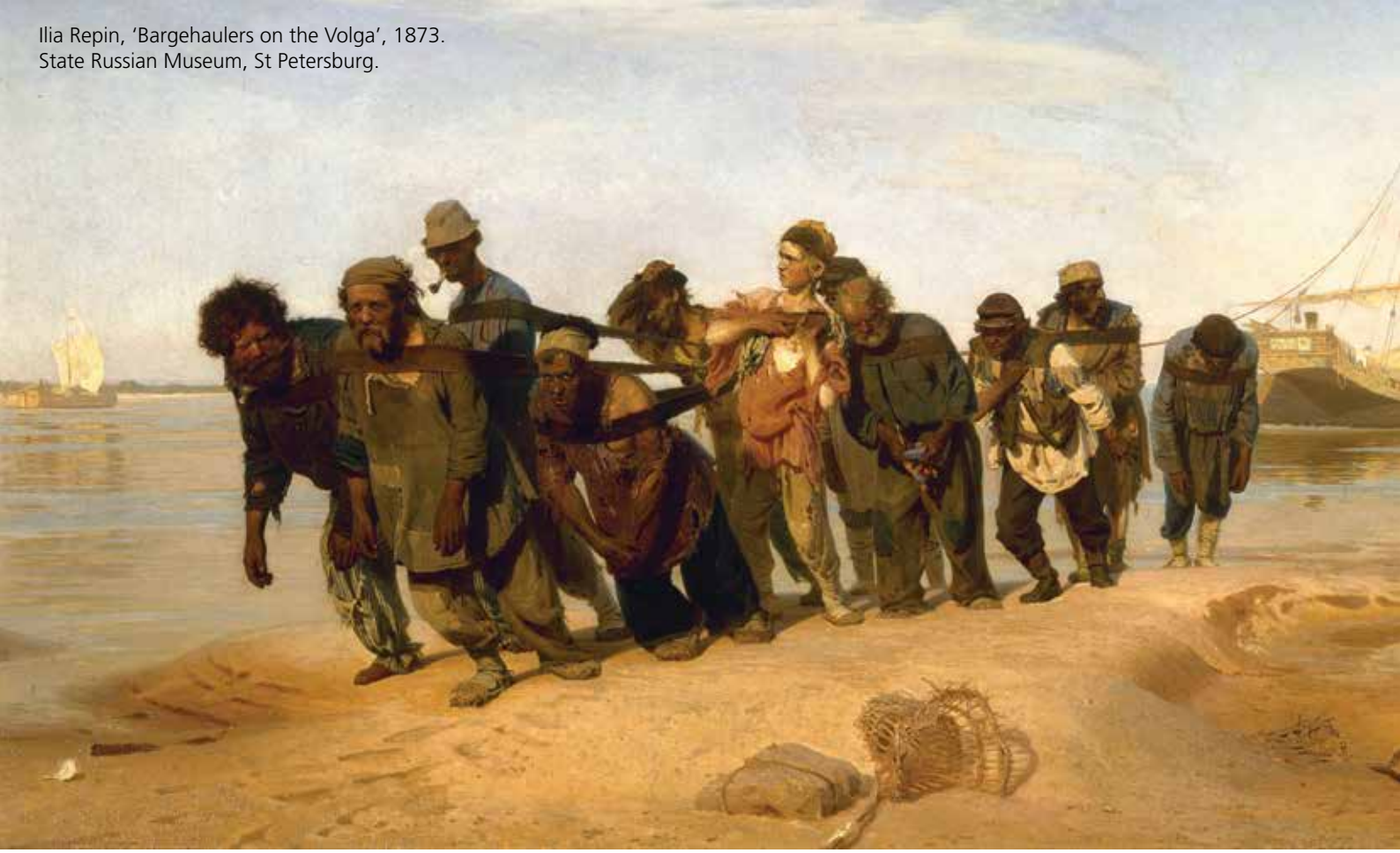


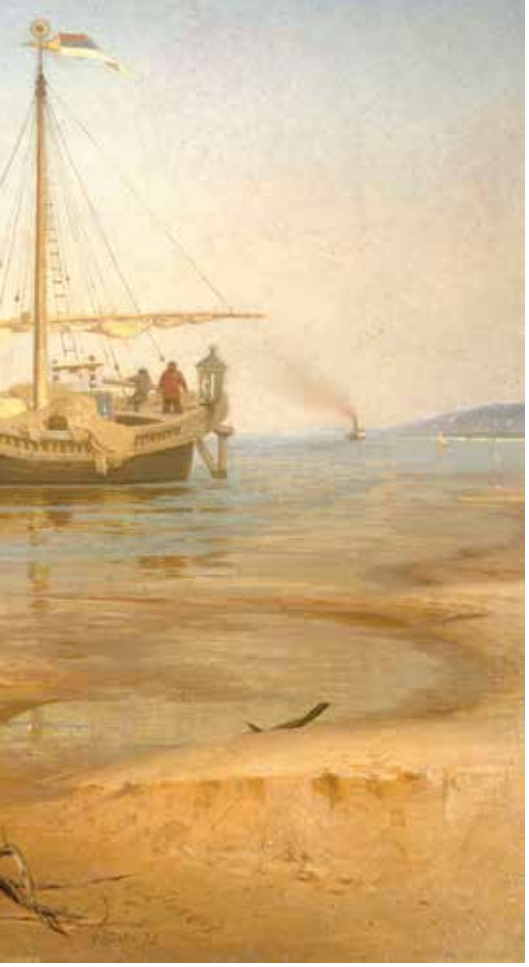
Ilia Repin, 'Bargehaulers on the Volga', 1873. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

'Our March': art and culture in the Russian Revolution

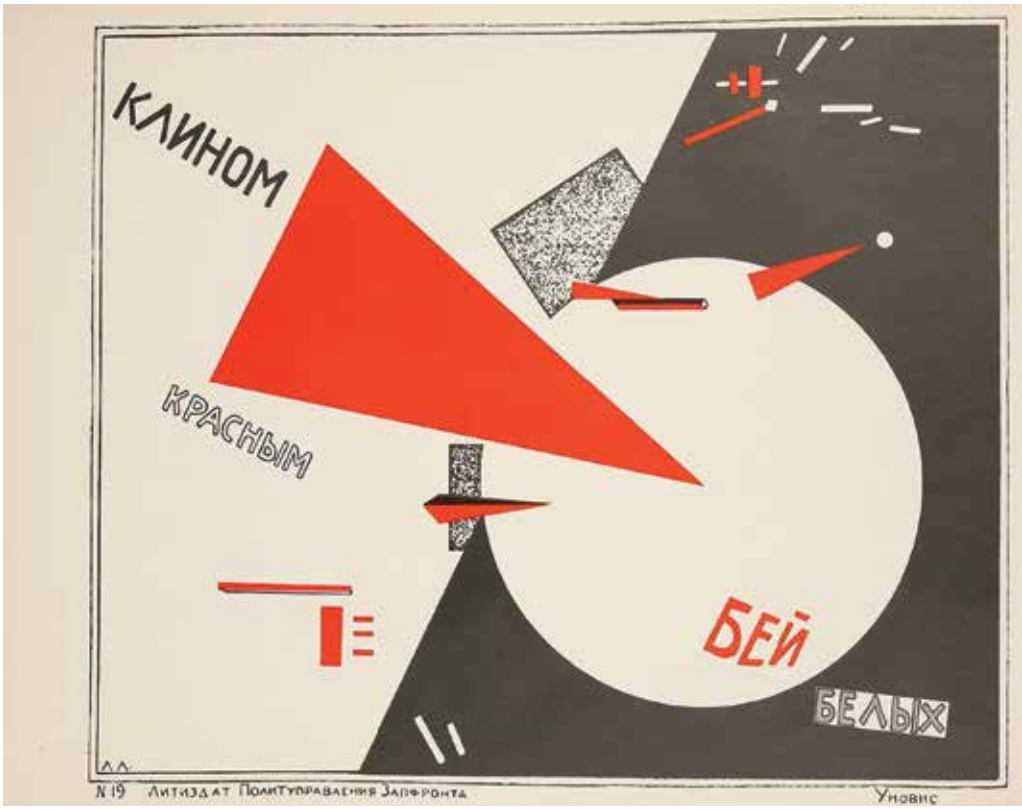
Peter Waldron explores the role of art in communicating to the masses the ideas of politics and change in Bolshevik Russia.

For Vladimir Maiakovskii, writing his poem 'Our March' in December 1917, the October revolution represented the fulfilment of the aspirations of Russia's radical writers and artists to steer Russia's 'ship of modernity' away from the constricting past they had reviled in the 1912 manifesto 'A slap in the face of public taste'.[1] Maiakovskii had joined the Bolshevik party in 1907 as a 14-year-old, but over the following decade there appeared to be little realistic prospect of the Bolsheviks gaining any sort of political power and the Russian cultural avant-garde instead concentrated its energies on subverting the artistic and literary establishment.

The oppressive autocratic regime of the Tsars had stifled open discussion of political and social issues before 1900. It censored newspapers and books and prohibited the formation of political parties and organisations aimed at debating broad issues surrounding Russian society and its future. Political opposition to Tsarism was forced underground and from the 1860s terrorism became a feature of Russia's politics: Tsar Alexander II was killed by a terrorist bomb on the streets of St Petersburg in 1881 and his successors lived under a constant threat of assassination. Deprived of formal avenues to discuss the big questions of the day, Russia's elite utilised other means to engage with social and political issues. Literature and art acquired a central importance in Tsarist Russia as a means through which topics such as the condition of the peasantry and the impact of economic change on Russian society could be aired in ways that evaded the regime's censorship.



El Lissitzky, 'Beat the Whites With the Red Wedge', 1919

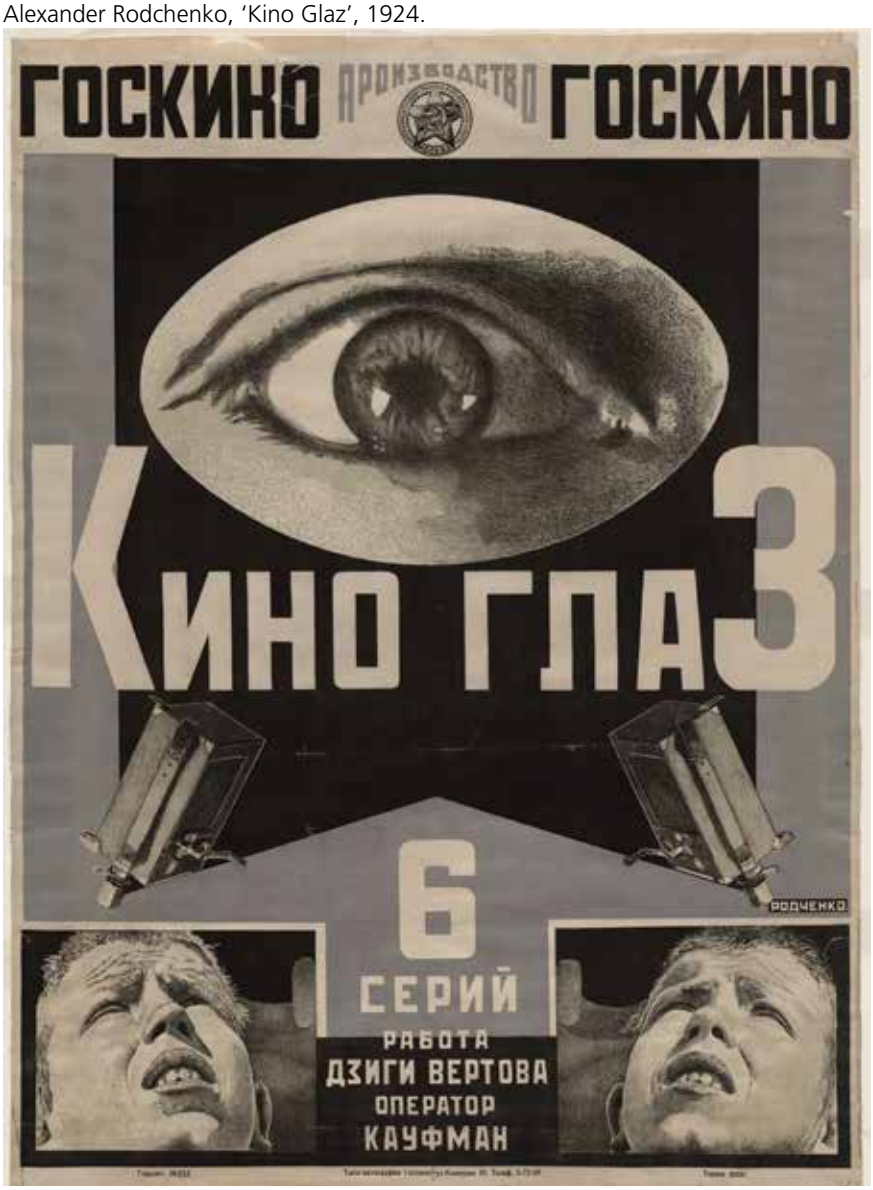


During the 1870s a group of realist painters known as the 'Wanderers' – from their commitment to travelling art exhibitions – produced a series of paintings depicting poverty and injustice as central elements in Russian society and, by implication, laying responsibility at the door of the Romanov state. Ilia Repin's 1873 'Bargehaulers on the Volga' was only the most dramatic of these pictures, and Russian writers too used their works to engage with serious social issues. 'Art for art's sake' was largely an alien concept in nineteenth-century Russia, and the great Russian writers each wove elements of social commentary into their works. Chekhov's plays depicted the ennui of a Russian nobility whose traditional way of life is being destroyed by the encroachment of the modern world, and the position of the Russian rural world forms a central part of the writings of Turgenev. Both Tolstoy and Dostoievskii engaged with the pressing questions that faced Russian society in their novels, providing their readers with much food for thought as Russia inexorably modernised in the late nineteenth century.

The advent of abstraction in European art in the first years of the twentieth century gave Russian culture a new impetus. The political upheavals of 1905, when the Tsarist regime was profoundly shaken by revolt across the empire, suggested that the Romanov regime was not as stable as it appeared and the weakening of the state's system of censorship in the wake of 1905 made it easier to voice different opinions openly. Poetry, music and the visual arts all flourished in the new century, adding a new and different flavour to Russian culture, aided by frequent and close contact between Russian and western European artists. Diaghilev's Paris-based *Ballets Russes* brought a radical approach to dance, while a new generation of poets and painters challenged the 'academy' tradition that had dominated Russian culture and produced work that experimented with new forms of expression. The 'Silver Age' of Russian poetry in the years after 1900 encompassed writers such as Akhmatova, Blok and Tsvetaeva who focused on the inherent aesthetic beauty of the written word, abandoning the nineteenth-century tradition of art engaging with wider social issues. Much more radical cultural forms developed around 1910, as abstract painting gained a following in Russia, with artists such as Natalia Goncharova and Wassily Kandinsky drawing on western innovations, but adding their own intensely Russian character to their work. The 1912 publication of 'A slap in the face of public taste' marked a turning point in the radicalisation of Russian culture, with its authors proclaiming that 'we alone are the face of our Time. Through us the horn of time blows in the art of the word'. Drawing on Italian Futurism, Russian artists set out to scandalise Russian society, staging the opera *Victory over the sun* with its discordant music and strange lyrics in

Vladimir Maiakovskii in 1924.

Alexander Rodchenko, 'Kino Glaz', 1924.



1913 and embracing abstract art with a fierce intensity.[2] In 1915 Kazimir Malevich – who, when the First World War broke out, had produced patriotic cards and posters in support of the war effort in the style of traditional Russian woodcuts – painted *Black Square*, one of the defining pieces of art of the twentieth century. *Black Square* represented the triumph of abstraction and subverted Russia's accepted artistic and cultural conventions. When the painting was displayed at an exhibition in late 1915, it was hung in the place traditionally reserved for the icon in a Russian home, scandalising conservative society and suggesting the significance which Russia's avant-garde ascribed to their art.

Russian culture was experiencing its own revolution well before the political upheavals of 1917 that drove Nicholas II from the throne and later installed Lenin and the Bolsheviks in power.[3] The October revolution, however, transformed the fortunes of radical writers and artists. Only a few of them had any direct affiliation with the Bolshevik party before October 1917, but the opportunities presented by the overthrow of the old political and social order and its replacement by a regime which promised real revolution resonated with the Russian avant-garde. Bolshevik aspirations to reshape Russian society chimed with the avant-garde's aim of breaking the stranglehold of traditional cultural forms and institutions and the two sets of revolutionaries discovered a common cause after October 1917. This convergence of political and artistic revolution was unplanned and fortuitous, but it provided the Russian avant-garde with an entirely unexpected opportunity to disseminate their cultural ideas to the entire population of the new Bolshevik state.

The Bolsheviks saw their seizure of political power as only representing a means to an end: Lenin and his comrades were intent on creating the world's first socialist state and society. Russia, however, was very far from fitting the Marxist model that predicated the success of socialism on the existence of a large working class and a developed capitalist economy. Instead, the Bolsheviks found themselves at the helm of a country where more than 80% of the population lived on the land and where industrialisation had really only taken hold in Russia during the 1890s. The majority of the population could not read or write while the Orthodox Church exercised considerable influence over Russians, especially in the countryside. Lenin's new regime therefore needed to devise methods to persuade a population that was unlikely to have a natural sympathy with the ideals of the Bolshevik party to adopt the values that the new regime represented. The main priority for the new government was to teach the population to read and write for, as Lenin had written, 'Without literacy there can be no politics, there can only be rumours, gossip and prejudice'.[4] This was only one element in the Bolshevik programme to inculcate a new set of attitudes and values into the Russian population, and art in its widest sense was enlisted to contribute to the process. The literacy campaigns of the 1920s were aimed not just at children and young people but, perhaps more importantly, at adults. Artists played a significant role in producing materials to encourage literacy and education more broadly, with El Lissitzky utilising Soviet symbolic devices as an integral part of his 1928 'The four fundamental ways of arithmetic', intended to educate children in mathematics while using Bolshevik symbolism as context.[5]

There was genuine enthusiasm from radical artists for the revolutionary regime. 'Proletarians of the paintbrush' was how both Wassily Kandinsky and Alexander Rodchenko described themselves, while the critic Abram Efros wrote that 'Futurism is the artistic form of Communism. A Communist in art can't *not* be a Futurist'.[6] Plans were developed soon after the October revolution to set up more than 60 new museums across the Soviet state to introduce new cultural forms to the population. Some of these new institutions were entitled 'Museums of Artistic Culture' and were intended to focus on providing artistic education, and more than two million rubles was allocated for the purchase of avant-garde works to display in the new museums. While this traditional method of presenting art was an important part of Bolshevik cultural policy, radical artists could be much more adventurous in the way in which they incorporated

their work into the new environment of the Soviet state. Changing the physical environment of Russia's towns and cities was an important way in which novel ideas about art and buildings could be introduced to the wider population. In 1919, Vladimir Tatlin designed a 400m-high metal latticework tower that would stand in the centre of Petrograd as a 'Monument to the Third International', the organisation devoted to promoting communism across the globe.[7] Tatlin's tower was never built, but a wide variety of other buildings were constructed by radical architects in Soviet cities. Ordinary apartment buildings, such as Ginzburg's 1930 Narkomfin building in Moscow, utilised modern construction methods utilising concrete and glass, but they were also intended to reshape the everyday experience of ordinary people and demonstrate the virtues of the collectivism that the Bolsheviks espoused by including communal dining, laundry and childcare as an integral element of the building.

The design of everyday objects was an important part of the work of radical artists as they contributed to the Bolshevik plan to construct a socialist society. The new regime discovered that there were thousands of blank ceramic plates in the storehouses of the former Imperial Porcelain Factory and a group of talented avant-garde artists including Sergei Chekhonin and Natalia Danko decorated the plates with a range of Soviet symbols. This was the first occasion on which the hammer and sickle – to become one of the central motifs of the Soviet Union – was utilised. In the very difficult circumstances of revolutionary turmoil and civil war, ordinary Soviet citizens were unable to afford to buy the newly-decorated plates but, seeing them on display in Petrograd, they appeared to Danko's sister to be 'a message from a beautiful future'.[8] There were few aspects of Soviet life in the 1920s that were untouched by the influence of radical artists: propaganda posters, theatre set and costume designs, book covers and buildings all bore the stamp of the avant-garde.

The diversity of artistic expression in the first decade of Soviet power mirrored the debates over the political direction of the new regime. Lenin's death in 1924, however, heralded the onset of a much more repressive and unforgiving atmosphere across Soviet life. Stalin's rise to power at the end of the 1920s stifled open expression in every area of life, and art and culture suffered alongside the rest. Writers found that their work was subject to severe censorship, while radical artists had to abandon avant-garde forms if they wanted to continue exhibiting. Socialist Realism became the sole officially-approved style of artistic expression as the dull hand of Stalinism constrained innovative cultural forms. The changed atmosphere disillusioned many Soviet artists: Tatlin retreated into a conventional style, working on theatre design and painting still lifes, but for some the pressure was too great to bear. Maiakovskii committed suicide in 1930, while many writers and cultural figures perished during the terror of the following decade. Malevich's paintings were taken out of public view and put into storage, emerging only half a century later as the Soviet Union relaxed its grip on cultural matters. Avant-garde art remained, however, a very visible element of Soviet life. Modernist apartment buildings dotted Soviet cities, while the Soviet Union's most revered public building – the mausoleum housing Lenin's body on Red Square in Moscow – remained one of the greatest examples of constructivist architecture anywhere in the world. The vibrant artistic experiments of the early years of Soviet power continued to form part of the landscape and heritage of the USSR.

Vladimir Tatlin, 'Monument to the Third International', 1919.

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