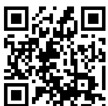
Soviet Art: Revolution and Propaganda

Background Notes

Jane Angelini – 13 March 2019

Kustodiev, *The Bolshevik,* 1920



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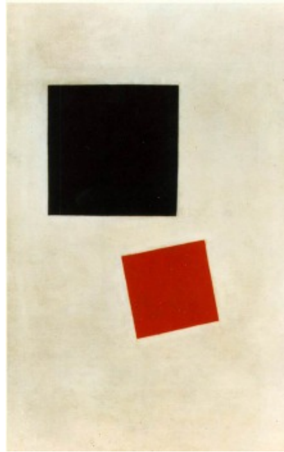
At the start of the 20th century Russia was an exciting place for artists, abuzz with new ideas and a sense of freedom and dynamism. St Petersburg had become a cauldron of radicalism with poets, playwrights and artists discussing the fall of tsarism and what should replace it. They were inspired not so much by Marx but by a present where everything, art especially, was breaking free from old confines, by the possibilities of new technology, a future of female empowerment, and modernity. Artists, both avant garde like Malevich and Rodchenko, or more mainstream like Brodsky and Kustodiev, basked in an atmosphere fostering creative freedom and debate.

Russia's demise in World War I, ushered in the 1917 Revolution, followed by years of civil war before the 1922 declaration founding the USSR, which transformed politics, economics and culture. Discussion and argument set in as ideas of a new "people's" art started to take shape. Progressive young artists began to propagandise revolutionary virtues in mass art forms like books, magazines, textiles and posters. Agitational art and design movements, with names like Constructivists and Productivists, came up with alternative design languages and methods that changed accepted practices of graphic and product design and typography for generations to follow. A state-funded cultural education organisation set up in the wake of the Revolution rejected musty, traditional conventions and promoted a new, practical art that was responsive to the needs of people in the street. It provided a spring of forward-looking Communist ideals – chiefly that art must serve the needs of party and state for the good of all.

At the time of the Revolution the Russian avant garde, called "leftists" at the time, and including Malevich, Tatlin, Rodchenko and Popova were swift to respond. All kinds of artistic viewpoints, from Cubism to Realism, were accepted expressive tools but it was the unprecedented symbolic abstraction of Malevich and the avant garde that became

the recognised “revolutionary” art genre and the foundation of “agitation art”, or agitprop. There was already a distinct strain of utopianism in the Russian avant-garde – a determination to reinvent art, as if from zero. Malevich’s abstract paintings freed art from what he called ‘the dead weight of the real world’.



Malevich,*Black square and red square,* 1915

Equally radical were Vladimir Tatlin’s *Counter-Reliefs*, made by assembling real materials, such as wood, glass and metal into three-dimensional constructions. Following these examples, the Constructivists rejected all ideas of illusory representation. Rodchenko focused on faktura, the physical qualities of the painting: the use of different paints and different textures, and how these related to other elements such as the painting surface, or the choice of colour. His experiments led to the ‘Black on Black’ series, in which the elimination of colour focused attention on the texture of the painting’s surface, and its interaction with light. In the end ‘nothing but painting exists’. Popova seems to respond to some of Malevich’s ideas, but push them further. Geometric shapes jostle together, overlapping, intersecting, their edges pressing beyond the frame. A dynamic sense of instability and movement is matched by her use of strong colour.

Propaganda

For Kazimir Malevich, rejecting the ‘dead weight of the real world’ meant depicting not people or things but a new, ideal world of shapes and forms. He called his style ‘suprematism’ as it celebrated the supremacy of geometry over reality.
He often used only two or three colours, most famously just black and white in his ‘Black Square’, exhibited in St Petersburg in 1915.
Lenin had no interest in art or aesthetics but when the resistance to the Bolsheviks led to civil war, they needed new tools of propaganda — to explain to a largely illiterate country what (and who) they were fighting for (and against). Artists were called upon to assist in shaping the New World and the new Soviet citizen and posters, photo montage, cult portraits and film all played a crucial role. Some of the propaganda posters by El Lissitsky, Rodchenko, Dmitri Moor, Klucis and Deineka are now international icons.
The war effort led to the creation of Rosta in Moscow and St Petersburg, a news agency that doubled as a Bletchley Park for propaganda. It enlisted not just artists but also futurist poets such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, who became one of the project’s most enthusiastic advocates. They were asked to make as many posters as possible, hundreds a week. Stencils would be used, so posters could be painted rather than printed. The suprematist style of using a limited range of colours was to become a trademark of the Soviet poster. A total of 3,130 posters were produced in the civil war years: a third military, a quarter political and the rest economic or cultural.
To the 25-year-old Mayakovsky, this project was about art breaking free from galleries and speaking to the nation, like Bolshevism itself. It meant ‘a nation of 150 million being served by hand by a small group of painters’, he wrote. As a result, soldiers could see the posters then join battle ‘not with a prayer on their lips, but with a slogan’. Trains ferried agitprop posters (and lecturers) to newly ‘liberated’ territories - talking about the enemy, about the revolution, about women voting, about the Russian soul.

In perhaps the most famous Soviet poster: El Lissitzky's 'Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge' (1919–20) there are no faces, no landscapes, just a long red triangle (the Soviets) piercing a white circle (the counter-revolutionaries) with other lines and rectangles floating free.

El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge,* 1919-1920

Posters were being made the world over by 1919, but none had the immediacy or power of those coming out of the Soviet Union. Rosta knew how to mix art and adrenaline. At a given signal, Rosta artists would be asked to hurl themselves at a sheet of paper to see who could complete the task first. The reception was lively and positive. Crowds regularly gathered around newly issued posters. Soldiers would send messages back saying, 'Give us more caricatures of priests, of whom we have had enough.' The Whites, who had also attracted Russian artists, tried posters — but they were too text-heavy and, therefore, ineffective. Mayakovsky often said that a Soviet poster was a failure unless it could bring a running man to a halt.

The Rosta artists had much creative freedom. By no means all of them were communists, which started to show when some of the political posters went wildly off-message. The daring didn't always impress the Politburo: one member complained that the prolific

posters had so much blood that they'd run out of red ink. Moor was declared a 'hero of the pencil and the paintbrush' after the war, but in general it was felt that the artists needed to be brought to heel. One contemporary account describes an old woman looking at a poster drawn in the cubist style, featuring a giant fish eye, and proclaiming, 'They want us to worship the devil!' Lev Kamenev, one of the most senior Bolsheviks, lamented 'a kind of student exercise in the fashionable futurist style' that ought to be shut down.

Dmitri Moor, *Death of International Imperialism,* 1919

A Revolution in Graphic Design

Soviet graphic designers saw their work as a challenge to the old typographic order, and before Socialist Realism came to dominate the visual landscape avant garde typography was a defining element of the new Soviet aesthetic. Modern Constructivist typography was a melding of disparate typefaces in varying sizes. Typefaces were readable, but they were not composed on a page in the tradition manner of one or two typefaces in logical columns; instead there were multiple sizes and shapes within the same word or sentence. Fonts were scrounged from

wherever they could be found and the masters of the form, El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko and Gustav Klucis among them, combined serif and sans serif poster typefaces – with the type made in both metal and wood – to build veritable letterform word monuments. This approach defined a short-lived Soviet style, but was eventually squeezed out in favour of Socialist Realism once Stalin came to power.

Rodchenko, *Books (The Advertisement Poster for the Lengiz Publishing House),* 1924

Heroic realism

The Soviet Union's party ideologues quickly came to find the modern visual language suspect; abstract approaches were mysterious, blighted by hidden meanings that encouraged interpretation. These avant garde methods returned in the later 20th century, but not before they were superseded and pushed out of the public sphere by Socialist Realism in the late 1920s. A more conservative approach was the hallmark of the most influential visual and graphic arts group in the Soviet Union, the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, formed in 1922. The Association called their evangelical revolutionary style "heroic realism." The state's preference for clear, unambiguous messages led to overly idealised representational art that replaced abstract ambiguity with unmistakable reflections of the revolution. Under Stalin, there was no longer place for play or experimentation. Artists had to play

along or go underground, holding exhibitions in each other’s houses or the park — and praying the KGB wouldn’t find out. The second world war saw a reprisal of old posters (and, sometimes, their artists) but the poster never regained the artistic heights of the first few Soviet years. The best work, done by <u>nonconformists</u>, forms the most diverse, powerful and moving genre in all of Russian art.

Poster of Lenin

Image of Stalin taken from a photograph, 1926

Vladimirski, *Roses for Stalin,* 1949

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