindsay, Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Part I, p. 73.
Peter Virgo.
16. Ibid
17. See Diploma Essay-Malevich and Mother Russia: Revolution and Evolution in Art and state.
18. Lissitzky had gone to Berlin to help organise the First Russian Exhibition in the Van Diemen Gallery.
19. Robert Radford, Art for a Purpose, p. 181 (notes).
20. In The German Ideology, Marx would state "In a Communist Society there are no painters, but at most, people who engage in painting among other activities".
21. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison eds., Modern Art and Modernism, p. 135/142.
22. Lodder, Russian Constructivism, p. 101.
Used by Kushner in his paper "The Production of Culture, Pt. I", in 1922 to describe easel-painting.
23. Ibid, p. 104.
24. Ibid, p. 105.
25. ibid, p. 100.

Paul Siegel, Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art

Robert C Williams, Artists in Revolution. p. 141.

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER V

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The reasons why the avant-garde was usurped by the traditionalists were as much inherent in the avant-garde itself as socially and economically imposed from without. One of its problems was that it did not have a unified, unanimous voice; it was a concatenation of solo performances, united only in its rejection of the established art forms of the past.

Among the painters, from Kandinsky to Malevich, there was a predisposition towards geometric abstraction, but a diversity of concerns, from the spiritual to the philosophic and the scientific. In the Constructivist camp there was the hard core anti-aesthetic branch led by Rodchenko, and those, like Tatlin, Lissitzky, Gabo and Pevsner, who identified their constructions with art. There was also the possibility, as pointed out, that the avant-garde obsession with abstraction had come to the end of the road (1). Constructivism itself denied access to the place of production, became an introverted experimentation with itself.

There were also the personal difficulties. The creation of Fine Art is, for many artists a highly individual pursuit, which does not take kindly to collective working methods; private eccentricities often resulted in personal quarrels. Members whose aims did not coincide were also difficult to organise. Finally, prohibition and rules stifle the free development of art (2) and it is doubtful if either Constructivism or Suprematism could have ever survived the severity of their own codes of veto.

Recruiting the avant-garde to culturalise the workforce was seen by the artists as official recognition. For many it was their first experience of the payroll. In practice it meant artists

to heat the freezing art schools. It also involved tedious time spent on writing reports and long hours teaching, with drastic reduction in their own creativity. It was this, more than conflicting artistic concerns that finally forced Kandinsky and others to abandon the education of the proletariat.

Nor was the industrial worker ready to be enlightened by the artists. He lacked the educational foundation to keep up with the programmes. There was an all-pervading urgency of leaping into learning without having mastered the elemental skills of a cultural crawl.

The problem was compounded by the proletariat's lack of self-understanding. As Folgarait points out, the proletariat, traces of peasant soil clinging to its heels, was "a class in the making ... auditioning for a class, knowing they had another, the peasantry, which would take them back" (3). How then could the artists visually speak for and speak to an as yet unrealised, indeterminate group?

The Constructivists themselves, as self-appointed creators of a new art for these people, were also a movement in the making. As we have seen, Constructivism was the theoretical and experimental bridge to Productivism, the art of the workplace and the would-be art of the future. But the very theoretical discussion and experiment, so crucial to the development of Constructivism-Productivism, became, not a bridge for the proletariat to cross but, in Trotsky's words, "a wide chasm between the creative intelligentsia and the people" (4). This gulf of misunderstanding

might have been narrowed by time and economic stability, but in the Russia of the first quarter of the twentieth century both commodities were unavailable luxuries.

As already stressed, economic instability had been a problem from the beginning. With the destruction wrought by World War I, the Civil War period compounded the economic and social devastation. For the artists it meant insufficient materials with which to create their new art. Promised workshops were stripped of machinery to bolster factory production. The factories themselves were not restructured to accommodate the artists.

It was therefore a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors which prevented the avant-garde from realising its ambition to be the new art of the people; the revolutionary art of the Revolution.

Lenin had noted the performance of the avant-garde and was not impressed. His own preoccupation with the proletariat had meant the neglect of the peasant and of agrarian affairs. Such oversight would result in a regional sabotage that would bring urban famine and hardship. As already mentioned, Lenin's manoeuvres in righting the economy included replacing the proletariat with the peasant as the unit of production, and his New Economic Policy changed all facets of Soviet life.

We have already discussed the considered unsuitability of avant-garde art for conveying to the peasant the Socialist dream.

Ambiguity and abstraction were now to be abandoned, in favour of readable images, easily understood. As the countryman ousted his city counterpart, the would-be art of the worker state was replaced by a peasant-oriented recognisable art of representation.

Representation was given a further boost in The First German Exhibition, brought to Moscow and Leningrad in 1924 (5). The German Realists (Verists) especially impressed the Party. Lunacharsky himself admitted they "surpassed nearly all our artists in the degree of their mental assimilation of the Revolution and their creation of revolutionary art" (6). Thus encouraged, the Russian realists consolidated their position into an impregnable whole under the flag of The Society of Easel Painters. An art "comprehensible to the millions" was called for by the Communist Party Central Committee in 1925 (7). Was it the final triumph of 'realism' and was what triumphed, in fact, realism?

* * *

The conflict in post-revolutionary Russian art, as in Western Modernism in general, was not simply between abstraction and realism but between two equally valid forms of realism: the actual realism of abstraction and the illusionistic realism of painterly technique. The avant-garde Constructivist was concerned with the making of real objects in real space, a case of creating reality; the traditionalists were concerned with the depiction of actual events, a case of representing reality. What precluded the coexistence and artistic evolution of both in the years after the Revolution was, in part, the economic necessity of competing for Party patronage and the later, more ominous issue of promoting Party ideology.

If the 'realism' of the Revolution failed the Revolution, the Party, in the period of the NEP (see glossary) demanded economic and artistic success. With the failure of the new there was a need to return to the tried and faithful realism of the past. Although the peasant art of the icon, the lubok (see glossary) and sign-board had been the traditional Russian native style, from the middle of the nineteenth century the Wanderers' realism, as popular art, firmly took hold.

Backed by the philosophy of Belinsky and Chernyshevsky, already referred to, it was a revolt against bourgeois values in art and society and soon became synonymous with the people and with Revolution (8). The art of the Wanderers had also been widely reproduced and by the early twentieth century very few homes in Russia were unfamiliar with their art. Lenin himself kept a copy of Repin's, They did not expect him (see fig. 18), at his headquarters in the Smolny Institute. Although initially upstaged by the avant-garde in the wake of the Revolution, by the mid-twenties it was reinstated as a link with the past and the present to carry the Party message across the land.

Realism itself was a reaction to Academic Idealism and supplanted the heroic and mythological themes of religion and history with the ordinary everyday scenes of contemporary life (9) in fact realism tended towards the extraordinary rather than the ordinary and chose raw and unsettling subjects, considered totally unsuitable for the rarified realms of art. Realism excelled in the relating of a story or anecdote and it was this emphasis on narrative content that antagonised the avant-garde.

Conversely, it was their disinterest in formal concerns and their ability to impart a message that endeared the Realist artists to the Communist Party.

While the original socially committed Wanderer/Realists chose controversial subjects, by the end of the century there emerged a watered-down offshoot, naturalism. Where Realism took a stand and made a positive statement regarding important issues in life, naturalism became no more than a passive imitation of the appearance of life, unselective and bland. It was this naturalism, although still called Realism, that was still practised in Russia at the beginning of the twenties and finally found official Party favour.

The trend towards the re-emergence of Realism had already shown itself in Russia by the early twenties, as younger artists became disillusioned and weary of the futile experiments of the avant-garde. It was not a particularly Russian phenomenon, as the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) emerged in Berlin in 1923 and a sister/Realist group, *Magischer Realismus* (Magic Realism) appeared in Munich: both as reactions against Expressionism (10). By the 1930's the American government's funding of a nationwide scheme for the arts resulted in a proliferation of Realist murals, uncannily similar to contemporary Russian work (11). The French reaction to the preoccupation of art with art was the Paris conference of 1936, convened to discuss whether revolutionary art should be realistic and if so, what the new Realism should be (12). Blunt, in his 1936 article on the Academy's summer exhibition in London declared that "abstract art is played out on the continent" and that "the only hope for European painting ... is the development of a New Realism (13).

So it was in the Western trend towards Realism that the Russian government announced at the 1934 All Union Congress of Soviet Writers that Realism had 'officially' returned. But whereas elsewhere the artists controlled their art, in the climate of Communist Russia art now relinquished its autonomy in exchange for the dubious security of employment by the State.

If 1917 was the Revolution from below, the Revolution from above and its policy of reconstruction began in 1928. After Lenin's death in 1924, the move towards nationalism began with the announcement of Socialism in one Country, strongly opposed by the international Trotskyites. The 1928 Five Year Plan was geared to the reorganisation of industry and the worker; the 1929 Collectivisation of farming brought agriculture and the peasant into line. The stage was thus well set for Central control by the time of the 1934 Writers' Congress and Stalin was now determined to have unlimited power. By imposing an official style on the arts of the country, Stalin now had command of the mental and manual workers in the State.

The new Party-imposed Socialist Realism would, in keeping with selected Marxist ideals, be Socialist and Realist; it would also be Nationalist, in defiance of Marx but in deference to the wishes of Stalin. Art and literature would henceforth speak to the people, glorify the regime and be accessible to all. Socialist Realism would promote the ideals of the Party and point to the transformation of society as one of its Socialist goals. Failure to do this, as Reavey points out, would "be criticised as 'abstract' or 'retrograde'" (14). 'Abstract' and 'retrograde' together with 'formalist' and 'intellectual' were four of the deadliest sins against Stalinism and were severely and peremptorily dealt with.

Stalin's Soc... neither
was it a place for the weak, the ugly, the lazy, the crazy,
the loser, the non-conformist or the thinker. Thinking, as
non-physical contemplation was the most suspect of all occupations.
The typical hero of Socialist Realism was young, clean, athletic
and especially healthy: a healthy mind in a healthy body
being the criterion of excellence in most dictatorships. The
artist was expected to extol physical work and play and be a
historian, philosopher and teacher. Art's function now was to
inform, to educate, to honour and to obey. It was an art
of laughing boys and girls, forever young, revelling in the glory
of collective work. It was the bread and circuses of Nero's Rome,
a clear indication of something rotten in the State.

In a Socialist State art had to appeal to the masses, there
being, ideally, no elite. If art, however, is to have mass appeal
there must be a levelling of aesthetic values and standards
anathema to the spirit of art. This is precisely what happened
in Russia, when the visually uneducated and partially illiterate
imposed their canons of mediocrity from without. "What is not
wanted by the people cannot have aesthetic significance" claimed
Pravda in 1936 (15), appealing to the lowest common denominator,
in its official capacity as organ of the Party. It is to
the eternal shame of the Stalinist regime that the people's
right to the nourishment of art was curtailed by the impoverishment
of Socialist Realism, the only art form allowed in the State.
As an artist, theoretician and one-time politician, Trotsky
would write in 1939 from the safety of exile that "the art of
the Stalinist period will remain as the frankest expression of
the profound decline of the proletarian Revolution" (16).

Given the suppression of the survival of Socialist Realism to the fact that it usurped the role of the icon and the former pictorial glorification of the saints. In spite of all prohibition and veto it still exists to-day. In any case there was, in Russia, no room for public alternatives or open dissent (17). Studio space was allocated solely to obedient members of the Artists' Union, materials and supplies could only be obtained from official Union outlets and exhibition space was strictly limited to those within the ranks of the Union. Artists were now full-time employees of the State, but their 'creative' work was compulsorily submitted to the most humiliating public criticism by the Union elders and by their own working colleagues. It was an atmosphere antipathetic to the living creation of art and the static condition of Socialist Realism is indicative of the silence that follows the censorship of the language of art.

For art is a language that speaks in its own unique way to the soul, about things that are for the soul its daily bread. Whether abstract or realist it is not the business of art to supply reality (18) but to offer an alternative level of awareness beyond reality. Nobody, least of all politicians, decides what the art of an era is to be; it evolves. Critics and theorists play their part in discussion and theorising towards the clarification of new art trends and their presentation to the public, but without the individual, personal commitment of each artist to his own private vision there would be no art of a given epoch.

In Russia it was the politicians, in the name of the people who decided what was to be created. Such interference meant art's autonomy and its inherent laws were breached and art itself ceased to be art and took on the role of Party ideology. In doing so it ceased to be art. "The struggle for revolutionary ideas in art must begin once again with the struggle for artistic truth, not in terms of any single school but in terms of the immutable faith of the artist in his own inner self. Without this there is no art" (19). What triumphed over the avant-garde in Russia was not Realism, not even art, but an effete illustration of fairytale themes where falsehood was truth and myth a reality.

The Marxist ideal of revolution, made and maintained by the massed strength of the people, had become first, a revolution led by an intellectual elite and, in turn, became a manageable, governable body, bulldozed into obedience by the will of one man. Russia had reverted to its two-class pre-war division of society: the Rulers and the Ruled.

What was intended by Trotsky and Lenin as a means to an end, a temporary necessity on the road to a triumphant, Socialist State, was now an end in itself. The dictatorship of the proletariat had become The Dictatorship: an authoritarian, totalitarian machine. It was a machine that would use art, not as a means of realising human potential, but as a tool to service the machinery of state. The dissident artist of Tsarist Russia had become a servant-chronicler of an absolute Tyranny.

It was the Revolution and the art of the Revolution betrayed.

CONCLUSION

FOOTNOTES

1. Anderson, Troels, Kazimir Malevich: Essays on Art I
2. Reference Diploma Essay, Malevich and Mother Russia: Revolution and Evolution in Art and State
3. Leonard Folgarait, "Art-State-Class: Avant-Garde Art Production and the Russian Revolution" Arts Magazine, December 1985.
4. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison eds., Modern Art and Modernism, p. 212.
5. John Willett, The New Sobriety: Art and Politics in the Weimer Period 1917-'33, p. 114.
6. Ibid
7. Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman The Avant-Garde in Russia 1910-1930 New Perspectives
8. Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution, p. 300.
9. Ibid
10. Willett, The New Sobriety: Art and Politics in the Weimer Period 1917-'33, p.p. 111/112.
11. Marlene Park, "City and County in the 1930's: A Study of New Deal Murals in New York". Art Journal, 39, I, Fall 1979
12. Lynda Morris, "Realism: The Thirties Argument II." Art Monthly, 36, 1980, p. 3.
13. Ibid, p. 7.

14. George Reavey, "The Last Decade: A Study in Soviet Literature" The Russian Review, 4, 1948
15. Paul Siegel, Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art
16. Ibid, p. 111.
17. It is not intended in this study to discuss the modern Soviet, dissident artists whose unofficial works are published and discussed in the French/Russian/English magazine YA.
18. Jean Francois Lyotard, The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.
19. Siegel, Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art, p. 24.

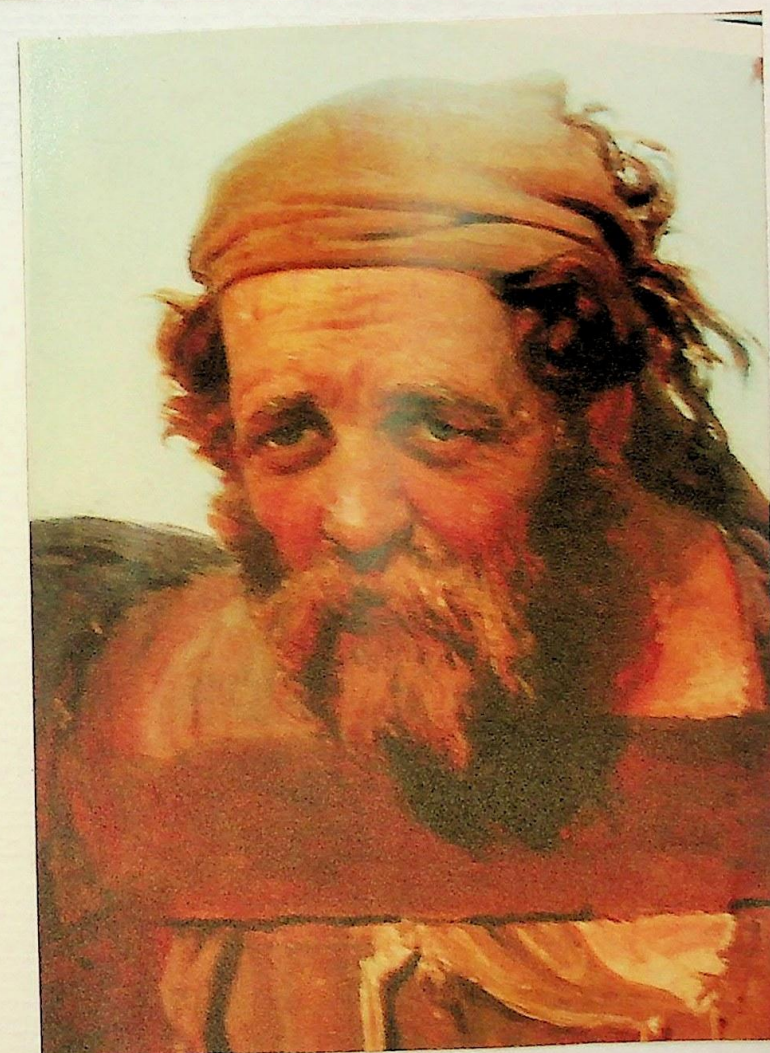


Fig. 1 - Ivan the Terrible and his Son Ivan (detail)
Ilya Repin 1865

Fig. 2 - The Barge Haulers (detail) 1870/73 Ilya Repin



Fig. 3 - The Hunchback, 1880, Ilya Repin

Fig. 4 - Spring Flood, 1897, Isaac Levitan

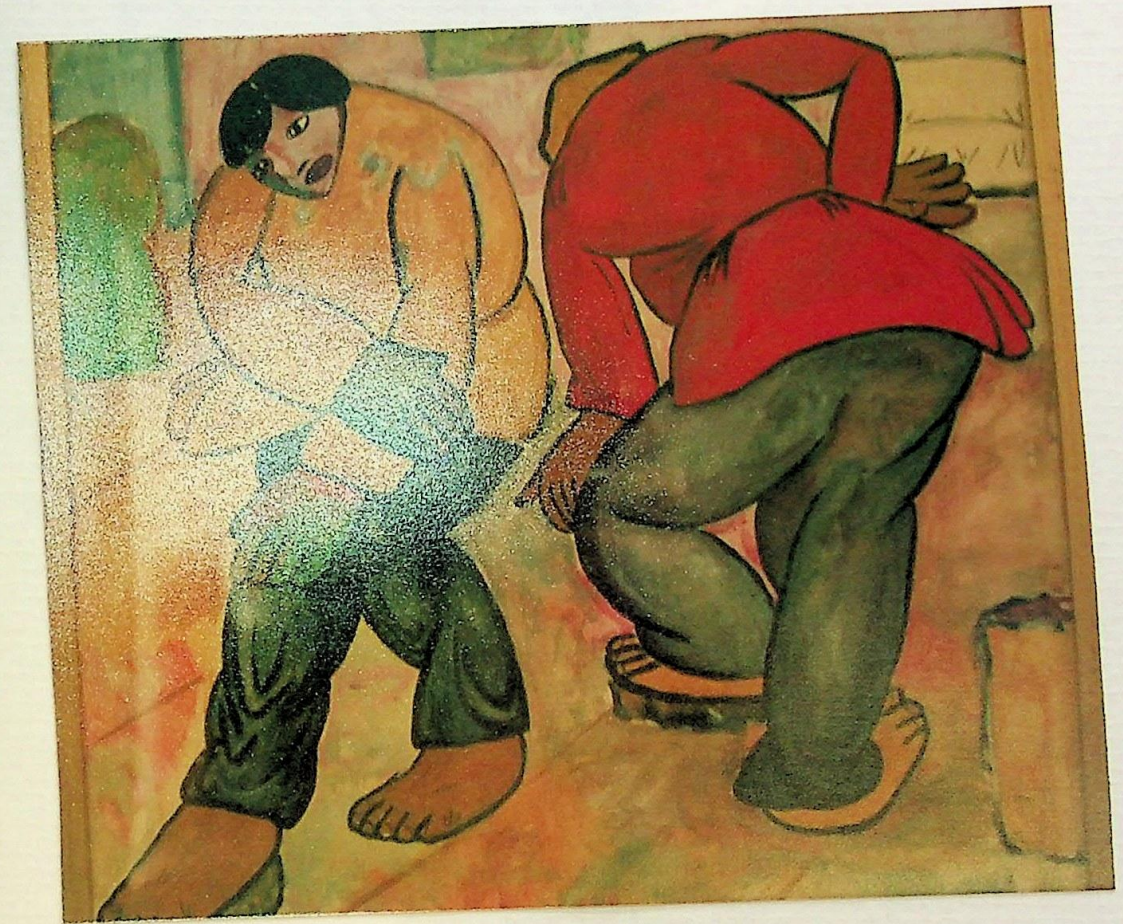
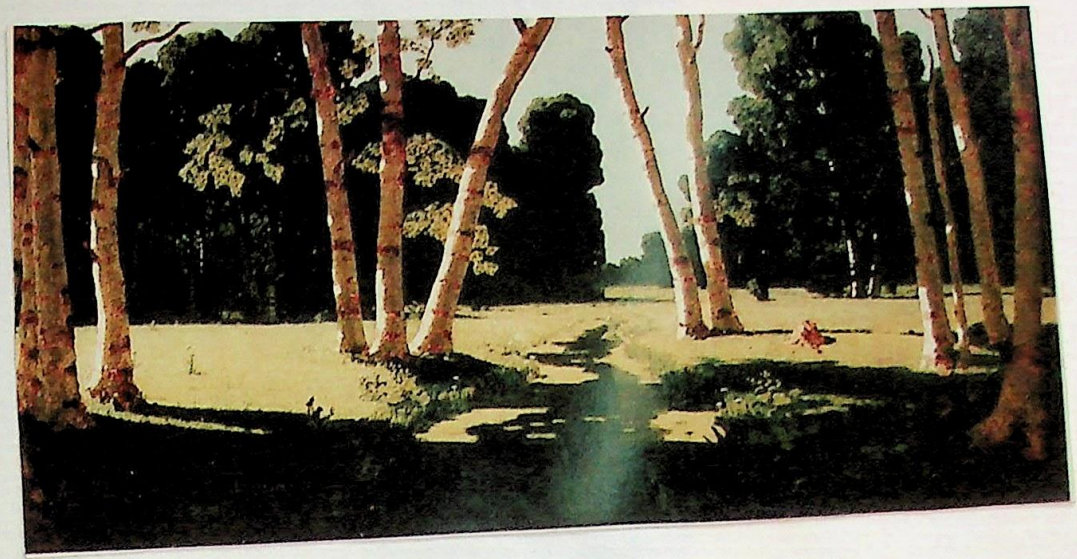


Fig. 5 - The Birch Grove, 1879, Arkhip Kuinji

Fig. 6 - The Peasant Dance, 1909, Kasimir Malevich

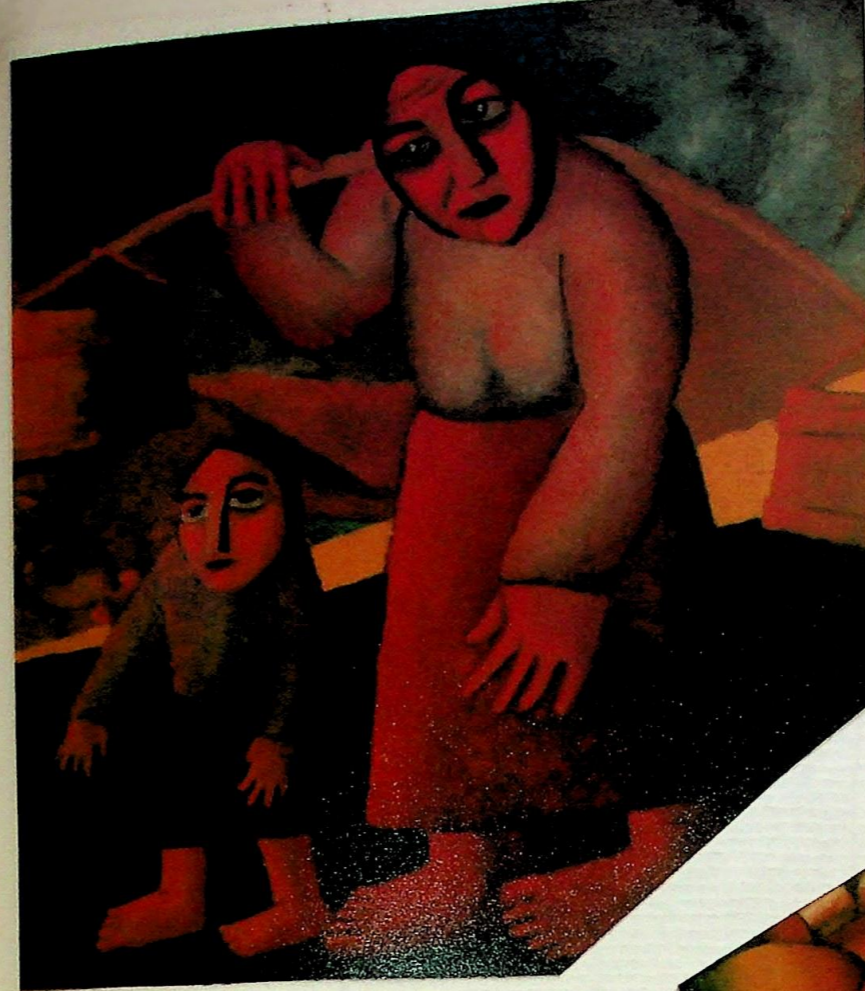


Fig. 7 - Woman with Buckets and Child, 1910/11, Kasimir Malevich

Fig. 8 - Taking in the Harvest, 1911, Kasimir Malevich

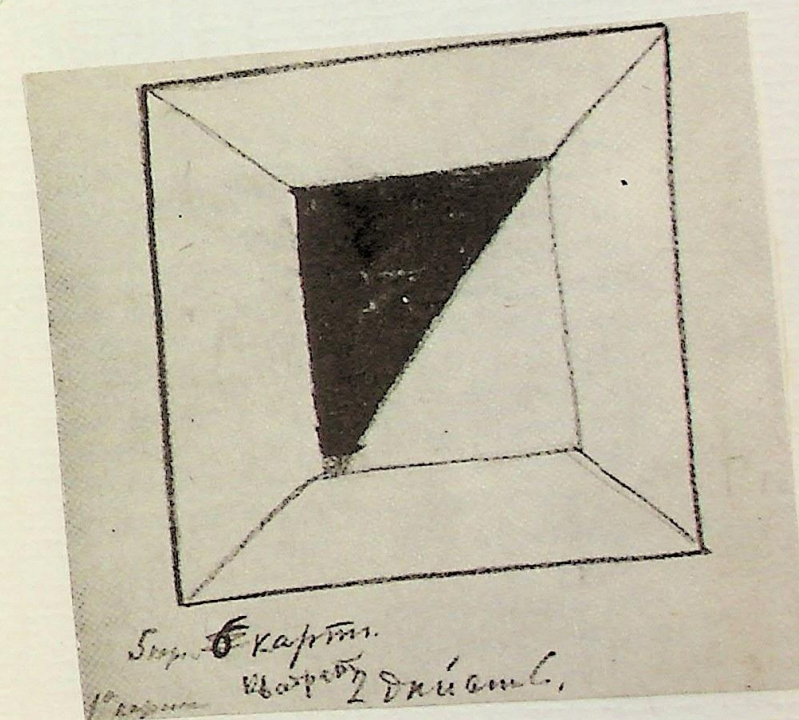
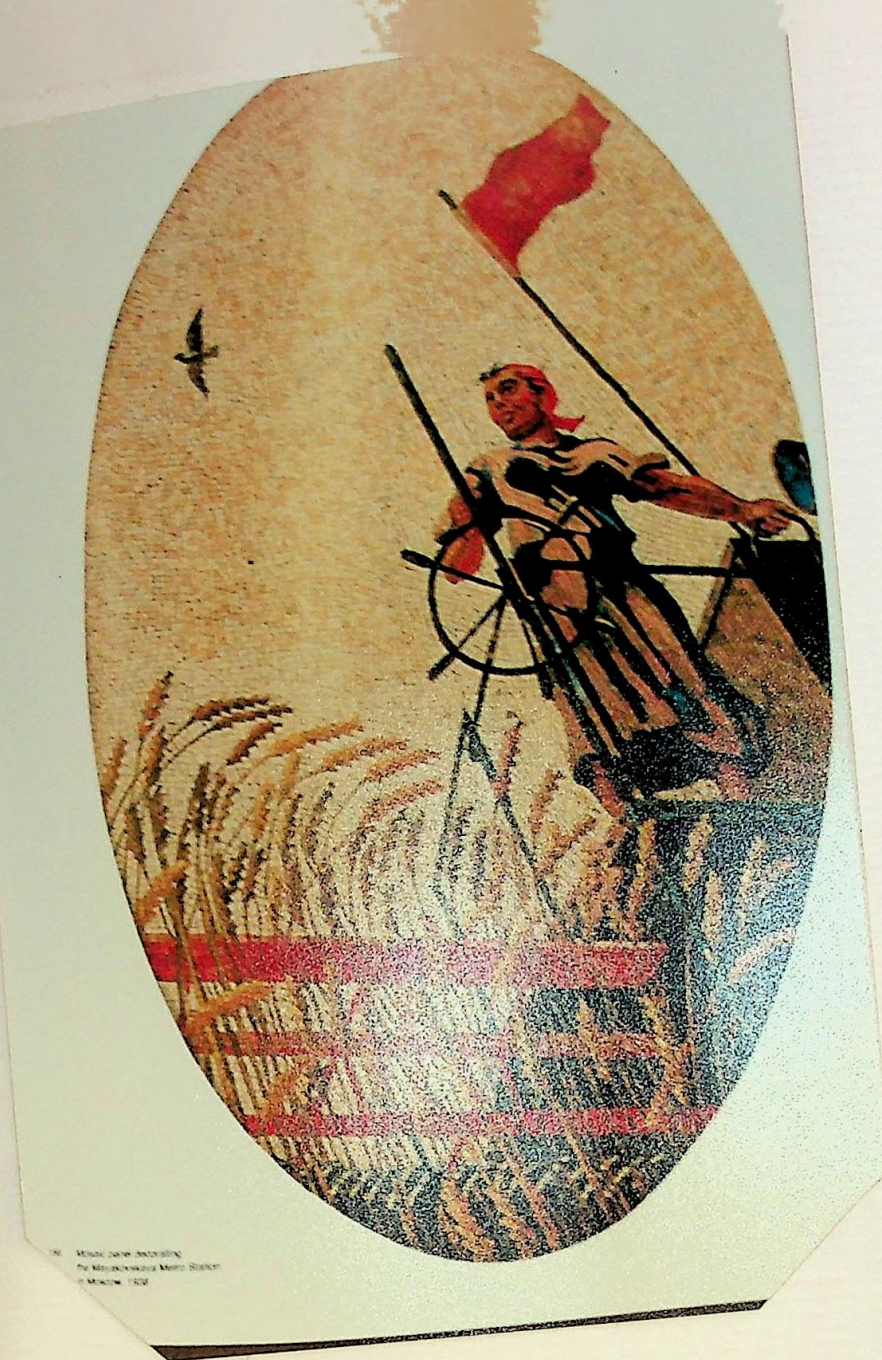


Fig. 9 - Mosaic Panel Decorating the Mayakovsky Metro Station, 1938, Alexander Deineka

Fig. 10 - Backcloth design for Opera 'Victory Over the Sun', 1913, Kasimir Malevich

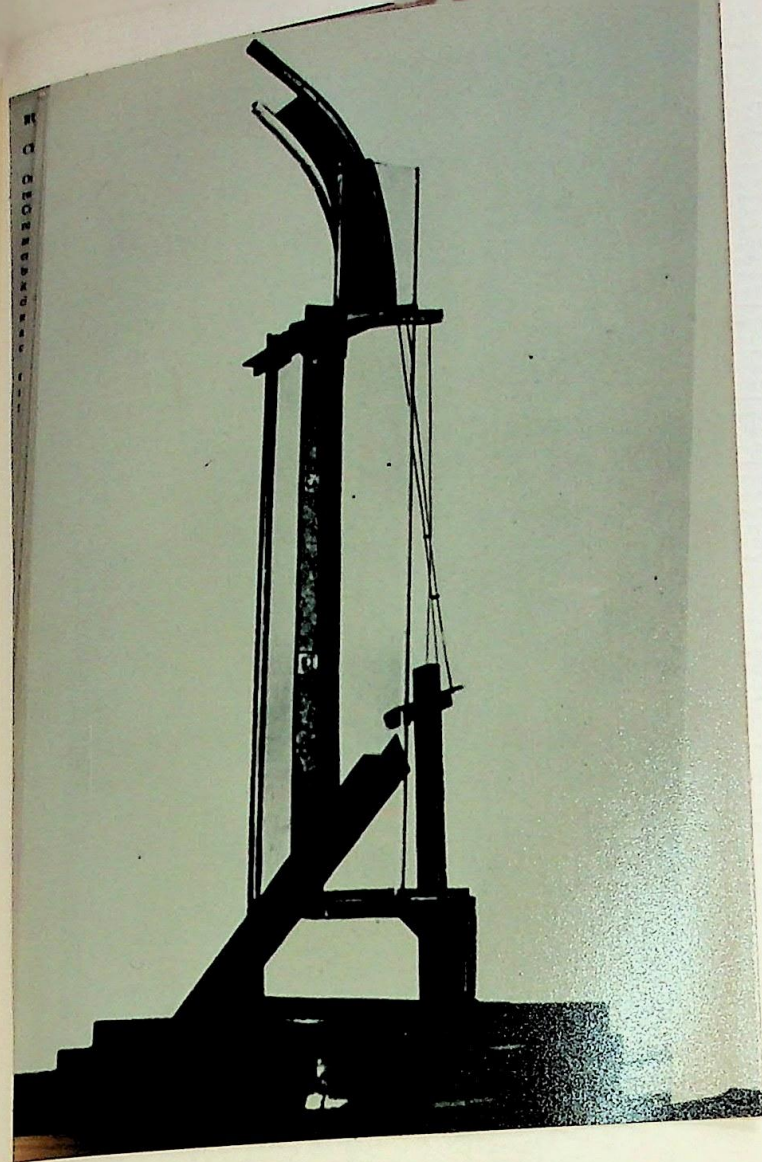


Fig. 11 - Construction for Spatial Structure No. 11, 1920,
Georgii Stenberg

Fig. 12 - Construction for Spatial Structure No. 6, 1920,
Vladimir Stenberg

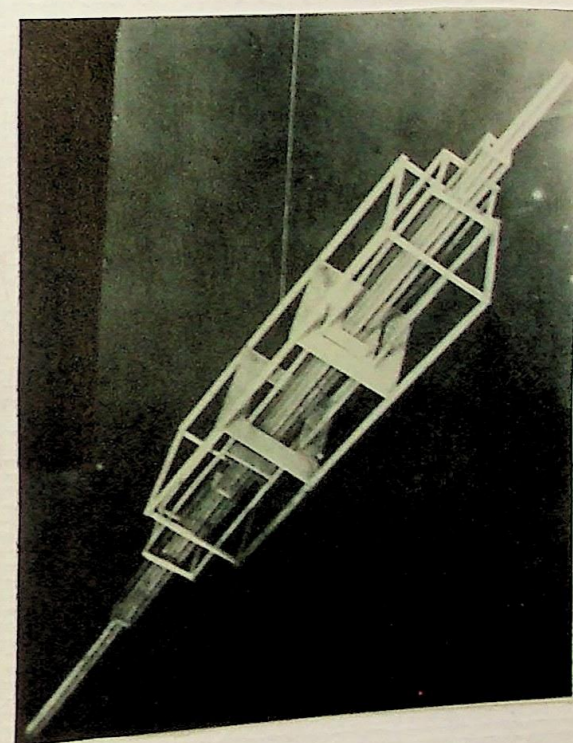
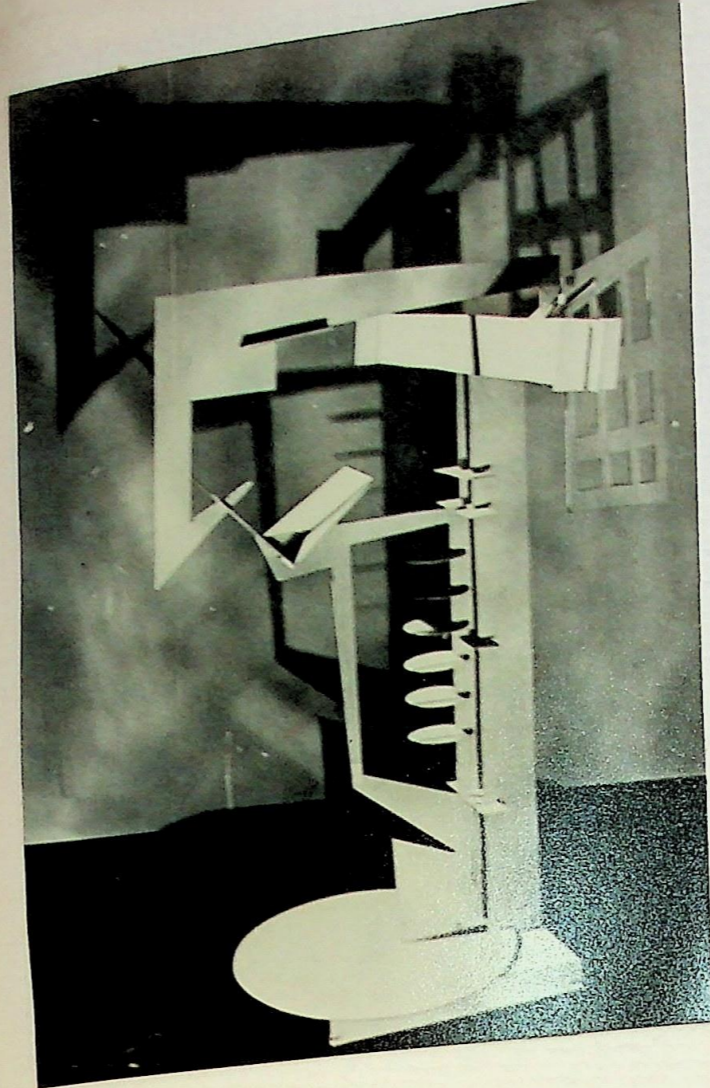


Fig. 13 - Non-Objective Sculpture, 1918, Alexander Rodchenko
 Fig. 14 - Three-Dimension Construction, 1920, Gustav Klucis



Fig. 15 - Model for Tower Monument to the Third International, 1919/20, Vladimir Tatlin

Fig. 16 - Set Design for the Magnanimous Cuckold, 1922, Liubov Popova

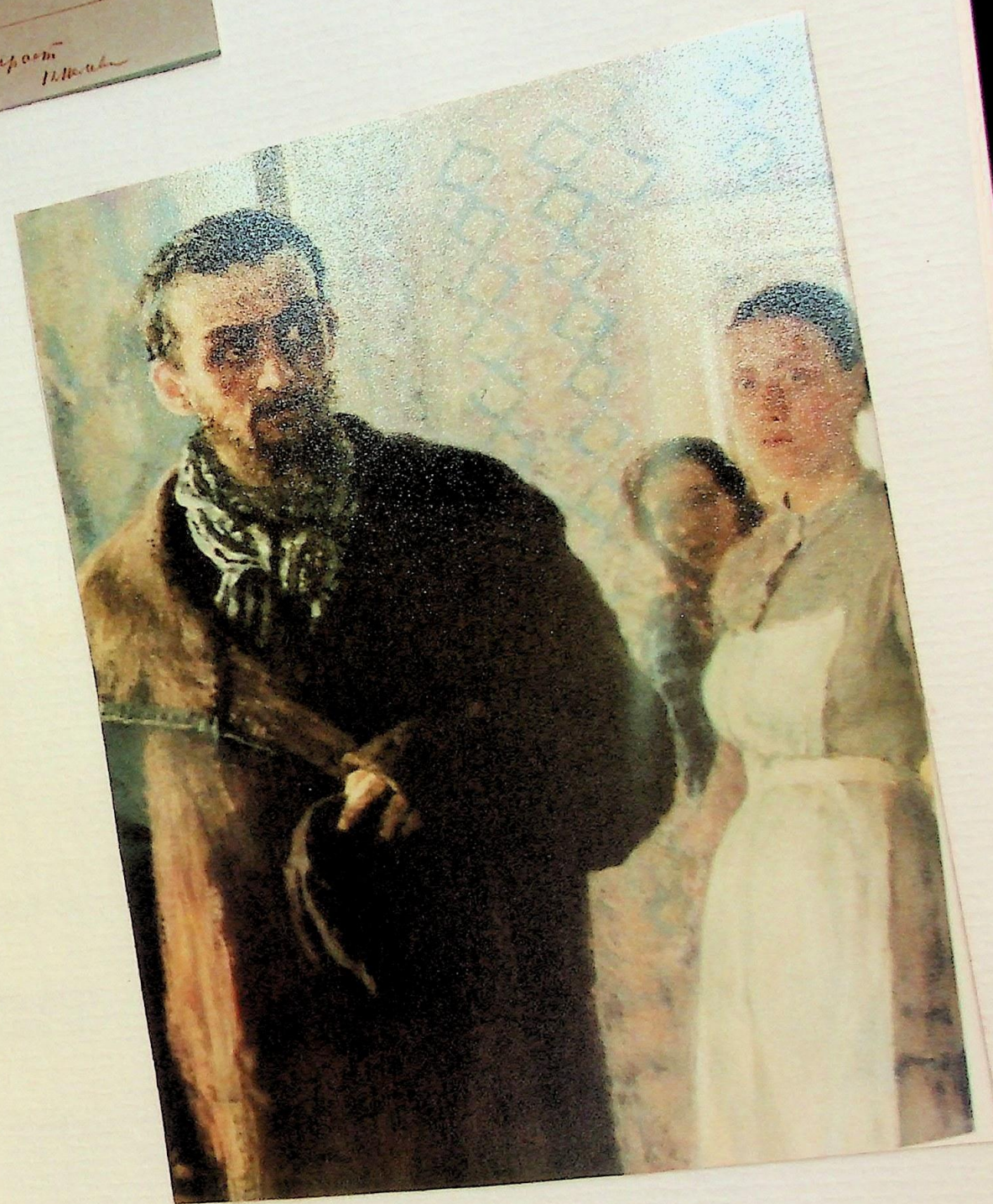
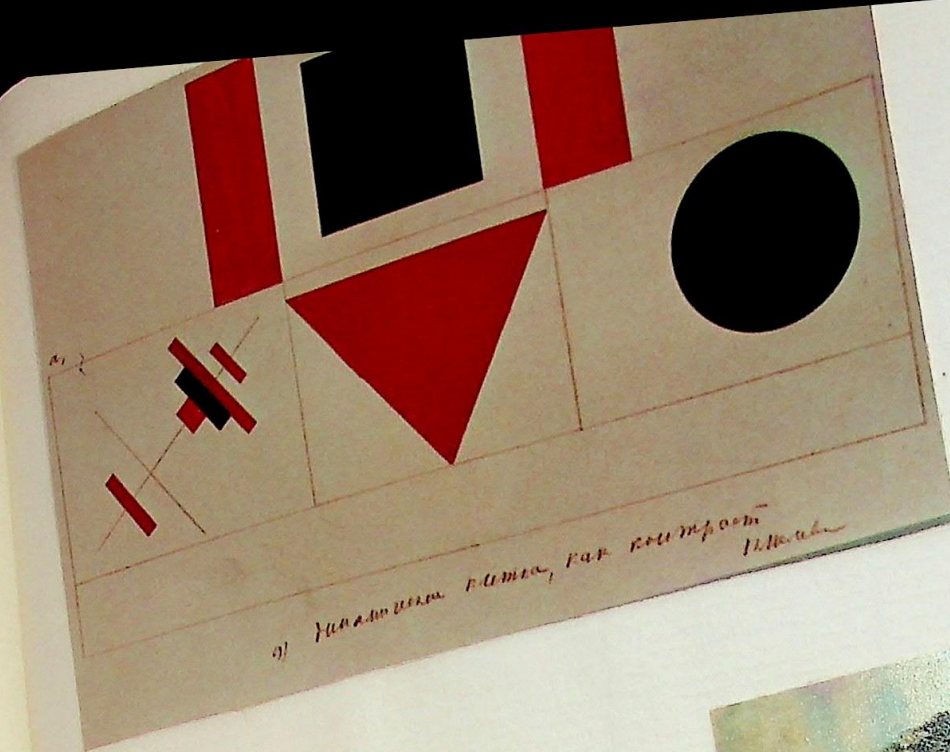


Fig. 17 - Suprematist Variations, 1919, Kasimir Malevich

Fig. 18 - They Did Not Expect Him (detail), 1884, Ilya Repin

GLOSSARY

AGITROP

Agitational Propaganda.

AKhRR

Association of the Artists of Revolutionary Russia.

AGITPOEZD

Agrit. train, painted outside and inside with propaganda images and slogans. Films (also purely propagandanistic) were shown and pamphlets and reading material distributed.

BYTIE

Objective Reality (Being). Organised in 1921 as a protest against the Constructivist rejection of easel painting.

GINKHUK

State Institute of Artistic Culture, Petrorad, set up in 1920.

INKhUK

The Institute of Artistic Culture, set up in 1920.

IZO

Department of Fine Art within the Commissariat of the Enlightenment. Shterenberg was appointed Head of IZO in January 1918. Tatlin was Deputy Head in Moscow.

LEF

Journal of the Left Front of the Arts.

OMAKhR

Younger section of the Association of the Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR).

NARKOMPROS

People's Commissariat of the Enlightenment, (broadly, Department of Education), of which Lunacharsky was Head until Stalin nationalised it in 1929.

NEP

New Economic Policy, introduced by Lenin to straighten the economy in 1921.

OBMOKHI

OPOYAZ

OST

PROLETKULT

ROSTA

UNOVIS

VKhUTEMAS

VKhUTEIN

the 500 were the leaders of the direct result of the artists during street propaganda work. It took the side of the Constructivists during the debate concerning the new art for the new society. They disbanded in 1923.

Society for the Study of Poetical Language.

Society of Easel Painters, formed in 1925. Most members had studied at the Free Art Studios and many were graduates from VKhUTEMAS, but finally rejected the formal explorations of the Constructivists in favour of easel-painting.

Proletarian Culture Movement, set up in 1917 by Bogdanov.

Russian Telegraphic Agency, whose windows were used in the campaign of visual propaganda, thereby employing many artists.

Affirmers of the New Art, set up in 1920 by Malevich and his followers in an attempt to make for Suprematism a basis for utilitarian art.

Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops, set up in 1920 to cater for the trend towards industry evident in the work of the avant-garde artists. Financed by the Trade Unions, not by IZO. They were not a success.

A rearrangement of VKhUTEMAS along more technological lines, still financed by the Trade Unions. Both VKhUTEIN and the Trade Unions, as constituted were disbanded by 1930.

OBMOKHI

Society of rebellious young artists, the Stenberg brothers and Medunetsky were the leaders, set up in 1919 as a direct result of the collaboration of artists during street propaganda and agitational work. It took the side of the Constructivists during the debate concerning the new art for the new society. They disbanded in 1923.

Society for the Study of Poetical Language.

OPOYAZ

Society of Easel Painters, formed in 1925. Most members had studied at the Free Art Studios and many were graduates from VKHUTEMAS, but finally rejected the formal explorations of the Constructivists in favour of easel-painting.

OST

PROLETKULT

Proletarian Culture Movement, set up in 1917 by Bogdanov.

ROSTA

Russian Telegraphic Agency, whose windows were used in the campaign of visual propaganda, thereby employing many artists.

UNOVIS

Affirmers of the New Art, set up in 1920 by Malevich and his followers in an attempt to make for Suprematism a basis for utilitarian art.

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A rearrangement of VKHUTEMAS along more technological lines, still financed by the Trade Unions. Both VKHUTEIN and the Trade Unions, as constituted were disbanded by 1930.

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