

# **Soviet Propaganda**

How do propaganda and art intertwine; the power of art  
as a political tool

Research question: To what extent was art used as a political tool  
and how did it succeed in Soviet Russia?

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Abstract : This thesis delves into the intricate relationship between art and propaganda in Soviet Russia. Placing art in her historical context. This thesis analyzes the key art movements within Russian Avant-Garde; Russian Futurism and Constructivism, as well as prominent propaganda Figures like Vladimir Mayakovsky and Gustav Klutsis. By examining the use of art as a political tool by Soviet leaders, the study sheds light on how propaganda was employed to manipulate and persuade the masses, and ultimately how powerful art can be. Through a detailed examination of artworks and propaganda materials, the thesis offers new insights into the role of art in shaping political ideologies.

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# Introduction

Propaganda is a word that suffers from getting misunderstood as negative due to its uses throughout history. (Philip M. Taylor, 5)(Mark Crispin Miller, 7) (Edward Bernays,7,33) The truth is, that propaganda can serve as an evil, but that depends on the person behind the aim and message. Propaganda is a word that defines an action, which is to persuade through any medium. What I find interesting is where propaganda and art meet.

It is the technique of manipulating events or words into “tricking” masses into making the ‘right choice’, it plays a part in creating a totalitarian state. Each leader that uses propaganda believes in his/her intentions, therefore we cannot always classify it as negative. The negative connotation attached has been developed due to success stories throughout history. The word is of Latin origin and was used in biology referring to the reproduction of plants. Pope Gregory XIII created a congregation to spread the Christian belief, called the “Propaganda Fide”, the spread of belief. (Erwin W. Fellows) Propaganda is therefore the spread of one’s beliefs often through manipulation.

Soviet Propaganda is a unique case study as it is where art and propaganda become one. Not only are they closely intertwined, but propaganda even stemmed out of two art movements; Futurism and Constructivism. The combination of the political instability of Russia and that artists used their mediums to spread ideology set the foundation of Soviet propaganda. The question that comes to mind is when is art just art with a message and when is art propaganda? Constructivism closed the gap between art and propaganda as it changed the role of the artist as independent to working for the greater good. Lenin stated that in a Communist Russia, art would no longer be for the elite which he said “the upper ten thousand suffering from boredom and obesity”, but for the millions of laboring working people, “the flower of the country, its strength, and its future”.(Tolstoy & Chertkov, 1972, p. 104) (Pisch, 2016) This shows two main factors of the revolution, one being Lenin his own appreciation for art and the ability it has to reach the masses. Secondly, it shows the part of the population the Bolsheviks stand for, the proletariat worker. It is one of the most influential and successful propaganda regimes. Creating the image and branding we now associate with communism.

Among the endless choices of influential artists within the case study of Soviet Russia, I chose the two artists Vladimir Mayakovsky and Gustav Klutsis. While a broader selection of artists would enrich this research we are limited by the specifications of the task such as word count, therefore this research goes into depth on two artists instead of lightly touching upon more. Gustav Klutsis and Vladimir Mayakovsky represent two different art movements and significant periods within Soviet Propaganda. Vladimir Mayakovsky was a known artist within Russian Futurism and the founder of ROSTA windows which became a stepping stone for visual propaganda. He was most active before and at the beginning of the Bolshevik rule. He died in 1930 which is when Gustav Klutsis was most active in creating propaganda. Gustav Klutsis was known for Constructivist art and one of the first to use photo-montage. He was one of the most loyal Soviet propaganda artists.

As Soviet propaganda is so intertwined with art, it is a suitable case study for the research question **to what extent was art used as a political tool and how did it succeed in Soviet Russia?** I will attempt to answer this research question by firstly setting the historical context to then look at the two art movements Russian Futurism and Constructivism. Then place the art movements in the socio-political context. This leads to the introduction of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Gustav Klutsis and the analysis of their works of art. By analyzing primary sources of art that represent the art movements, it is a way to prove how the historical context is intertwined with art. The propaganda posters will be examined as art pieces and placed in their social, political, and historical contexts to connect the three domains; art movement, history, and artist. A sub-question this research paper will attempt to answer is; **to what extent is Soviet propaganda the artist his/her own ideology?** Soviet propaganda is a topic well researched, while never done by comparing Vladimir Mayakovsky and

Gustav Klutssis and placing them in their artistic movement and socio-political context. This makes this thesis provide new insights on the topic of Soviet propaganda.

To provide a more in depth research I have chosen sources which give access to Russian primary sources translated to English. The books "Words in Revolution" and "Gustav Klutssis and Valentina Kulagina" both provide English translations of original Russian sources. Words of Revolution by Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle includes Russian Futurist manifestos and scripts of performances by Myakovsky. Gustav Klutssis and Valentina Kulagina by Margarita Tupitsyn includes Diary entries from Kulagina, Klutssis his wife. Having access to these texts provides a much more genuine understanding of the socio-political context both artists lived and worked in. The diary entries show a very personal side to Klutssis and Kulaginas life in Russia, as dairies are written for no-one to read meaning it is often an unedited raw record of events. Especially in Soviet Russia, this shows an unfiltered side to working as a propaganda artist. This helps in gaining insight to the extent of monitoring there was within propaganda.

The limitations with both these sources is what gets lost with translation. This is especially significant in the poetry and performance citations of Vladimir Mayakovsky. As one of the strengths and stylistic devices within Russian Futurism is the unconventional use of words by extracting them from their original meaning, use and connotation. This is something that is hard to achieve in a translation, therefore I chose to put the Russian words in a translator to look at the multiple options there were for one word. Each option would change the sentence and its meaning showing the limitations of translation. Manifestos and performance pieces use very specific language to persuade, therefore very direct, cryptic and over exaggerated. The language use in the diary entries are informal and sometimes include emotions such as anger or irritation. These are interesting elements to keep in mind when using them as sources. Both these primary sources have a bias as they are subjective to the writers opinion.

## Historical Context

Near the end of WWI, Russia was in turmoil. The peasants wanted land, everyone wanted to leave the war, and living conditions were harsh because most of the resources went to the army. In 1905 the tragic event known as "Bloody Sunday" happened when the Tsar's troops fired on the petitioners of a peaceful march. This became a turning point in the Tsar's rule, as he was no longer seen as the protector of the people by the Russian population. The Russian people were losing hope in the Tsar long before the First World War, but the war was the last straw. During World War I Russia was fighting against the Germans as they were part of the Allies. Russia was sending all its resources to the war front while the people in Russia were dying of starvation and bad living conditions. The combination of the many casualties in the war and the horrible living conditions in Russia made people desperate for change. When people are desperate they tend to seek hope in extreme political parties. Exactly why support grew for the Bolsheviks. Germany played a role in helping the Bolsheviks gain power as it would work in their favor. They knew that the Bolsheviks were the Tsar's biggest threat and that if the Tsar lost power to the Bolsheviks, they would step out of the war as it was one of the main promises that made them gain support. Lenin was in exile due to the threat he imposed on the Tsar. The Germans played their part in helping the Bolsheviks gain power by smuggling him back to Russia through Germany. This is when Lenin spoke the three words every Russian wanted to hear; "Peace! Bread! Land!" (Philip M. Taylor, 199). These words were the demands the peasants, the proletariat, and the armed forces wanted to hear. The people never got an explanation on how these promises were going to be achieved, the standard propaganda techniques: half-truths and card stacking. (Philip M. Taylor)

Though those words helped get them into power, it was the propaganda during the Civil War that was needed to remain in power. The Civil War created a new form of visual communication. The civil war began in November 1917 after the October Revolution (October in the Russian calendar). It was the Reds against the Whites. The Red army was the Bolsheviks and the Whites were the Tsarist supporters and the Western helping troops. The Western European countries wanted to prevent the

spread of Communism knowing the influence Russia has over the Balkan states and a significant portion of the Eastern countries bordering them. There have been multiple discussions on which factor played the biggest role in the Bolsheviks' victory; One factor was how the Bolsheviks made it seem as if the Western countries helping was because the White army had a lack of nationalism and not enough strength to lead themselves, meaning they could never lead a country. Another factor was that the White army didn't have a common ideology causing a lack of unity. They all had different ideas about what they wanted Russia to become, which was the same among the soldiers. The only common goal was that they didn't want the Bolsheviks to lead Russia. The lack of unity, therefore, resulted in a lack of trust. The Bolsheviks' biggest resistance wasn't the white army, but it was an ideological war between Communism and Capitalism.

The Bolsheviks put propaganda in every aspect of living. Education became compulsory, which meant they were in control of what was taught. Russia became a Totalitarian state. The victory of the civil war depended on one major factor who the peasants supported, them forming 80% of the population (Chenoweth, 2020). The problem was that the majority of the peasants in Russia were illiterate, this became an obstacle that transformed propaganda into visual communication.

## **Russian Futurism 1910 - 1920**

To be able to analyze propaganda as a form of art we have to identify the art movements that influenced Russia before and during the historical context. Russian Futurism is the first artistic movement of the Russian Avant-Garde period. Russian Futurism had four main branches; Cubo, Ego, Mezzanine, and Centrifuge which all believed they were the original and "correct" version. This thesis will focus on Cubo Futurism which was also the most influential in the role of art in communism and, Vladimir Mayakovsky was one of the leading poets and artists in this movement. Cubo Futurism started in 1910 and became publicly known in 1912 when their manifest "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" was published. Cubo Futurism had a main focus on poetry and literature, specifically challenging words and their original meaning. Freeing the written word from traditional limitations created by society. Such as, the connotations of words, the biases attached to them, and meanings developed through common use. (Rowell, 2020) Mayakovsky used these traditional limitations to create poetry where he would combine words in an unconventional way to create a new form of expression (Lawton & Eagle, 2005, pp. 11–20).

They wanted to challenge the current art world by contradicting all rational ways of interpreting art. It was radical and very direct which led to a certain resentment of the movement. This resentment was used by the Cubo futurists and transformed into curiosity. Hosting events where their manifestos and poetry would be performed in absurd costumes or unconventional ways. These events became extremely popular among the people who initially critiqued them as they had a sense of scandal and entertainment. It almost became a guilty pleasure. The futurists were exciting to watch as they were openly contradicting all art that already existed. This is where the name "a slap in the face of public taste" came from. Literally meaning slapping the public who are attending the Cubo futurist events in the face. A poetic play on words, perfectly embodying the Cubo futurist movement. A short poem showing how they used words to have a double meaning and intertwined it with another medium of art; performance (Lawton & Eagle, 2005, pp. 11–20) (Stephan, 1981).

The source *Words in Revolution* a book about Russian Futurism by Lawton and Eagle is a significant source for this art movement as it was one of the first publications where the manifestos were translated from Russian to English. Anna Lawton got her PhD in Russian Literature and her nationality is Italian making her interest and research within the domain of Futurism quite extensive. Proven by the multiple publications about the subject. She manages to compare Italian Futurism to Russian Futurism where once again within the same movement conflicts arise as which is the "correct" version. Herbert Eagle's research and teaching focuses on cinema and literature during Russian Communism. Both authors have devoted their research and teaching to Russian literature, where this

source is a fraction of this expertise. By having fragments of direct translations of the manifestos we as a reader get an insight on the time period and the unrest in which this movement grew. Fragments from the manifestos have direct and persuasive language as they attempt to persuade the public. While the language in the introduction by Anna Lawton differs as she places the manifestos in their socio-political context, and therefore the text is academic and analytical.

The biggest difference between the Futurism of the West that originated from Italy and Russian Futurism is that Russian Futurism did not reject the past. The largest similarity is praising technology and urbanism for the future, something all Futurists embodied worldwide. Futurism worldwide, simply put wanted to change radically from the existing ways. A movement to show their discontent in both Russia and Italy. Russian Futurism contradicted traditional beauty and the rational way of thinking, but without neglecting the past instead they critiqued it. They even had hints of the past by using archaisms. They used symbols and characters from Russian Folk stories such as water nymphs and bogeymen. This is a technique eventually also adopted in propaganda as the Russian people were known to be receptive to traditional folk figures and religious symbols.

Russian Futurism led to the making of the Left Front of the Arts (LEF) which was a publication meant to increase the role of art in communism. The founders and creators of LEF were artists, playwrights, filmmakers, and poets including Vladimir Mayakovsky who was the head editor. Their philosophy was to review and analyze leftist art. Like communism, art had to abandon individualism and promote industry and technology. These aspects mentioned above coincide with the manifesto of Constructivism (Stephan, 1981).

## **Constructivism 1915 - 1935**

Constructivism began in the early 1920s, after the Russian Revolution when the Bolsheviks gained power. Constructivism stemmed from Russian Futurism but further evolved to work as a political art movement for communism. One major difference is the role of the artist. The artist became a catalyst for social change, therefore always working together towards the same ideology. They fell under the title of “workers” which is what the Bolsheviks party stands for, the proletariat worker (Rowell, 2020) (Hauptman & Museum of Modern Art, 2021) and Museum of Modern Art). A constructor of art. The photomontage is a literal example of constructing art, as you take images apart to construct an entirely new composition that tells a new narrative (Gough, 2007). The artist became an engineer of images. Constructivism is in a sense a direct representation of communism on a smaller scale. A collective doing their part in the system working for the same ideology.

In this historical context, these artists wanted to work for the communist ideology. People in Russia wanted a revolution and change. This already started with Russian Futurism and only proved to increase with Constructivism. When the Bolsheviks secured their power these artists were more than willing to produce propaganda for the cause. This gives insight into the extent of hope communism initially gave.

Constructivism has a more visual identity than Futurism. Constructivism can be recognized by the use of geometric shapes, lines, and primary colors. They rejected representational art and realism. The movement celebrated industry, technology and the worker meaning materials such as metal and glass would commonly be used in sculpture pieces. Another way they embraced technology is by creating pieces with photography and pieces that could easily be mass-produced to achieve its purpose of spreading ideology. Every aspect of Constructivism has the communist identity. Not only the aesthetics that embrace the working class and industry, but also the methodology aligns with the communist ideology. (Rowell, 2020) (Hauptman & Museum of Modern Art, 2021) and Museum of Modern Art)

# Vladimir Mayakovsky

Vladimir Mayakovsky was a leading artist for the communist revolution. An interesting question that comes to mind when researching art during Soviet Russia is whether the political message behind the art is also the artist's own ideology. Mayakovsky started with poetry to share his ideology. Writing poetry under the Russian Futurist art movement. His works before 1917 talk of a grim present and dark reality. With common themes of oppression, sickness, death, and all with a tone of melancholy. (Steinberg, 2018) Mayakovsky was known for using conventional words in unconventional ways which when looking at the translated poems is visible but some aspects have to be lost in translation. Mayakovsky and the futurist movement wanted to disrupt Tsarist Russia. He was in conflict with the present. The whole futurist movement was, they wanted change (Birnholtz & Williams, 1978).

"lie down bright in linen clothing on the soft bed of the real shit and quietly kiss the knees of the track as the wheel of the locomotive hugs my neck"

- Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy

The quote above is from his play made for a futurist theatrical event in St. Petersburg. It is about a poet who walks along the streets of a very dark and scary place, with crippled men and women. This is where the quote comes from because at that very moment, the poet thinks about "lying down" on the train tracks. Futurist performances are meant to shock the audience. Mayakovsky succeeds in doing so in his play. His whole play is meant to show how horrible the current reality is they live in, enough to make a poet think such horrible thoughts. The play takes a turn and the poet concludes that instead of dying he must start a revolution to change this "dark reality". This translated sentence is a perfect example of how some aspects get lost in translation. The words "real" and "shit" can be interpreted in multiple ways, real could even be wrongfully translated and meant to be present. (Lawton & Eagle, 2005, pp. 11–20) (Steinberg, 2018) (Birnholtz & Williams, 1978) Mayakovsky plays with the reader and his interpretations by almost using euphemisms and lovely words to explain such a brutal event. The words "bright in linen" and "soft bed" make you read the text twice as they contradict the action he is describing. This is a perfect example of using words in unconventional ways to shock the public. This is one of the translations in the book *Words in Revolution* which is significant in my research and understanding of Mayakovsky his own ideology, necessary in answering the sub question. He started with poetry where his ideologies are pretty clear, this shows his support for the communist party.

The literature in favor of the communists published during the revolution had a very small audience as the majority of Russia was illiterate meaning there was a need for adaptation. The Bolsheviks had Vladimir Mayakovsky join the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA) in 1919 which was the organization in charge of all propaganda during 1918-21. Before the revolution was in sight, Newspapers were the Bolsheviks' first form of Propaganda. They circulated underground newspapers such as the *Izvestia*. (Philip M. Taylor, 199) The problem with this method of spreading ideology, was that it only reached the educated with an interest in Communism which were often already supporters. The Bolsheviks had two main obstacles for making propaganda, one being Russia suffered from a paper shortage and the second being high illiteracy rates. (Philip M. Taylor, 200) Vladimir Mayakovsky and Mikhail Cheremnykh created a new concept, the first 'ROSTA windows' style posters. 'ROSTA Windows' was a concept that would eliminate challenges that occurred with the usual propaganda applied in Russia.

They created wall newspapers that would be hung in shop windows throughout the busiest places. Hence the name. It is a combination of a poster, instruction, and news outlet that is majority visual. The ROSTA artists developed icons recognized as symbols that related blacksmiths with industry, sunshine with prosperity, and other Figures known by the majority of the population due to the biblical connection. This is a characteristic we can relate to Russian Futurism where folk Figures

were referred to in poetry. This is specifically known as the use of Lubok, which were traditional Russian prints that used symbols from folk stories and religion to represent emotions or values. Lubok, started as a Chinese form of storytelling that came to Europe in the 17th Century. When this print reached Russia, the peasants started learning the techniques to create their own to sell in the markets.(Pigareva, n.d.)(Pisch, 2016) The use of Lubok became a breakthrough in propaganda to reach the majority of the Russian population. It was already a form of communicating stories between the peasants meaning the icons derived from Lubok would be understood. A technique dedicated to making the illiterate understand the message. ROSTA windows in combination with Lubok was problem solving at its best.



Figure 1. Vladimir Mayakovsky (1921). *Sowing Campaign: Let's fulfil the decree!* ROSTA Window series #42. [Hand-cut stencils with watercolour pigment] David Winton Bell Gallery

The above example (Figure 1 a ROSTA poster from their later years) by Vladimir Mayakovsky “Let’s Fulfil the Decree” shows the combination of art, poetry, and propaganda. The ROSTA images speak for themselves but if the viewer can read you also have a Mayakovsky poem. Mayakovsky wrote the majority of the slogans attached to the ROSTA visuals, this was the perfect opportunity to combine his poetry with images and make it legible for everyone. In this short poem, Mayakovsky is strategic in using “I” as if the reader is the one saying it which means every person feels addressed.

- “1. Everyone fulfilled the Soviet plan”
- “2. I wasted no time and worked with dedication”
- “3. For this I was immediately rewarded”
- “4. With a prize and a decoration!”

This ROSTA window was made with hand-cut stencils and watercolor pigments which was the common approach as it made it possible to make multiple close to identical posters. The posters hero the color red as it is the color of Communism and the Bolsheviks. The Figure represents the role model the Bolsheviks encourage on the audience, hence the color red. It is a way to recognize that this poster belongs to the Bolsheviks. The first frame shows a rich grain field to encourage sowing and agriculture. The second shows a nice home and a strong role model with the statement “I wasted no time and worked with dedication” which attaches the image of having a lovely home with working hard. On the sleeve of the third frame it states the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic which is Russia under Bolshevik rule in combination with the words “for this I was immediately rewarded” which directly attaches reward to the Bolsheviks. The last frame is a summary of “hard work pays off” as we once again see the role model at the end of his hard work finally able to have some rest indicated by the pillow and blanket in the bottom left corner. It is interesting how the text attached to the last frame is different from the objects chosen to depict these words. “Prize” and “decoration” are depicted by the pillow and blanket which might say something about the worth of rest in their context. Another reason could be to show that the prize means more than just material things. ROSTA was the first stage of branding for the communists, as it was the first time visual representation was used to reach the public.



"1. Those are the weapons our factories used to produce"  
 "2. Now we have a new kind of weapon to use"  
 "3. For Spring's arrival we must prepare"  
 "4. Get the plough and harrow in full repair"  
 "5. Worker! A new front has opened"  
 "6. Quickly, go fix the farming equipment!"

Figure 2. Vladimir Mayakovsky & Mikjail Cherenmykh (1921).  
*All for Farming Equipment Repair Week! ROSTA Window series #81*  
 [Hand-cut stencils with watercolour pigment] David Winton Bell Gallery

This is a ROSTA window series with Mikjail Cherenmykh who was the co-founder of the ROSTA Windows. These visuals are more detailed than the earlier series which is probably an addition of Cherenmykh who was more of an artist than a poet. This series is addressed more to the workers than the peasants in the actions portrayed. It encourages the workers to repair farming tools for the peasants. The addition of the second frame to put the Bolshevik stamp all over this propaganda is strategic in forcing their brand. Another interesting characteristic is that the worker "role model" in the last frame is dressed in red and strong, very similar to the previous ROSTA window while the peasant in frame three looks completely different. The peasant is meant to look hopeless to represent the peasant before the Bolsheviks ruling, the one using traditional farming equipment. That is why the hero in this series is the worker who will help the "hopeless peasant". ROSTA windows work almost like comics or storyboards which make it so universally legible. Even before looking at the English translations you get a sense of what they mean.

# Gustav Klutssis

Gustav Klutssis was a Bolshevik supporter from the beginning as he also joined the storming of the Winter Palace in 1917, directly driving the revolution. He studied at the VKHUTEMAS (Higher Art and Technical Studios) in Moscow, which was a specialized institution that would educate and create masters in industry, film, and art to eventually work for the greater good of Russia. Under the control of Lenin, this was an art and technical school that taught a few of the most influential Constructivist artists. He eventually also became a teacher at VKHUTEMAS. (MOMA n.d) (Alex. Oushakine, 2019) It was in itself a propaganda technique to make a prestigious school that created artists for communism. It is commonly compared to BAUHAUS in Germany as they both believe in getting taught by the masters of that specific craft. It worked by starting as an apprentice and then becoming a master to then teach the next apprentice. Creating a cycle of learning from each other. Klutssis was closely taught by Kazimir Malevich who was known for the art movement Suprematism. Influences of Suprematism can be seen in some of Gustav Klutssis' work which will be shown in the case studies. Gustav Klutssis became one of the main artists for propaganda and one of the earliest to incorporate photo-montage. (Rowell, 2020) (Tupitsyn, 2004) (Ratanova, 2016) Klutssis wrote an anonymous essay for the LEF journal in 1924 titled "Illustration and photo-montage," which shows his early use and the power of the tool. He wrote;

"By photo-montage, we mean the exploitation of photography as a visual medium. The combination of isolated photographs is to be substituted for the composition of graphic images. The rationale for this substitution is based on the fact that photography is the exact retention of visible facts and not their illustration. For the viewer, this precision and documentary fidelity endow the photograph with such a force of persuasion that no type of graphic representation can ever equal it."

- Gustav Klutssis Essay in LEF 1924

This shows how aware artists, specifically Klutssis, were of the power of their art. They wanted to achieve the power of persuasion. He states photographs are associated with facts, meaning if artists use photographs instead of drawing or other mediums it is easier to persuade the audience that, that is the "truth". (Rowell, 2020)(Tupitsyn, 2004) Photographs give a sense of reliability as it's a relatively direct representation of what happened. In photo-montage, it is a fragmented reality as photo "montages" are taken out of their original context and placed in a new one creating a new reality. (Ratanova, 2016) This is similar to what the Cubo Futurists wanted to achieve with words. A perfect tool for the use of propaganda. Photo-montage was also great for reproduction, it was a way to persuade the masses. The technique was opposite to "fine art" and therefore the perfect representation of the revolution. (Pisch, 2016) Just like Russian Futurism, Constructivism contradicted the art from the past (Gough, 2007). These two art movements reflect the social-political context in Russia. The people wanted change in most aspects of living which also led to change in and through art.

This direct translation is from the book Gustav Klutssis and Valentina Kulagina by Margarita Tupitsyn, who is a well known Russian exhibition curator. This book is extremely significant as it decreases the limitation of language I as a researcher have. Tupitsyn has translated articles from the LEF publication and diary entries from Valentina Kulagina, Gustav Klutssis his wife. The diary entries provide a personal insight in Gustav Klutssis his life. It is even more significant due to the fact Kulagina and Klutssis were also partners in art and propaganda. She is often the subject of his photography.



Figure 3. Gustav Klutsis (1924).  
*Oppressed Peoples of the Whole World, For Lenin*, [Photo montage poster] Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga



Figure 4. Gustav Klutsis (1927).  
*Lenin and Socialist Reconstruction*, [Photo montage poster] Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga

Figure 3 is one of the earlier works by Gustav Klutsis and was an ode to Lenin published after his death. This was a collection of sixteen letterpress photo-montage prints, one by Aleksandr Rodchenko, ten by Gustav Klutsis, and five by Sergey Senkin. The one above is the second in the collection and made by Klutsis. (Rowell, 2020) This is an early example of photo-montage where the subjects of the photographs are removed from their context. In this case, Lenin is situated speaking to the masses. The high contrast with a minimal color palette of red, black, and white makes the focal point the abstract loudspeaker. This piece shows influences of Suprematism through the composition of shapes that together create an abstract loudspeaker. The words coming out of the abstract loudspeaker translate to be “oppressed, people of the whole world, under the banner of the communist international, overthrow, imperialism”. This shows the international ambitions, supported by the collage of people who form the audience listening to Lenin his words. Most of the collage parts that make up the audience are blurred or face their backs to the viewer and are in recognizable working clothes. The one character in the audience that stands out is the man with a turban and a cigarette who is the same size as Lenin and represents the international aspect of the poster. An exaggerated representation of “worldwide” support. The turban is chosen as he is obviously not from Russia and easily recognized as a foreigner. Figure 4 is another one of his earlier works where the focus is on industry. He has Lenin positioned on a high part of the factory looking over all his fellow workers. The workers are pictured in collages of different masses. (Tupitsyn, 2004)

Gustav Klutsis his earlier works have an identity of Constructivism, with industry, photo-montage, and the common goal of spreading communist ideology. A significant characteristic of propaganda where Lenin is the role model is that he is always recognizable as a normal man. He is shown as a role model but a modest one, who leads the revolution in a normal suit without extra dramatic features which we do see in later Stalinist propaganda. This could be because the communism ideology has everyone as equal if you work hard and play your part in society, that could be the reason it would be out of place to make Lenin look like a god-like Figure. Once again both these earlier works achieve the branding of communism by using the color red and images of industry.

Klutsis tends to work with diagonals with Figure 3 where he leads the viewer's eye from the bottom left corner to the top right corner and Figure 4 Where he leads the viewer's eye from the bottom right corner to the top left. The photo-montage is setting the stage and creating a still-life performance that the viewers can imagine. (Gough, 2009)(Tupitsyn, 2004) This almost creates an interactive process between the poster and viewer as they can use their creativity to image the scene.

Gustav Klutsis separated himself from most photo-montage artists by using his own photography in combination with photographs from public archives. His passion lay both in art and in photography. (Tupitsyn, 2004) He used techniques such as double exposure, photo-grams, and superimposition to manipulate the image to create compositions that painted the new “truths”. (Ratanova, 2016) These techniques were unique to Soviet Constructivism. He would often go on excursions throughout the city to collect photographs from streets to people which would then eventually set his scene on the poster. He also went to events where Lenin spoke and took photographs. He also had friends pose in costumes to represent the characters of the revolution such as the proletariat worker. He sometimes would pose himself and create a self-portrait as seen in Figure 5. Though when published the character of Klutsis or other friends would sometimes be taken out, though it is not sure by whom, it could have been by officials or by Klutsis himself to protect his own photographs. If it were Klutsis himself that removed the subject from the poster it could have been to protect his identity or to make his photographs untraceable. It could also indicate how publications were already monitored in the earlier years of Stalin. Which in the mid-1930s became a turbulent political context where freedom of expression and speech was even more closely monitored. An example is Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2 where a worker's face is cut out on the left of Lenin.



Figure 5. *Unknown photographer, (ca. 1930). Gustav Klutsis and friend Aleksei Kruchenykh, [photograph]* From Book Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina



Figure 6.1 *Gustav Klutsis, (1927). Millions of Workers enter Socialist Competition, [photo-montage poster]* From Book Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina



Figure 6.2 *Gustav Klutsis, (1927). Millions of Workers enter Socialist Competition, With censorship cut in the bottom [photo-montage poster]* From Book Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina

This later work by Gustav Klutsis is a perfect example of the use of superimposition to manipulate the proportions of the proletariat worker. By taking multiple images of the subject from different angles, Klutsis could take aspects of different images to collage together and create the same subject but with different proportions. Exaggerating the arm to become the focus point and creating a sense of depth as if the arm reaches the foreground. It also shows Klutsis his support for internationalization with the photo-montage of the masses showing different cultures. The different cultures are always exaggerated with different ethnicities. The three ethnicities represent the internationalization of communism worldwide.



Figure 7. Gustav Klutsis (1931).  
*The USSR is the Stakhanovite brigade of the world's proletariat.* [Photo-montage poster & lithograph]  
 David Winton Bell Gallery

After Lenin died he created more works where the worker became the focal point, until 1929 when he turned back to images of Lenin. This could be argued to have been a subtle protest towards Stalin or a loyal adoration towards Lenin or even both, there are our sources that argue both sides. In December 1929 Stalin's 50th birthday would be celebrated nationwide. He wanted to take this as the opportunity to use propaganda and announce himself as "the Great leader and organizer of the October Revolution, the creator of the Red Army, and the leader of the world proletariat". These claims that Stalin wanted to get credit for, most likely went against Gustav Klutsis' principles. Stalin wanted to be the only leader that represented Communist Russia. Klutsis had a personal bond and loyalty towards Lenin. They both lost their brother due to them being sent to exile under Tsarist Russia which is where Klutsis his disapproval of the monarchy started and his loyalty towards the communists stems from. This is proven by his own participation in the revolution when storming the Winter Palace. His participation also means he knew the actual truth that Lenin and Trotsky were the leaders of the October Revolution. The increase in propaganda with Lenin as a subject is also a way to immortalize him as the leader of the Russian Revolution and the start of Communist Russia. After Lenin's death his body was preserved and embalmed which is now still a landmark in Moscow and another way to immortalize him. By having a Mausoleum for Lenin people will always have a place of worship for communism under Lenin. (Jenkins)

Under the banner of Lenin for Socialist Construction is a poster that has two versions that give an insight into Gustav Klutsis, his own voice and opinion. By analyzing the two versions alongside each other we can extract different interpretations of the artist's voice and historical context. Under the Banner of Lenin for socialist construction is the edited version. In other words, the version that tells a narrative in favor of Stalin. (Tupitsyn, 2004) This is meant to tell the narrative that after Lenin died, a new leader was needed and this poster shows that Stalin was his worthy successor. The technique

Klutsis uses a more subtle version of his cut-and-paste method making seamless transitions. Stalin being a worthy leader is shown by making their heads the same size representing their equality. By placing him so close behind Lenin could imply that he is the obvious choice as successor literally being the next in line. Another aspect that supports this is that their heads are overlapping to make them share one eye. Almost as if they are merging into one person, one leader. Stalin behind Lenin suggests he will continue realizing Lenin's vision. The slogan attached to the piece does show that Lenin remains the original father of communist Russia. Under the banner of Lenin for Socialist Construction entails that Stalin would work as the new leader on the foundation of Lenin. The slogan aligns with Klutsis' version of the revolution.



Figure 8.1 Gustav Klutsis (1930).  
Under the Banner of Lenin - Socialist Construction.  
[Photo montage poster & lithograph]  
Modern Museum of Art



Figure 8.2 Gustav Klutsis (1929-30).  
Plan of the Socialist Offensive.  
[Gelatin silver print]  
The MET Museum

The original version "Plan of the Socialist Offensive" has a double agenda. He chose to exhibit the original version as a political message. The word "offensive" has a double meaning in the slogan, he is suggesting that Stalin's "Five Year Plan" contradicts Lenin's plans of building a socialist society. The slight changes in composition and opacity of the overlap of the faces give a completely different narrative. Stalin's head is positioned behind Lenin, this time suggesting he is in Lenin's shadow. A direct criticism from Klutsis of Stalin for trying to change the October Revolution narrative by keeping Stalin in Lenin's shadow. Both narratives can co-exist due to the two versions of the propaganda poster. The protest narrative shows Klutsis his loyalty for Lenin, but most importantly shows Klutsis would not produce propaganda he does not agree with. (Tupitsyn, 2004) This subtle protest by Gustav Klutsis and his realization of how to persuade the masses made Stalin temporarily change his propaganda to instead of competing with Lenin the leader of the revolution he would have to make himself join the workers. This is when the "The Reality of our Program - Its Real People" Figure 9 was created (Pisch, 2016) (Ratanova, 2016).

Once again we see the use of diagonals to create an interesting composition, something most of Klutsis' pieces have in common. This poster does not have the character of the proletariat worker, the workers are symbolized by industry and the repetition of cranes and metalwork. He collaged these cranes to frame the focal points, the two portraits. It is most likely intentional that there are no other people in this piece as it is a poster about the leaders. Stalin had another vision on how a leader should be portrayed in propaganda which would lead to Klutsis his fate.

# Propaganda under Stalin

Lenin died in 1924, which was almost a moment of crisis for the Bolsheviks as they needed a new leader that embodied the “comrade”. Finding a new leader was particularly difficult for a regime where there are no legal traditions in who becomes the successor. Unlike the previous Tsarist Russia where the Successor is the next male blood relative. (Pisch, 2016) As previous propaganda was used to make Lenin the charismatic leader who marches along with his comrades it was important for the regime to transfer that charisma onto a new leader.

Stalin did exactly this in his earlier years, starting as the loyal student and follower of Lenin and as shown in Figure 9 the “comrade” worker who marches alongside the proletariat workers. He needed to gain support as a leader before changing methods of ruling from within. Something he only realized when getting pushback for his initial ruling methods, from people like Gustav Klutsis. Lenin was too much an adored leader to erase from history. Soviet Propaganda reflects the intentions of Stalin from the period of gaining support to the moment he changed the regime to his own methods. Figure 9 is one of the examples where Stalin is shown as a comrade beside the proletariat workers. This is a piece that is cohesive with the rest of the propaganda made by Klutsis. This reflects the period of gaining support and “blending in”. Being the loyal, charismatic student who followed Lenin’s footsteps (Pisch, 2016).

On April 23rd, 1932 Stalin ordered the Central Committee to issue a decree that would ban all artistic groups from working independently. Everything would now go through the central committee. In 1934 at the First Congress of Writers Union, Socialist Realism became the obligatory method for all the arts. This was an order from Stalin as he did not approve of avant-garde movements specifically Constructivism. Stalin changed the role of the artist drastically. Propaganda was always slightly monitored but the artists had freedom within the style of Constructivism. The artist was a loyal worker who was able to create their own identity within political art. Under Socialist Realism the artist’s identity was practically illegal. Soviet propaganda became subject to censorship. The posters went from heroing the worker to making Stalin look like a god-like Figure. Almost every piece of propaganda had an image of Stalin. (Rowell, 2020)(Pisch, 2016) An interesting parallel that can be made is to the Tsarist portraits where the royal family would be painted in heroic ways while the people are always below. (Rowell, 2020) Exactly what the October Revolution was against and overthrew. Every slogan attached to a poster was replaced by quotes from Stalin’s speeches. Creating a dictatorship.

From extracts of Valentina Kulagina’s diary entries, we can first-hand read the extent of monitoring there was.

“Yesterday, Gustav handed in his poster Stalin and Voroshilov — to the Glavlit for the 3rd time — and Irinova (now it’s Irinova!) didn’t want to sign off on it and he had to take it to central Glavlit — I find such things outrageous — one moment it’s this and that is bad, and Stalin doesn’t look like himself — and then all of a sudden all is well.”

- Valentina Kulagina’s 11 March 1935

This diary entry is about Figure 10 which is one of the last works Klutsis got to make before he was a victim of the purges (Tupitsyn 217)(Pisch, 2016). This shows the amount of people one poster had to be passed by to be approved. Her frustration is obvious in her diary entry as she uses the words “now it’s Irinova!” and “Outrageous”.

In 1931 Stalin made his opinion about photo montage clear, proclaiming that photo-montage is too close to reality. Propaganda is made to persuade the public to support the communists and that is both the reason photo montage became a popular medium and the reason it eventually became censored. (Pisch, 2016) Stalin wanted to make the reality better than it was by hiding the truths. His dislike for photo montage gives an insight into the truths he was trying to hide. If photo montage is

the manipulated Utopian truth constructed through real images, why would he be against it, unless the photographs could not construct his “utopian” reality? Photo-montage does have its limitations as you are constricted by real-life frames. This in combination with the fact the possibilities are endless with drawing and painting is the reason photography would be replaced by “humanist realism”. (Rowell, 2020) (Jenkins) (Ratanova, 2016) The new propaganda was all drawings and paintings.

The truth of Soviet Russia is never shown in Propaganda as one of the most loyal artists, Gustav Klutsis became a victim of Stalin’s purges in 1938. This only proves the amount of force that was intertwined in every aspect of Soviet Russia under Stalin. This act reflects the suppression of artistic freedom. This brings us to the question of to what extent is Soviet propaganda the artist his/her own ideology. Throughout the analysis of the Russian Avant-Garde, it is obvious each artist used their artistic expression for the greater cause of spreading their ideology. Russian Futurism and Constructivism are a reflection of the want and longing for revolution and change. In the mid-1930s when Stalin made propaganda a subject to extreme censorship, is when the role of the artist becomes a puppet. It can therefore be argued that the propaganda from 1934 onwards is not always the artist’s own voice. Russian Avant-Garde was over.



Figure 9. *Gustav Klutsis (1932). The Reality of Our Program Is Real People—That Is You and Me.* [Photo-montage poster & lithograph] IZOGIZ (State Publishing House of the Fine Arts), Moscow and Leningrad

It can be argued that one of the reasons he became a victim of the purges is due to the fact he never stopped with photo-montage in his propaganda as seen in one of his last works before his death (figure 10). The two pieces of propaganda where Stalin is the sole leader are less common than propaganda pieces where Lenin still features as the previous leader. This last piece made in 1935 is made to support internationalization and international solidarity of communism shown both in the slogan and in the different ethnicities of the public. The different ethnicities were a common

technique Klutsis used to imply international communism. This piece shows the compromise Gustav Klutsis made in his artistic choices, as shown in the differences between Figure 9 and Figure 10. Figure 9 shows Stalin as a comrade, which was commonly done by Klutsis with previous leader Lenin, while Figure 10 heroes Stalin with the immense scale of the portrait compared to the photo-montage of the public. Making him monumental and above his people. His later works always show Stalin looking at the left as a symbol of communism being left-wing. Stalin's face is also manipulated to hide his scars and smoothen his skin to make him look more friendly (Pisch, 2016). The analog Photoshop before its time. He adapted his propaganda to fit most of the specifications, but would not make propaganda that goes against his principles. The identity of Klutsis in his work always remained.



Figure 10. Gustav Klutsis (1935).

*Long live the USSR, model of brotherhood among the workers of world nationalities.* [Photo montage poster & lithograph] Brown Digital Repository. Brown University Library.

## Conclusion

Art is a medium in which the artist usually has the choice to create a message with his/her work. When looking at the art movements that arose before and during Soviet Russia we can see how artists used art to spread ideology. Russian Futurism used a sense of absurdity and mockery towards the elite to comment on the socio-political context in Russia. As Russian Futurism is the earlier movement it was purely motivated by the artists who performed and created. Art reflects the turmoil in Russia as so many Russian artists created either “protest” art or art to spread communism which shows they wanted to change. Therefore art as a tool for political change under the art movements of Russian Futurism and Constructivism till 1934 are majority aligned with the artist his own ideology and not made under force.

The start of visual propaganda was due to the challenges faced in reaching the necessary audience. Vladimir Mayakovsky and Mikhail Cheremnykh created the ROSTA windows which solved multiple obstacles the Bolsheviks faced in reaching the peasants. With their combination of art, poetry, and propaganda, they effectively communicated Bolshevik

principles to a largely illiterate population. Simplistic designs based on Lubok and traditional Russian symbols make the images legible to the masses. It combines image, allegory, and the use of a chronological series that makes it easy to read like a comic or story. This shows how the socio-political context has such a significant role in propaganda and art. It also shows how the Soviets took these obstacles to their advantage in the Civil War as it was a way for them to win.

Constructivism is when art became propaganda. There are also abstract artworks within Constructivism that embrace technology without the obvious communist traits that fall more under art than propaganda. Constructivism was driven by the artists who wanted a communist Russia but also later used by Lenin to create an army of loyal artists. To make them loyal workers for Soviet propaganda. Lenin reinforced the importance of the artist through the VKHUTEMAS (Higher Art and Technical Studios) technical academy where most influential Constructivist artists graduated from and taught at.

The Soviet propaganda made by Gustav Klutss utilized avant-garde techniques like photo-montage to construct the “communist ideals” and often also immortalized Lenin. His choice to use photo-montage in propaganda was an influential shift. The photo-montage is a direct representation of the definition of propaganda. Using “real” images, often photographed by Klutss himself to construct a new reality. By taking subjects out of their context to set a new scene that embodies the communist ideology is the manipulation of truths to persuade the audience. It is smart because a photograph has a documentary value to it and a sense of reliability. Almost unconsciously persuading that it is a real scenario.

What makes Soviet propaganda so successful is a combination of multiple factors. One is creating the brand of communism. Creating the recognizable communist aesthetics is achieved by the Constructivist artists. The organization and unity of the style is achieved by both Lenin and Stalin in more forceful ways. This is an example of why propaganda has a negative connotation. Stalin used extreme censorship to make all propaganda look the same, while Lenin achieved cohesion within his propaganda by creating a centralized system where all aspects of life from education to propaganda were supervised. Both monitored systems and therefore it is difficult to extract the negative from propaganda because such a success story is almost always achieved with a sense of censorship or force. The difference between the two is that Soviet propaganda under Lenin did have room for its own artistic expression within the communist ideology.

Despite the constraints under the Stalin regime, Klutss continued to have his own artistic identity and even subtly resisted state control through his work. Klutss was able to maintain a degree of artistic integrity amidst political pressures which made him a victim of the purges of 1938. The fate of Klutss highlights the complex interplay between artistic expression, political ideology, and state control, raising the question about the extent to which propaganda reflects the artist’s own ideology versus state mandates. In Soviet Russia, there is a thin line between own ideology and the state ideology. We can argue that the moment “art” is made without the possibility of artistic identity, that the posters are propaganda rather than art.

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### Figure 1

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### Figure 2

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### Figure 3

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### Figure 4

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### Figure 5

Unknown . (1930). *Gustav Klutssis and friend Aleksei Kruchenykh* [Photograph]. From Book *Gustav Klutssis and Valentina Kulagina*.

### Figure 6.1& 6.2

Klutssis, G. (1927b). *Millions of Workers enter Socialist Competition* [Photomontage Poster]. from the book *Gustav Klutssis and Valentina Kulagina* .

### Figure 7

Klutssis, G. (1931). *The USSR is the Stakhanovite brigade of the world's Proletariat* (Brown University Library Brown Digital Repository) [Poster Lithograph]. Views and Re-Views. <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:89341/>

### Figure 8.1

Klutssis, G. (1930). *Under the Banner of Lenin - Socialist Construction*. (New York) [Photomontage and Lithograph Poster]. Modern Museum of Art. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/6503>

Figure 8.2

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Figure 9

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Figure 10

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