

**JEWISH AVANT-GARDE
ARTISTS AND THE
RUSSIAN REVOLUTION**

Christina Lodder
University of Kent



‘The Revolution seemed to me to be some kind of heavenly radiance, a token of fate presaging a new life, a new earth, a new people in my homeland’.

‘I was one of the hundreds of artists in Moscow possessed by the vision of a new life’.

Naum Gabo, ‘Autobiography’,
1970s, p. 34

February Revolution 1917



Abdication of the Tsar
Democracy established

Art world liberated from the
control of the autocracy.
Artists created their own
organisations and unions

The October Revolution 1917



25 October 1917

The Bolshevik wing of the Russian Communist Party took power

Avant-Garde Artists welcomed the revolution.

Jews were granted full civil rights, access to all educational institutions, and the freedom to run their own Hebrew and Yiddish theatres.

Impact on Avant-Garde activities 1918-1920

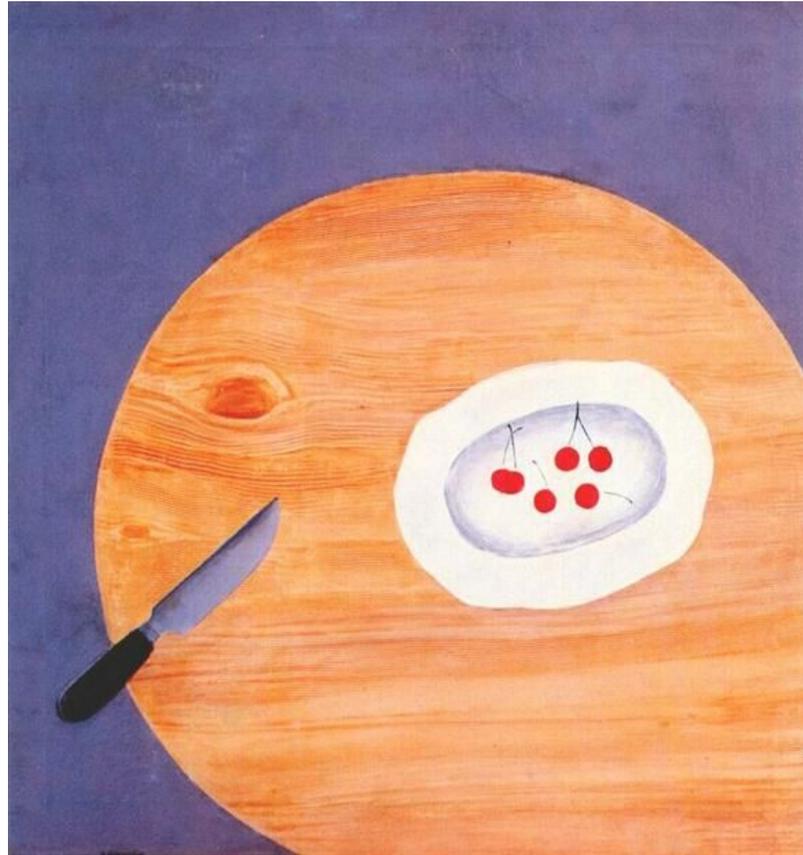
1. New practical demands
2. New Ideology

Avant-garde artists executed propaganda and agitational tasks

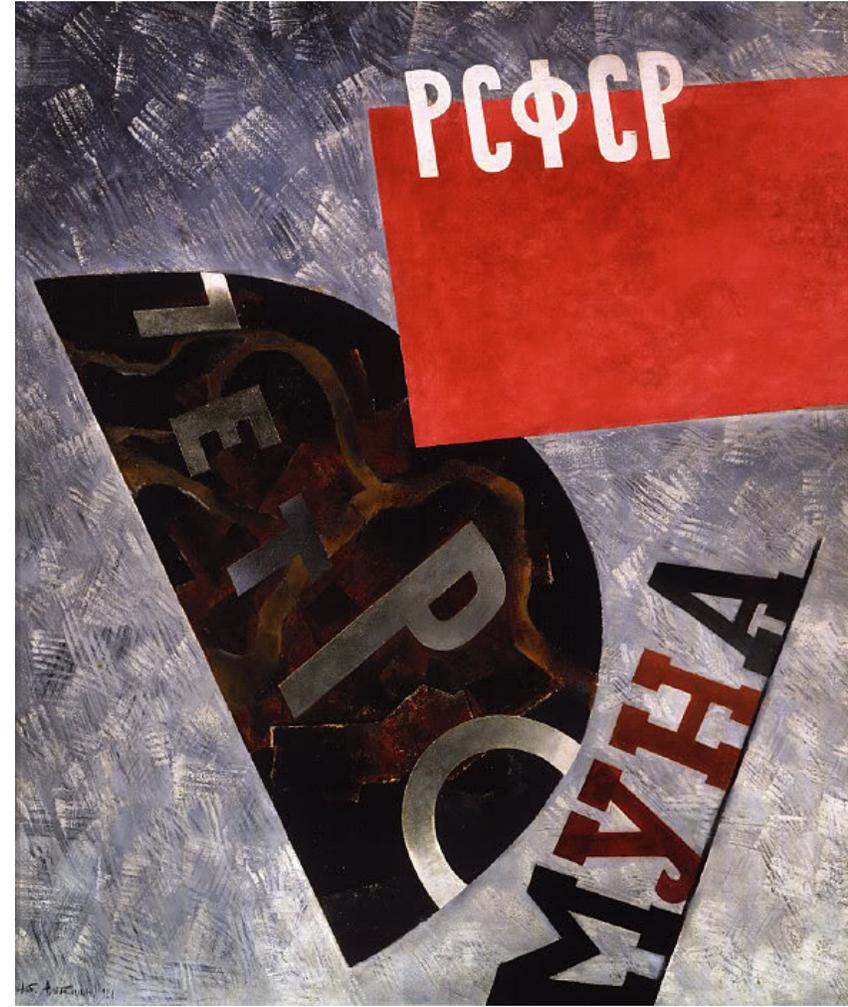
They ran artistic affairs within IZO (The Department of Fine Arts within the Commissariat for Enlightenment, Narkompros), editing journals, working on state purchasing committees, organising provincial museums and art galleries, reforming artistic education, running the art schools, and conducting debates about the role of art in the new society.



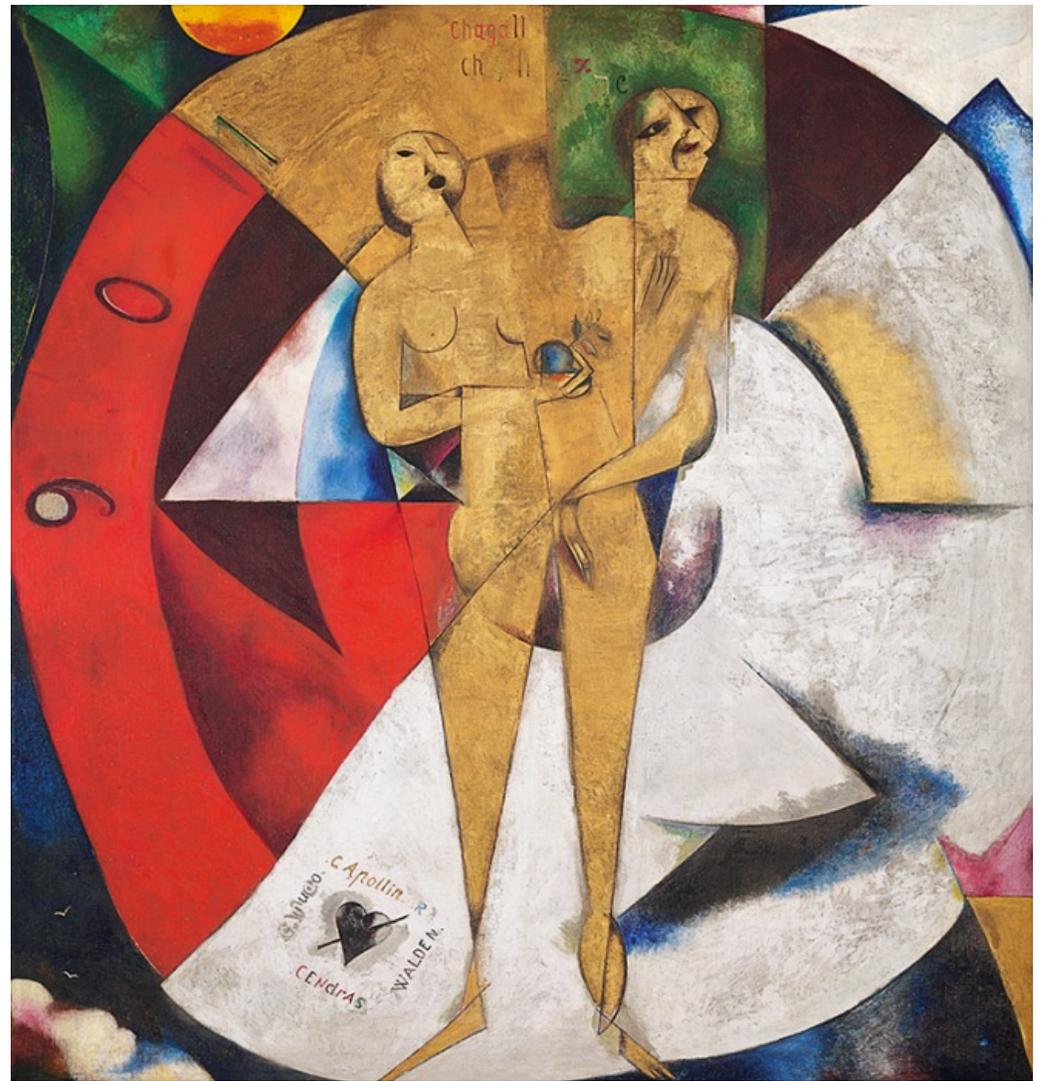
Robert Falk, *A Circus Artiste*, 1917, worked in the Department of Fine Arts within the Commissariat for Enlightenment



David Shterenberg, *Still Life with Lamp and Herring*, 1920. Worked in Paris, returned, In 1918 became Head of the Department of Fine Arts within the Commissariat for Enlightenment



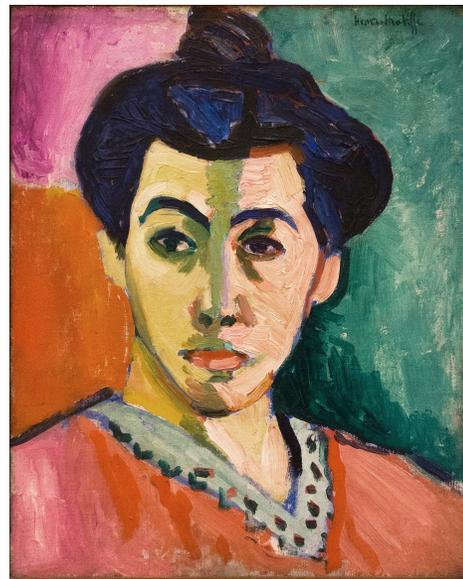
Natan Altman, *Petro Komuna*, 1919, worked in the Department of Fine Arts within the Commissariat for Enlightenment



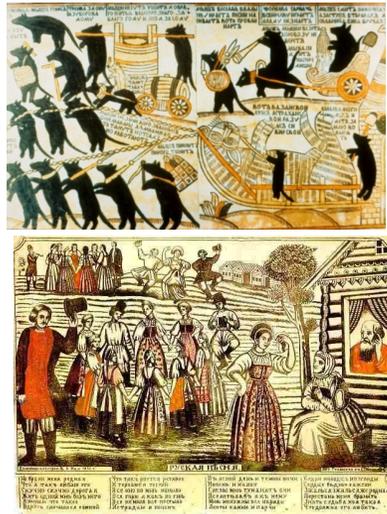
Marc Chagall, *I and the Village*, 1911, oil on canvas, 192.1 x 151.4 cm., Museum of Modern Art, New York; and *Homage to Apollinaire*, 1911-12, oil on canvas, 200 x 189.9 cm., Stedelijk Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven



Chagall, *Pregnant Woman*, 1913, oil on canvas, Stedelijk Museum



Henri Matisse, *Harmony in Red* 1908, oil on canvas 180 x 220 cm Hermitage, St. Petersburg; and *The Green Line*, 1905.



Fernand Léger, *The Smokers*, 1911, oil on canvas, Oil on Canvas 129.5 x 96.5 cm., Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York





June 1914 Chagall visited Russia, intending to stay only for the summer and then return to Paris

1 August 1914 First World War

Autumn 1914 Chagall was conscripted into Tsarist Army - appointed clerk in Petrograd

July 1915 Chagall married Bella and both moved to Petrograd

They experienced the Revolutions in Petrograd

Chagall, *Wounded Soldier*, 1914,
India ink on paper.



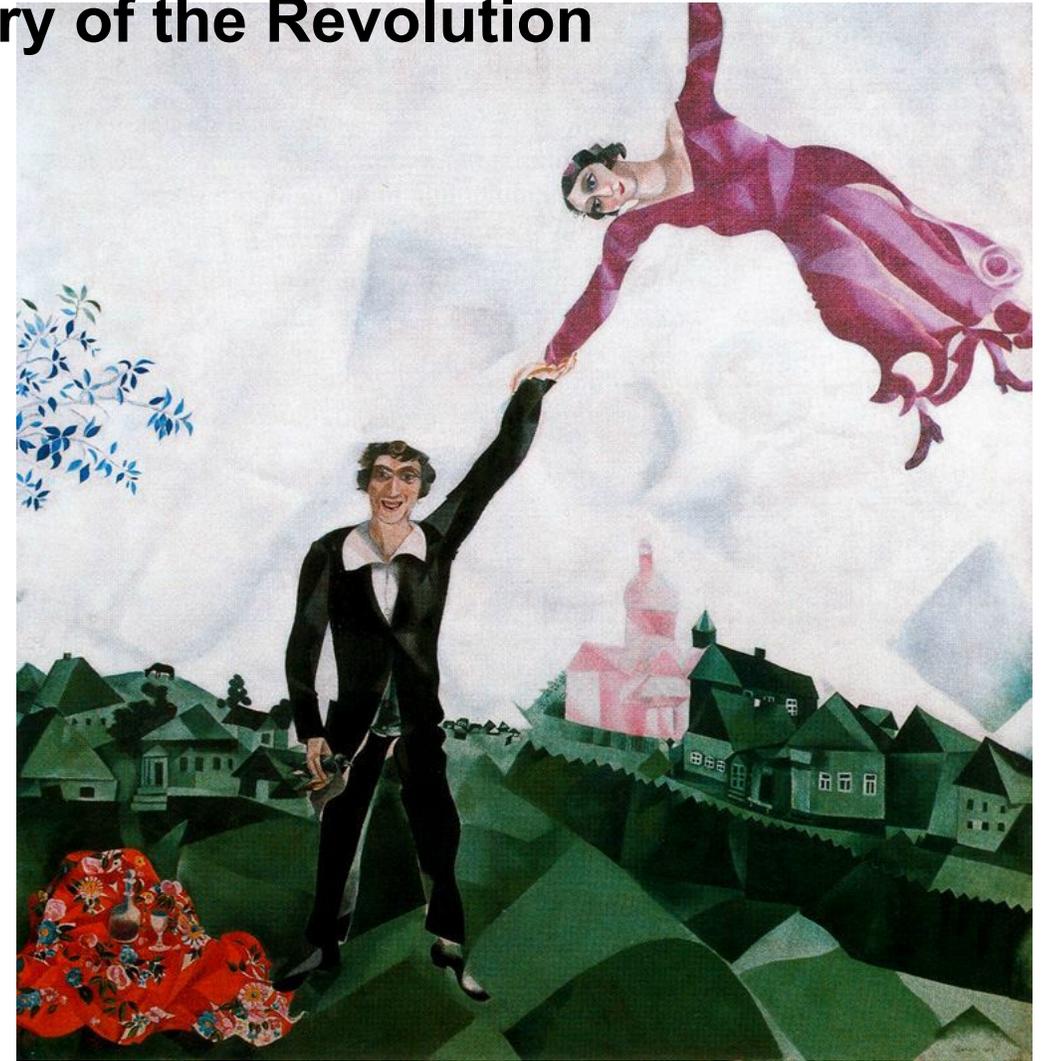
November 1917
Chagall returned to
Vitebsk

September 1918
Chagall was appointed
Commissar of the Arts
for Vitebsk with the
'right to organize art
schools, museums,
exhibitions, courses,
lectures on art, and any
other artistic enterprise
anywhere within the
city and region of
Vitebsk'

November 1918 Chagall as Arts Commissar organised the decorations of Vitebsk for the first anniversary of the Revolution



Chagall, *War on the Palaces*, 1918. Sketch for the decorations of Vitebsk for the November 1918, watercolour, India ink and coloured pencil on paper, 33.7 x 23.2 cm., State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



Chagall, *The Promenade*, 1918, 1917-18, oil on canvas, 170 x 183.5 cm., State Russian Museum, St Petersburg



Marc Chagall, *The Fiddler*, 1912-13, oil on canvas. 188 x 158 cm. Stedelijk Museum.



Chagall, *War on the Palaces*, 1918.



The school was located in the former house of the Banker I. Vishnyak at 10 Vokrenskaya Street (then Bukharinskaya, now Pravda Street)
The school was open to everyone , aged from 15 onwards

Chagall set up the Vitebsk People's Art School in November 1918



The teaching staff, July 1919:
Seated Left to right: El Lissitzky, Vera Ermolaeva, Marc Chagall, David Yakerson, Yuri Pen, Nina Kogan and Aleksandr Romm

Report of Chagall's speech at the official opening on 28 January 1919:

Comrade Chagall ... spoke of the enormous importance of artistic development for the proletariat, and of the necessity of giving the new art a broad scope for development.

Comrade Chagall spoke of the fundamental difference between the way the artistic development of the masses was carried out under the old regime and how it is now conducted, under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In the old days, art only existed for the benefit of the 'the fortunate few'. The doors to the temple of art and science were tightly closed to the working masses ...

Now the situation is totally different.

The doors to the scientific and artistic holy of holies have been opened to all workers, and these former outcasts ... can now make free use of the advantages that, in fact, should have been theirs by rights since time immemorial



Chagall, *Over Vitebsk*,
1915-1920 (after a painting of
1914), oil on canvas, 67 x 92.7
cm., MoMA, New York.

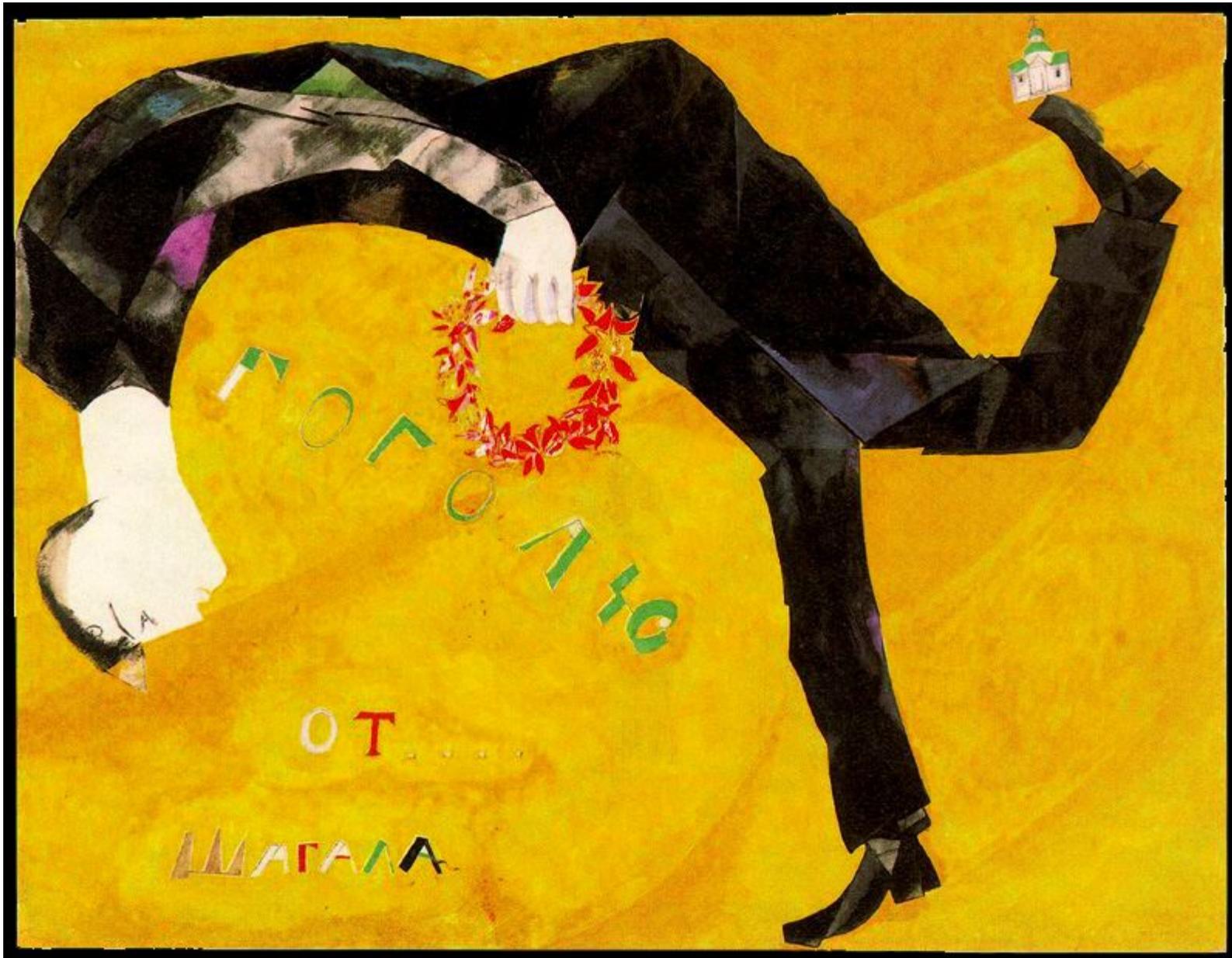
The flying figure perhaps refers to the Yiddish saying, 'he walks over the city' describing beggars; the fate of the wandering Jew (a motif of the persecution of the Jews)' or Elijah who may come bringing succour or salvation, or bearing gifts in a sack on his back.



Chagall, *Over the Town*, 1918

“In Vitebsk, he belonged to a community, a community more closely knit than any he was ever to discover in France... nearly everyone loved everyone, in keeping with the Hassidic commandments. Vitebsk was overflowing with love”

Chagall, *My Life*



Chagall, *Homage to Gogol*, 1917, curtain designed for a Gogol Festival, gouache, watercolour and pencil on paper, 39.4 x 50.2 cm., Museum of Modern Art, New York.

November 1919 Kazimir Malevich and Suprematism arrived in Vitebsk



Kazimir Malevich, *Dynamic Suprematism*, 1917, oil on canvas, Tate, London; and *Supremus No. 58 (Yellow and Black)*, 1916, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg

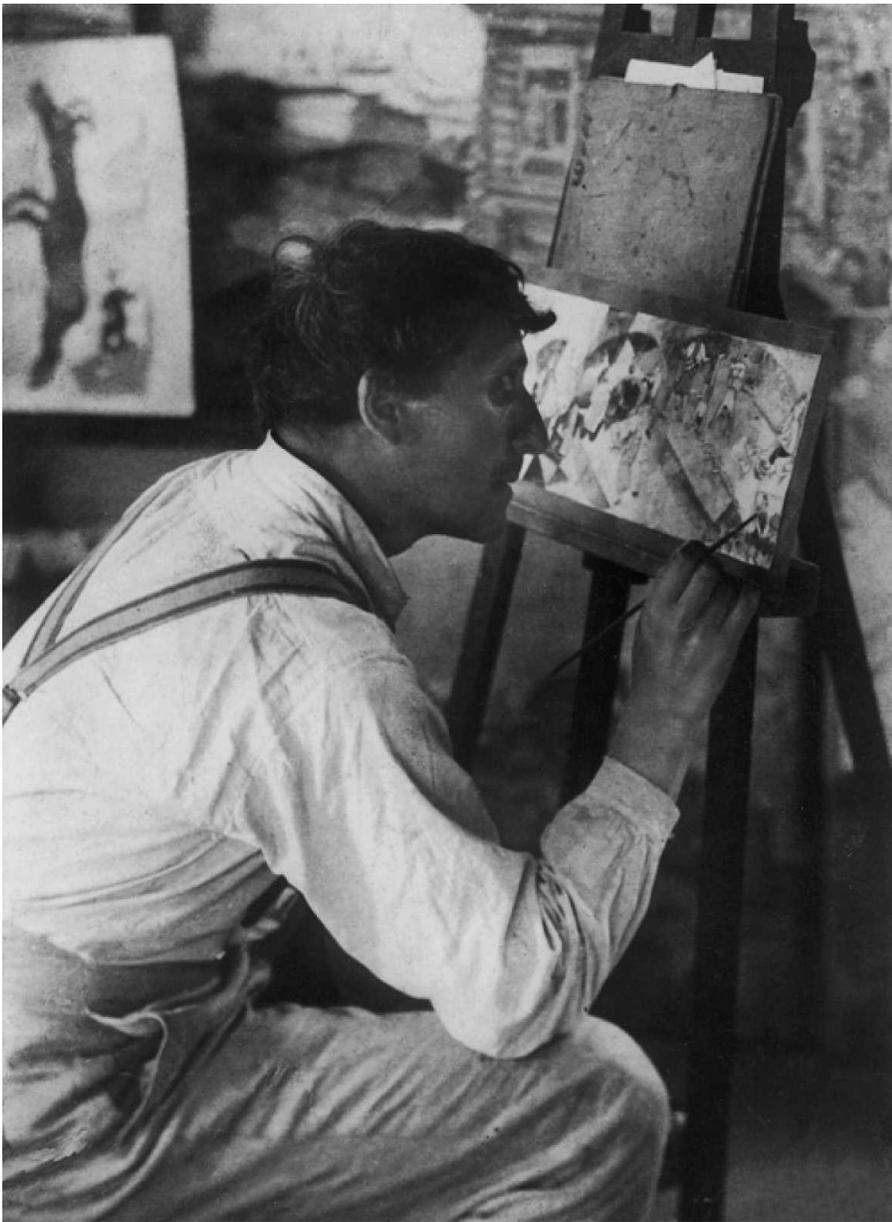
Malevich inspired the foundation of Unovis (Champions of the New Art) in January 1919. It gradually absorbed all the students.

In May Chagall's students transferred to Unovis. On 5 June 1920, Chagall left Vitebsk and moved to Moscow.



I set to work. I painted a mural for the main wall: Introduction to the New National Theatre. The other interior walls, the ceiling and the friezes depicted the forerunners of the contemporary actor – a popular musician, a wedding jester, a good woman dancing, a copyist of the Torah, the first poet dreamer, and finally a modern couple flying over the stage. The friezes were decorated with dishes and food, beignets and fruits spread out on well-laid tables. I looked forward to meeting the actors who passed me: 'Let us agree. Let's join forces and throw out all this old rubbish. Let's work a miracle! (around 1921)

Chagall, Introduction to the Jewish Theatre, 1920



There you are', said Efros (Granovsky, director of the State Jewish Chamber Theatre, 1920), leading me into a dark room, 'These walls are all yours, you can do what you like with them'. It was a completely demolished apartment that had been abandoned by bourgeois refugees. 'You see", he continued, 'the benches for the audience will be here; the stage there.' To tell the truth, all I could see there was the remains of a kitchen.. ..And I flung myself at the walls. The canvases were stretched out on the floor. Workmen, actors walked over them. The rooms and corridors were in the process of being repaired; piles of shavings lay among my tubes of paint, my sketches. At every step one dislodged cigarette-ends, crusts of bread.

My *Ugala* (1922), design for the Jewish theatre



The minstrel



Detail showing Eφος, Chagall,
Granovsky and the actor Krashinski



Theatre

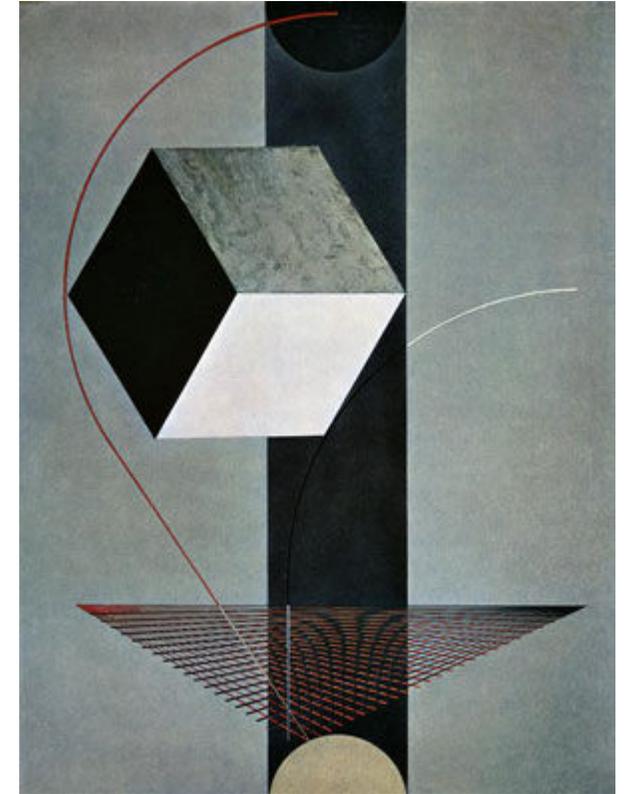
El Lissitzky – Combining the Jewish Renaissance, Suprematism and Communism



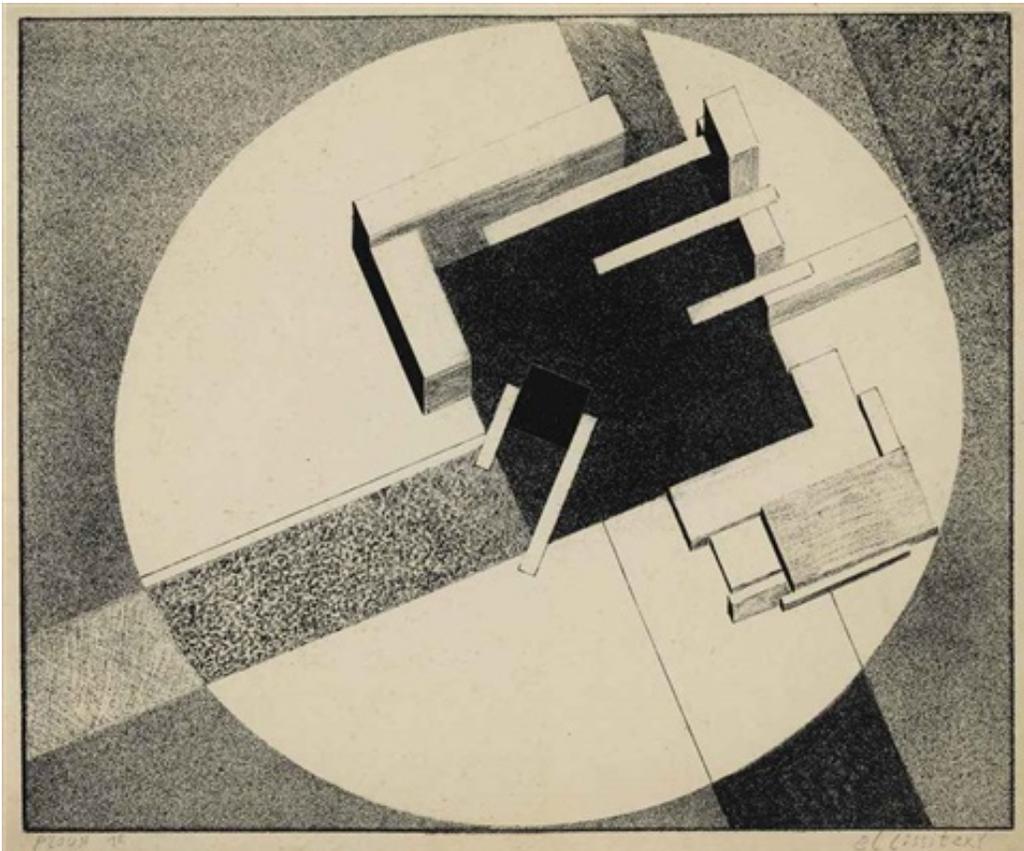
Lissitzky and Malevich,
Summer 1920



El Lissitzky, illustration for the
*A Conversation: The Legend
of Prague* by M Broderson,
Moscow, 1917



El Lissitzky, Proun 99, c.
1920, oil on canvas.



El Lissitzky, *Proun 1 e*, c. 1920,
lithograph

The name Proun signified for us that station on the path of creation of the new form that grows out of the earth, which is fertilised with the dead bodies of the picture and the artist. The picture fell apart, together with the old world that had had created it... The new world will not need little pictures...

We believe in creative intuition, which creates its own method and system ... according to laws which are as organic as the growth of the flower..

We don't need the individual, but the universal.

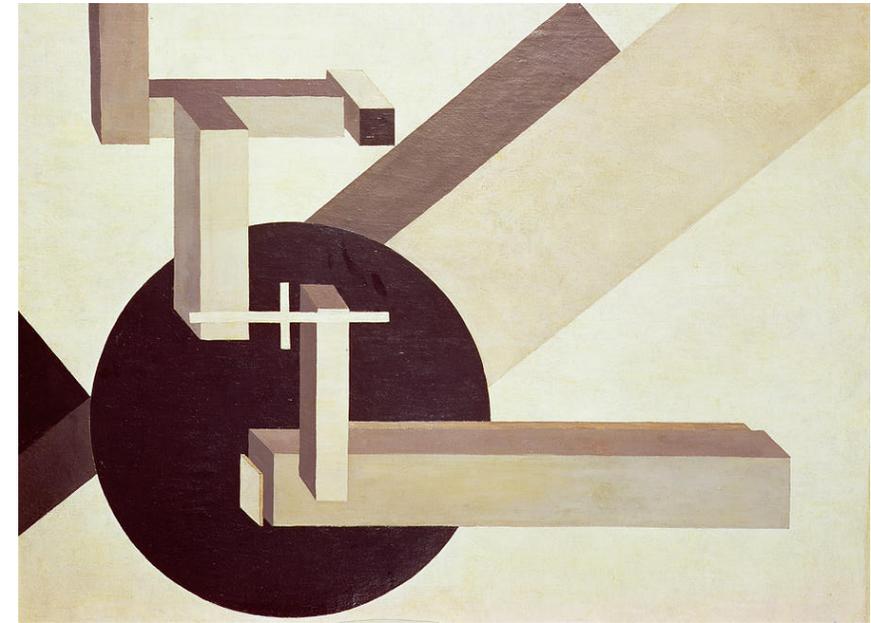
We live in an epoch of reinforced concrete, a dynamic epoch, we don't describe and we don't beautify. we race and create.



El Lissitzky, The cover for the Committee for the struggle against unemployment, Vitebsk, 1919

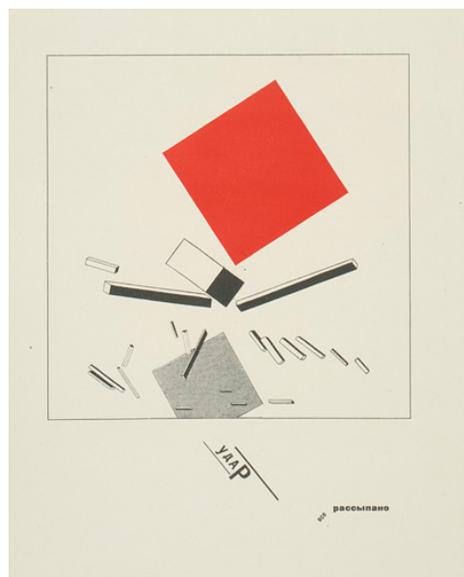
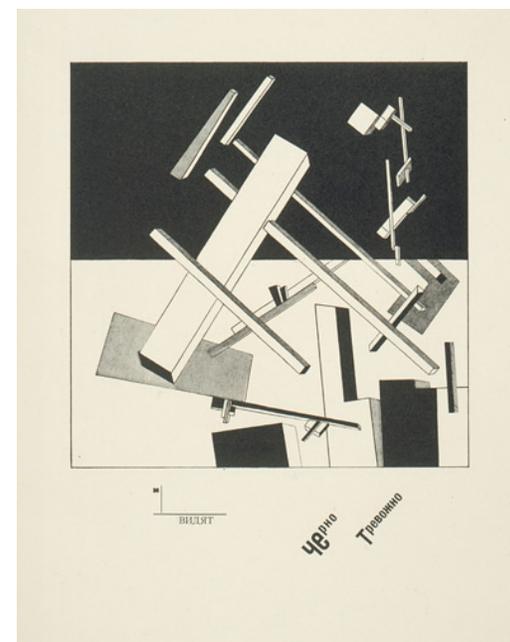
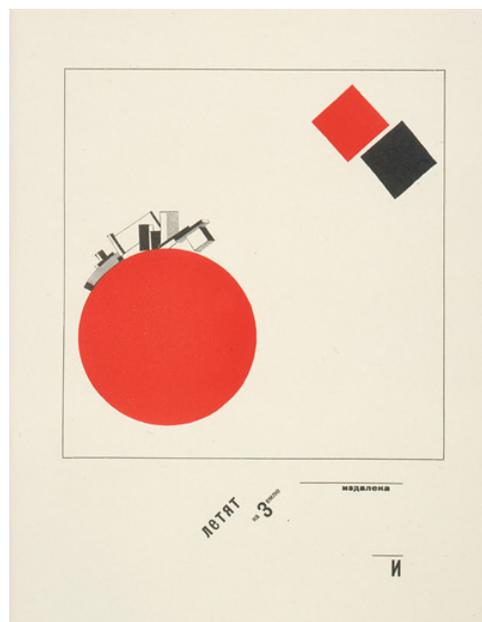
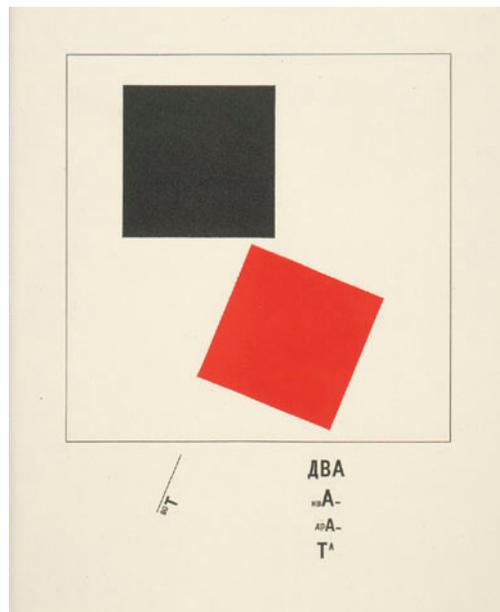


El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, 1919-20, poster

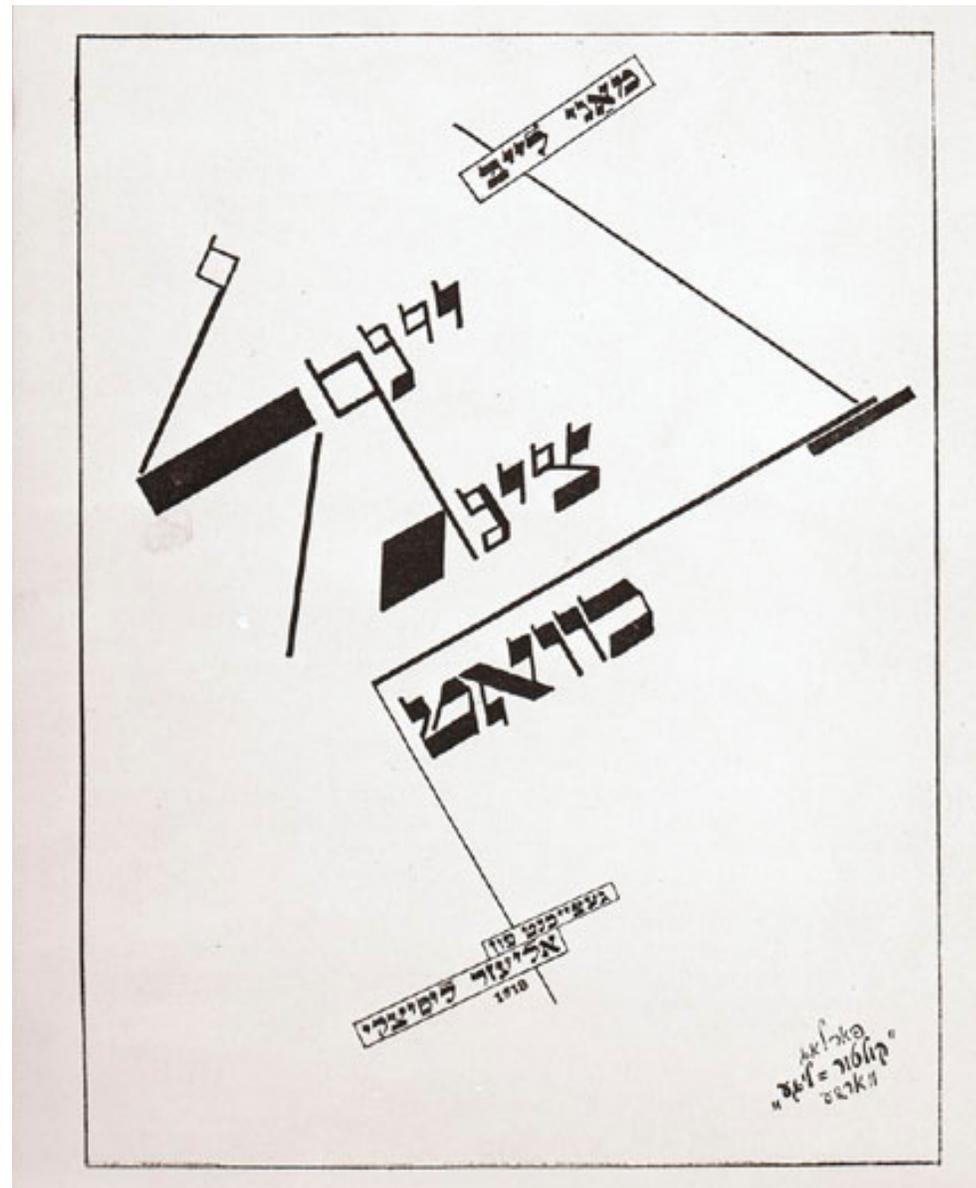


El Lissitzky, *Proun 10*, c. 1920, oil on canvas

El Lissitzky, *The Factory workshops are Waiting for You*, 1919-1920; large propaganda board. Viebsk

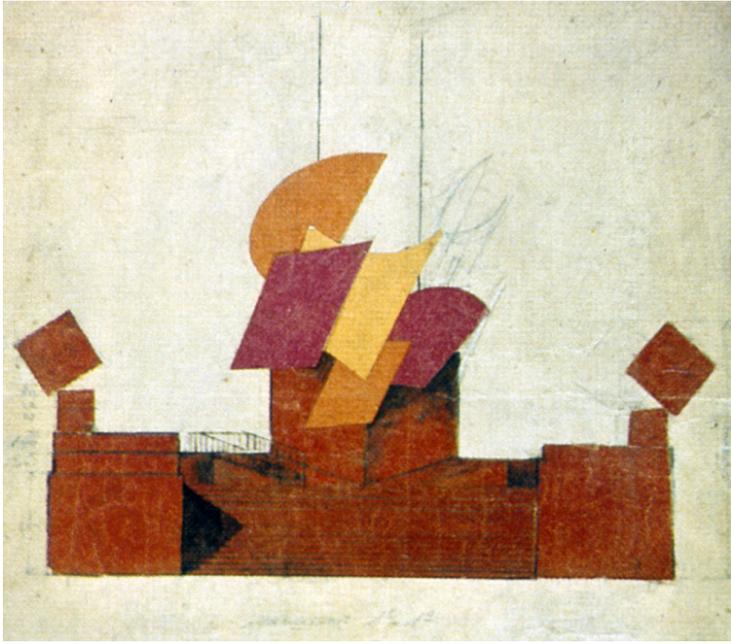


El Lissitzky,
*Suprematist story
of two squares in
six constructions,*
Berlin, 1922



Lissitzky, Two different illustrations for *A Mischievous Boy* – first in 1917 – second in 1922

Decorations for the Revolutionary Festivals



Natan Altman,
Design for
Uritskii (Palace)
Square for 7
November
1918, including
his design for
the Alexander
Column and
illuminating it at
night.

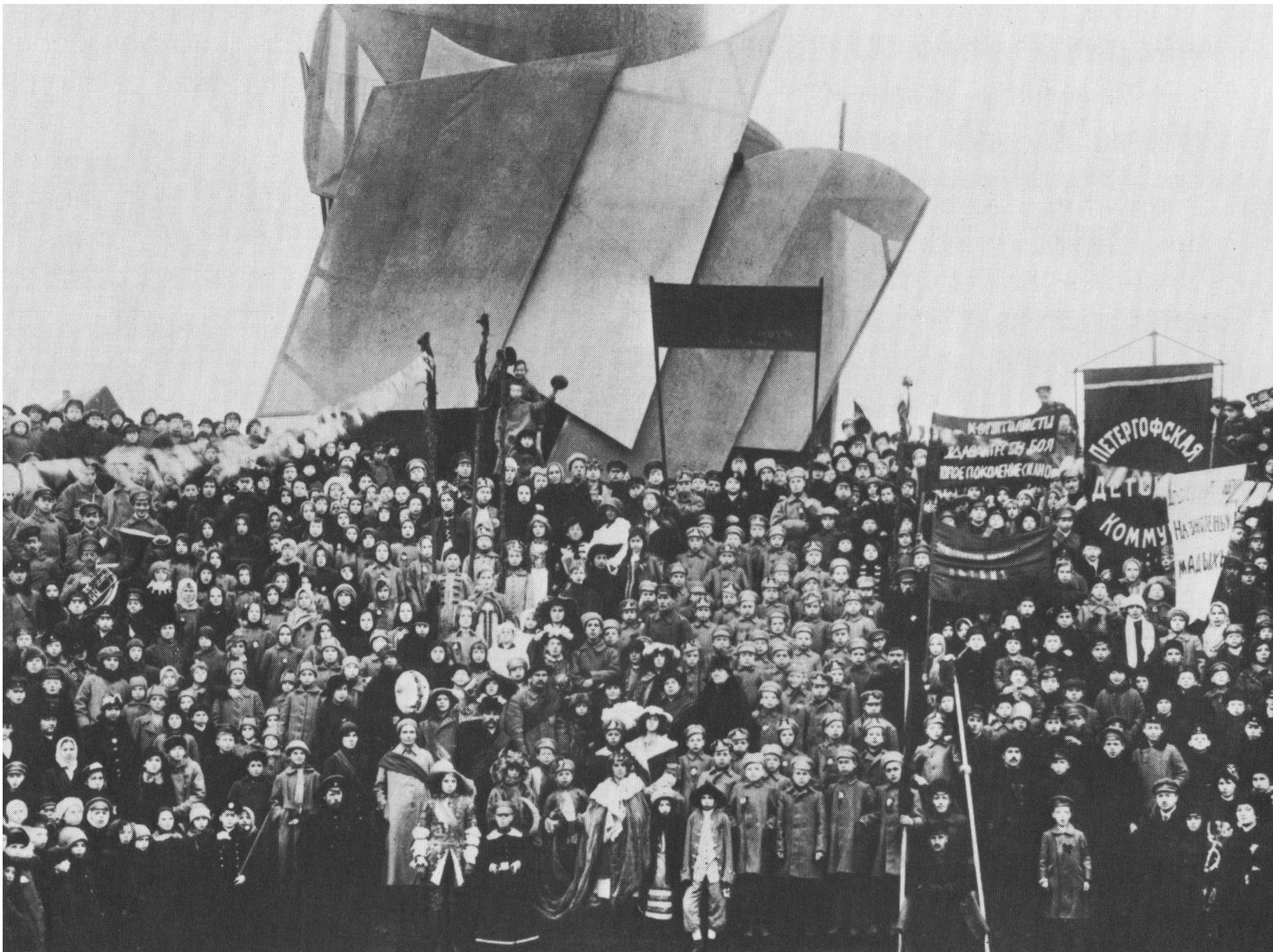




Natan Altman, *Design for decorating Uritskii (Palace Square), Petrograd, 7 November 1918*. Text reads “Workers of the World Unite”;

and painted panel “He who was nothing will be everything” originally placed in the centre of the Winter Palace Façade, 7 November 1918.





Uritskii Square, 7
November 1918

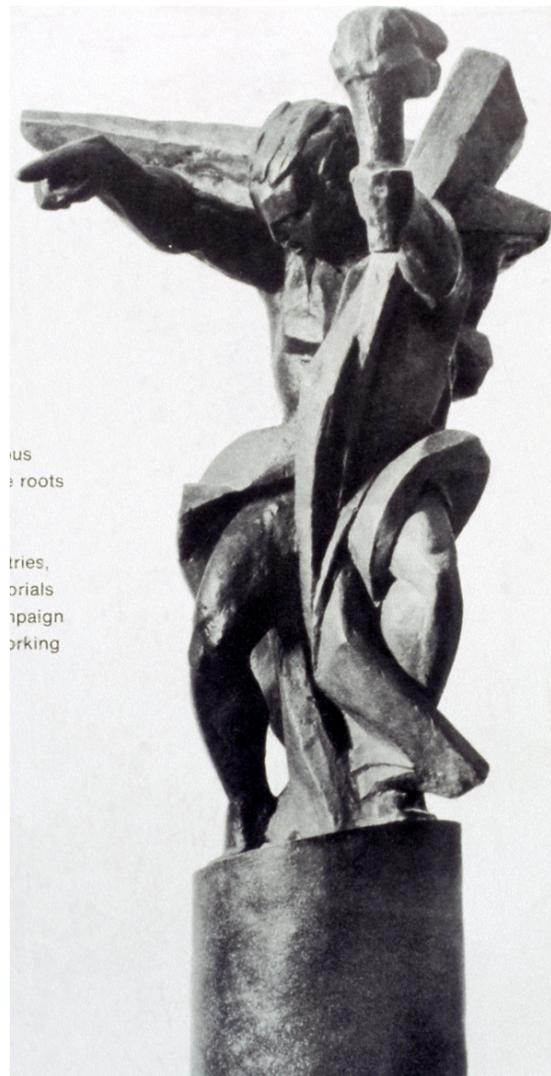
Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda



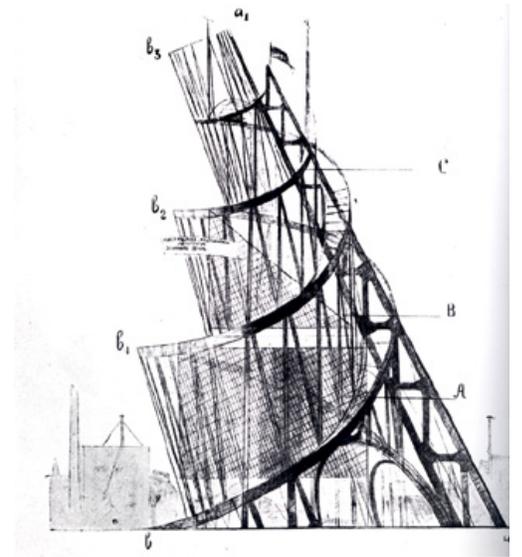
Demolishing the monument to Alexander III in the Kremlin, Moscow, 1918



Andreev and Osipov, Monument to The Soviet Constitution, 1918-19 concrete, Moscow., and detail.



Vera Mukhina, *The Torch of the Revolution*, 1922-3



Vladimir Tatlin, Model for a Monument to the Third International, unveiled November 1920.



Naum Gabo, *Column*, model c. 1920, early plastics; *Constructed Head No. 2*, c. 19156 galvanised metal; *Constructed Head No. 1*, c. 1915, plywood.



Naum Gabo, *Column*, conceived c. 1920, large version constructed 1970s, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh

In August 1920, Naum Gabo published his *Realistic Manifesto*. He declared:

In the squares and streets today we proclaim, to you, the people, our Word; we are taking our Deed out into the squares and streets, in the conviction that art cannot and must not remain a refuge for the leisured, a consolation for the weary, an excuse for the lazy. Art is called upon to accompany man everywhere, wherever his inexhaustible life flows and acts - at the factory bench, at the table, at work, at rest, at play; on working days and on holidays, at home and on the road - in order that the burning urge to live may never be extinguished in mankind.

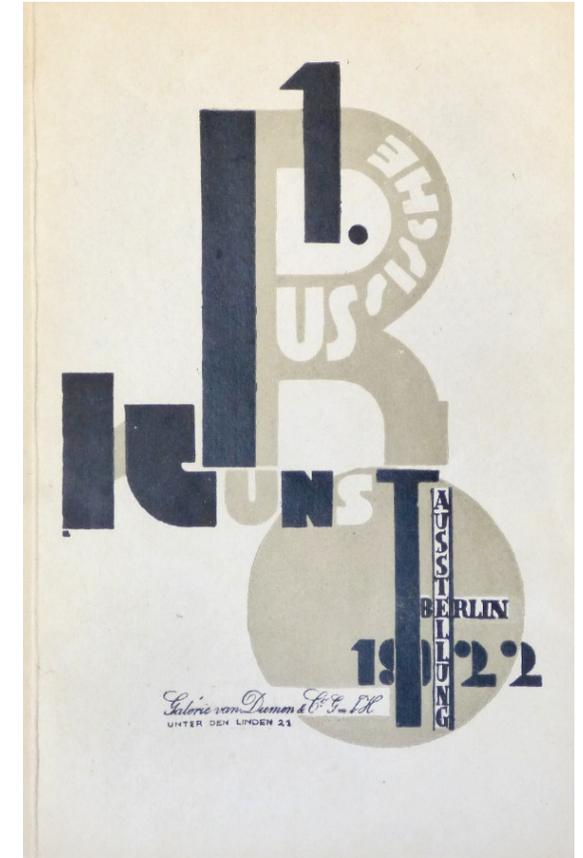
1921 THE END OF CIVIL WAR & WAR COMMUNISM

NEP – New Economic Policy. In this compromise with capitalism, propaganda became increasingly important.

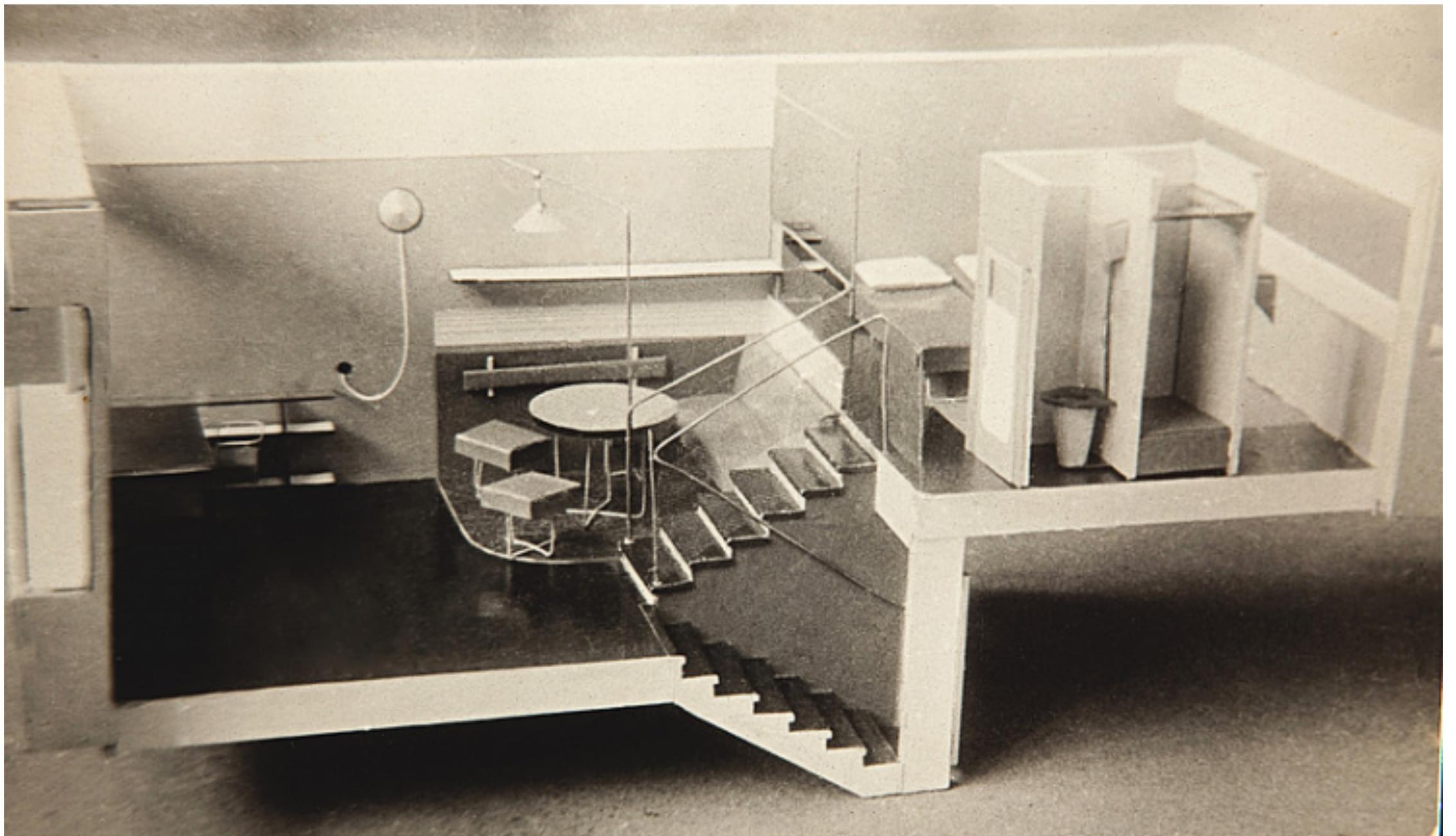
The Bolsheviks re-established their control of all government organisations, including those concerned with art and culture. Avant-garde artists lost their positions.

Government began promoting figurative trends

Many artists left Russia, including Chagall.



First Russian Art Exhibition, October 1922, Berlin: David Shterenberg (sitting), Marianov (Cheka), Natan Altman, Naum Gabo & Lutz (the Van Diemen Gallery). Lissitzky designed the cover for the



El Lissitzky, Model for an apartment for a couple in the Narkomfin building, 1928-1932



El Lissitzky & Sergei Senkin,
photomontage for the Soviet section
of the *Pressa* exhibition, Cologne,
1928

El Lissitzky, Design for *USSR in Construction*

1928-9 END OF NEP

CONSOLIDATION OF STALIN'S POWER

FIRST FIVE-YEAR PLAN

COLLECTIVISATION OF AGRICULTURE

ART BECAME AN IMPORTANT TOOL OF
PROPAGANDA

1934 SOCIALIST REALISM – SOCIALIST IN
CONTENT, REALIST IN FORM

JEWISH ARTISTS - CONTINUING THE FIGURATIVE TRADITION



Isaak Brodsky, *The Red Funeral*, 1906; and
Portrait of Stalin, 1928.





Isaak Izraelovich
Brodsky, *Lenin at
Smolny, 1930; First
of May
Demonstration on
Nevsky Prospekt;
and Construction
Site, 1928.*





Chagall, The Revolution, 1937, oil on canvas, 50 x 100 cm., private collection.

"I think the Revolution could be a great thing if it retained its respect for what is other and different,"

THANK YOU