

Soviet society in the 1920s and 1930s

16

Were Soviet culture and society transformed by the October Revolution?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The Bolsheviks wanted to change society. Wherever revolutionaries seek to remake society, they challenge deep-rooted social institutions: the family, education and religion. In this chapter we focus on the experience of women after the revolution and also ask how much change there was in the family, religion, education and the arts. The first decade of Communism (1917–27) saw more equality for women, the most liberal divorce and abortion laws in Europe, an explosion of the arts, a fierce attack on religion and changes in education. But things did not always turn out as the revolutionary leaders intended.

- A** How much did life change for women and the family? (pp. 286–291)
- B** How did the Bolsheviks use artists and film-makers between 1918 and 1928? (pp. 292–297)
- C** How much change occurred in education? (pp. 298–299)
- D** What impact did the Bolsheviks have on religion? (pp. 300–301)



How much did life change for women and the family?

ACTIVITY

Match up statements 1–5 with the seven depictions of women in Soviet art shown on pages 286–287. Think about the messages the artists are trying to convey.

- 1 Women hold prestigious positions and are not just simple workers.
- 2 Building Communism and love can come together and reach greater heights.
- 3 Soviet woman is physically robust and does jobs only men do in the West.
- 4 Men and women both play a full part in Soviet economic progress.
- 5 In the USSR motherhood and work can be combined joyfully.



SOURCE 16.1 *Industrial Worker and Collective Farm Girl*, a statue by Vera Mukhina, 1935



SOURCE 16.2 Georgie Ryazhsky's portrait, *The Chairwoman*, 1928



SOURCE 16.3 *Higher and Higher*, a painting by Serafima Ryangina, 1934



SOURCE 16.4 *Woman Metro-Builder with a Pneumatic Drill* by Aleksandr Samokhvalov, 1937



SOURCE 16.5 *To Dine With the Mothers*, 1935

■ 16A Legislation on marriage and childcare

1917

- New divorce law – either partner could terminate a marriage on grounds of incompatibility. If one partner was not present at the divorce hearing, he or she was notified of the divorce by postcard.
- People's Commissar for Social Welfare passed laws which:
 - guaranteed paid maternity leave for two months before and after the birth
 - allowed nursing mothers to work shorter hours and take time to breastfeed their babies at work
 - excused women from heavy work or night work
 - set up a commission for the protection of mothers and infants, which made plans for maternity clinics, milk points and nurseries.

1920

Law passed allowing abortion to be performed under medical supervision. The Soviet state became the first country to legalise abortion on demand.

Women and the family

The new Communist state intended to bring about fundamental changes in the position of women in society. The key to this was economic independence: women should be able to have a job outside of the crushing drudgery of looking after a home and family (see the views of Alexandra Kollontai in Chart 16B, page 290). Lenin regarded the traditional bourgeois marriage as akin to slavery, with the woman the property of her husband and subjugated to his will. It was economic and sexual exploitation. Freeing women from their domestic role required the large-scale provision of facilities such as canteens, laundries, kindergartens and crèches; in other words, the socialisation of domestic services. This was a requirement which Lenin understood and supported.

Changes to women's role in the home also implied a fundamental change in the relationship between men and women. Once freed from the constraints of bourgeois marriage, there would be more equality between the sexes and sexual liberation because people would be freer to choose their partners. Therefore laws were passed immediately to make divorce easier and later, in 1920, to allow abortion on demand. The Bolsheviks had set the socialist dream for women in motion, but this soon collided with the economic realities of life in the Soviet state in the 1920s.

In 1919, the USSR had the highest marriage rate and, by the mid-1920s, the highest divorce rate in Europe, twenty-five times higher than in Britain. This situation did not work in women's favour. With easy divorce available, women were abandoned when they became pregnant. There were reports of young men registering more than fifteen short-lived 'marriages'. One survey of broken marriages from the end of the 1920s indicated that in 70 per cent of cases divorces were initiated by the men and in only seven per cent by mutual consent. By 1927, two-thirds of marriages in Moscow ended in divorce; across the country the figure was one-half. Due to the housing shortage, divorced couples often still lived together and domestic violence and rape were common.

The government was neither willing nor able to fund enough crèches or public canteens to free women from childcare and housework. When, in 1922, the idea of state provision for crèches, kitchens and laundries was costed, it added up to more than the entire national budget. The reality for many Russian children was not a network of socialist kindergartens but life in gangs that survived by begging, scrounging, stealing and prostitution. Hundreds of thousands had been made orphans by war and civil war. Malcolm Muggeridge, the English journalist and writer, reported seeing orphans 'going around in packs, barely articulate and recognisably human, with pinched faces, tangled hair and empty eyes. I saw them in Moscow and Leningrad, clustered under bridges, lurking in railway stations, suddenly emerging like a pack of wild monkeys, and scattering and disappearing' (quoted in R. Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, 1995, page 326). Contemporaries estimated that in the 1920s there were between seven and nine million orphans, most of whom were under the age of thirteen.

SOURCE 16.6 O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924*, 1997, p. 197, writing of Russia before the revolution

For centuries peasants had claimed the right to beat their wives. Russian peasant proverbs were full of advice on the wisdom of such beatings: 'The more you beat the old women, the tastier the soup will be.'

A rival proverb [was] 'Women can do everything; men can do the rest.'

SOURCE 16.7 B. Williams, unpublished correspondence describing Soviet Russia in the inter-war years

It was a macho world for all the talk of equality. The nineteenth-century scientific ideas of in-built gender differences were still influential. Women cared and supported. Men built socialism. The iconography of the new state showed women with children or represented as peasants. The high-status proletarian was male, a metal worker or a blacksmith.

SOURCE 16.8 B. Williams, 'Kollontai and After: Women in the Russian Revolution' (unpublished lecture), quoting a Communist observer

In principle we separated marriage from economics, in principle we destroyed the family hearth, but we carried out the resolution on marriage in such a manner that only the man benefited from it... The woman remains tied with chains to the destroyed family hearth. The man, happily whistling, can leave it, abandoning the women and children.

How important do you think employment is in changing the status of women in society today? Have increased economic independence, and higher positions in companies and public bodies, affected the lives of women and their relationships with men?

FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes on the following to prepare for a discussion:

- changes in the social and legal position of women after October 1917, including changes to the laws on divorce and abortion
- the difference between the socialist dream and the reality of childcare
- women's employment 1917–29
- the extent of women's political activity
- Alexandra Kollontai's ideas on women's emancipation, sex and marriage, and childcare.

Employment

During the First World War, the percentage of women in the urban workforce doubled; by 1917 it was about 47 per cent. After the Civil War, when five million men were discharged from military service, women suffered as men were given preference in jobs. Although women were paid less than men, employers regarded women as more expensive due to the time they took off work because of their home responsibilities. With the growth of urban unemployment during the NEP, women were forced from skilled to unskilled work – still predominantly in textiles and domestic service, and then from work to unemployment and into prostitution and crime. There were all-women gangs of thieves and 39 per cent of proletarian men used prostitutes in the 1920s. The result of all this was that the percentage of women in industrial labour by 1929 was practically the same as it had been in 1913. According to a survey in the 1920s, women in proletarian families worked an eight-hour day outside the home plus an extra five hours in domestic tasks; men did not help with the domestic work.

Participation in politics

You would imagine that a party that stressed the equality of women would promote this within their own party. But women's participation in the Communist Party did not make great strides in the 1920s. In 1917, women formed ten per cent of the party membership; in 1928, 12.8 per cent (156,000 women). At the party congress in 1918, only five per cent of the voting delegates were women and this percentage went down rather than up in succeeding years. Young, unmarried women had more time to be activists and female membership of the Komsomol (the Young Communist League) was much higher than party membership.

Women were up against two problems: Russian male chauvinism and the Marxist dislike of any separatist activity that could be interpreted as weakening the class struggle and proletarian unity. Traditional attitudes to women excluded them from party activities, as Sources 16.9 and 16.10 show. There were even reports of women being attacked or beaten by their husbands for being involved in party work.

In 1919, the party set up a women's department, Zhenotdel, to make women active defenders of the revolution through propaganda and agitation. However, in practice it focused on practical help such as social services, education and training, and making sure that new laws protecting women in factories were enforced, rather than on Alexandra Kollontai's more radical ideas about transforming women's role in society (see Chart 16B on page 290). Zhenotdel was abolished suddenly in 1930 on the grounds that it was no longer necessary.

SOURCE 16.9 J. McDermid and A. Hillyer, *Women and Work in Russia, 1880–1930*, 1998, p. 132

Before the revolution Kollontai tried to organise a meeting of women workers. Despite the promise of the St Petersburg committee of the party to provide a venue, when Kollontai and the women arrived, they found a sign on the door which read: 'The meeting for women only has been cancelled; tomorrow there will be a meeting for men only.'

SOURCE 16.10 B. Williams, 'Kollontai and After: Women in the Russian Revolution' (unpublished lecture); quoting a woman delegate who complained at a party congress that her activist husband forbade her to take part in public life

And in those very meetings which he forbids me to attend because he is afraid I will become a real person – what he needs is a cook and mistress wife – in those very meetings where I have to slip in secretly, he makes thunderous speeches about the role of women in the revolution, calls women to a more active role.

16B The views of Alexandra Kollontai

Paid work

Paid work outside the home should be the centre of women's lives. It would make them independent and personally fulfilled. As a good Marxist, she believed that a woman's rights and position in society 'always follow from her role in the economy and in production'. Capitalism oppressed women with the double burden of waged work and housework.



Marriage

The new marriage would be based on love, not on economic considerations or purely on sex, and would be unhindered by inequality, dependence or family ties. It need be neither monogamous nor long-lasting but it would be a true love relationship – the 'winged Eros' she writes about in her much misunderstood *Letter to Soviet Youth*. Like Lenin, she disapproved of the casual attitudes towards sex displayed by some Soviet youth in the 1920s.

Family life

The family could be transformed into something new: a network of collectives made up of a group of people working and living co-operatively together. Kitchens, dining rooms, laundries and childcare would be provided by the state.

Workers' participation

Her belief in participation was not confined to women. The new society must be created from below. Trade unions must be preferred to the party bureaucracy. The party should return to the ideas of 1917. Trade unions, soviets and other elected workers' organisations should be trusted to run industry and create socialism themselves. Every party member should spend three months of every year working in factories or villages.

Children

Motherhood was a duty but it ought not to be a burden. Once weaned, children would be the joint possession of the collective and possessiveness towards children would end. In the nurseries and kindergartens the new generation would learn to value the beauties of sociability, sharing and togetherness, and become accustomed to looking at the world from the perspective of the group and not through selfish eyes.

Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952)

Alexandra Kollontai dominated Bolshevik theory and practice about 'the woman question' in 1906–22. The daughter of a wealthy general, her life was changed in 1896 after she visited a large factory. Shocked by the plight of the workers, which she saw as enslavement, she committed herself wholeheartedly to improving their living and working conditions. She plunged into revolutionary Marxism, leaving her husband and son. She was drawn into the Social Democratic Party, leaning towards the Mensheviks, but after the beginning of the First World War she committed herself to Lenin and the Bolsheviks. In 1917, she was on both the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party and the Central Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. She was appointed Commissar for Social Welfare after the revolution and drafted much of the 1917 legislation in this area. She resigned in protest over the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

After the Civil War, Kollontai was one of the leaders of the Workers' Opposition (see page 151) and clashed with Lenin. He stooped to a personal attack on her lifestyle. She had a succession of husbands and lovers: Shlyapnikov, the other leader of the Workers' Opposition, was her lover and she was married to Dybenko, a huge, black-bearded Bolshevik sailor and revolutionary hero seventeen years her junior.

The defeat of the Workers' Opposition effectively ended her political career. After this she was exiled to become a diplomat and in 1950–45 she was Soviet ambassador to Sweden; the King of Sweden was reported to be her lover. She wrote semi-autobiographical novels such as *Red Love* and *Love of Worker Bees*, putting forward her views on sex and the new woman. She retired to Moscow, the only surviving leading member of the opposition, and died in 1952 aged 80.



Enthusiasts to the left of Kollontai talked of free love, the abolition of marriage and forcibly removing children from the harmful influence of their parents to be brought up by the state. Kollontai did not, or at least did so with caution. Nevertheless, the pressure of the 'new morality' on girls led to 'liberty, equality and maternity!' Kollontai was increasingly associated with the corruption of Soviet youth rather than the liberation of Soviet women. There were some experimental communes but only one survived until the end of the 1920s. It had 168 members, only sixteen of whom were men. Student communes pooled all grants, books, even underclothes. One in Moscow forbade individual friendships. The fear of the 'new woman', prepared to sacrifice family, home and sometimes children for the cause, was widespread.

It is easy to overestimate the impact of these new ideas on Russian society in the 1920s. Although the family had been challenged by 'free' (unregistered) marriages, postcard divorces and abortion, the social radicalism of the decade can be exaggerated. Soviet law strongly emphasised the mutual responsibility of family members for each other's financial welfare and, as the state lacked the resources to provide social welfare, the family remained a key institution. There was an increase in promiscuity, but surveys in the 1920s suggest the increase was not as great as young men claimed. The majority held to traditional attitudes towards relationships and a large number dreamt of long-lasting partnerships based on love and marriage. Also, such change as did occur tended to be in the cities and not in the countryside, where the vast majority of the population remained unaffected by the concept of the new woman and freer sexual relations, as Source 16.11 indicates.

SOURCE 16.11 M. Hindus, *Black Earth*, 1926, pp. 165–67. In 1926 Maurice Hindus, an American academic, went back to the village in Russia where he had been born and talked to young people in the village

And what I asked, of the morality of young people? Had there been any changes since the Revolution? None, they replied. Girls were as strict as ever their mothers and grandmothers had been. Of course, a fellow could flirt with a girl, put his arm around her, hold her hand, kiss her, but only on the cheek, not on the lips – unless she was his fiancée. Otherwise – well – our girls were quite strong, a blow of their fists might even draw blood. Lapses in conduct were as rare as in the old times ... it was the worst thing for a girl to submit to a man. Her betrayer is likely to abandon her, and no other man would have her as his wife. The girls knew that and took care of themselves.

And what, I further enquired, of the Young Communists? They laughed uproariously. Ekh, the Young Communists ... some of them were against kissing and dancing, said it was all the invention of the capitalists to corrupt the peasant and the proletarian ... and besides it was too much responsibility to be a Young Communist.

How far had women's lives and their position in society improved between 1917 and 1929?

LENIN'S VIEWS ON KOLLONTAI'S IDEAS

For Lenin, participation in the labour force plus socialisation of domestic duties equalled female emancipation. However, he thought that Kollontai's views on sex were completely unMarxist and anti-social. 'Of course ... thirst must be quenched. But will the normal man, in normal circumstances, lie down in the gutter and drink out of a puddle, or out of a glass with a rim greasy from many lips?' was his attitude to casual sexual relationships – he deplored promiscuity. As far as he was concerned, young people required healthy sports and exercise rather than 'endless lectures and discussions on sex problems'. Lenin also condemned the Workers' Opposition as a deviation and radically wrong in theory.

PROLETKULT

Make notes on:

- Proletkult
- the Bolshevik use of arts as propaganda
- cinema.

Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933)

Lunacharsky was an intellectual, playwright and literary critic who was Commissar for Popular Enlightenment between 1917 and 1929. In the revolution he was a prominent and popular leader, second only to Trotsky as a crowd orator. He was creative and open-minded and encouraged artists, poets and musicians to work with the Bolsheviks. Although promoting proletarian culture, he also respected the cultural achievements of the past and was able to ensure that many historical buildings survived. At different times he was criticised by Lenin for his support of the avant-garde and Proletkult, and for trying to protect the Bolshoi theatre rather than using the money to set up reading rooms as part of the literacy campaign. Lunacharsky believed in allowing some artistic freedom and different schools of painting, literature and the performing arts did exist in the 1920s. He was replaced as Commissar in 1929.

LENIN'S VIEWS ON ART AND PROLETKULT

Lenin attacked all modern art as Futurism and was not keen on it. He believed that freedom in art was the freedom to 'elevate the masses, teach them and strengthen them'. He had no time for individual self-expression which he called 'bourgeois-anarchist individualism'. Lenin attacked the Futurist Mayakovsky's poem '150 Millions' as 'Rubbish, double-dyed stupidity and pretentiousness', declaiming 'And flog Lunacharsky for futurism'. Nor was he keen on Proletkult. He did not believe that you could invent a new proletarian culture; rather you should develop the best models and traditions from the existing culture from a Marxist world outlook.

How did the Bolsheviks use artists and film-makers between 1918 and 1928?

Proletkult

Following the October Revolution, the Bolshevik government set up the Commissariat of Popular Enlightenment (Ministry of Education and Culture) headed by Anatoly Lunacharsky. The focus moved away from 'high art' – ballet, opera, fine art and museums – which was regarded as bourgeois and élitist, to 'popular culture' – art directed at the mass audience. Workers and peasants were encouraged to produce their own culture – Proletkult (proletarian cultural movement). This was to be a collective culture in which the 'I' of bourgeois culture would give way to 'we'. Some of the more extreme members of the Proletkult movement wanted to do away with existing libraries and art galleries, jettisoning the bourgeois culture of the past.

Proletkult was the idea of Alexander Bogdanov, Lunacharsky's brother-in-law. Bogdanov wanted to make art responsive to the needs of the working class and encouraged the masses to participate actively in making art. He set up studios, poetry circles, folk theatres and exhibitions. By 1920, there were around 400,000 Proletkult members, including 80,000 active in art studios and clubs. Bogdanov believed that proletarian art would move people towards Communism.

Lunacharsky was sympathetic to these ideas and believed that Proletkult should be independent of political control. Initially it was exempt from supervision. But it seemed to be developing as an independent working-class organisation, something the Bolsheviks would not tolerate, and so Lenin, antagonistic to the philosophy of Proletkult, had its regional and central offices shut down during 1921 and 1922.

How did the Bolsheviks use art in propaganda?

The Bolsheviks were anxious to harness art to the service of the new state. There had been a flowering of creativity in the arts in Russia in the years just before the revolution and this lasted into the 1920s. Innovators in the arts, the 'avant-garde', rejected the art of the past as linked with the bourgeois way of life which was to be destroyed. In the years immediately after the revolution, many of Russia's finest artists took part in the Soviet cultural experiment. The Bolsheviks wanted to keep well-known artists on their side if possible, and many artists, for their part, were encouraged by the ending of tsarist censorship. Indeed, artistic freedom was one area which the Bolsheviks encouraged in the first years after the revolution.

Artists of the avant-garde were excited by the revolution and embraced it. They wanted to communicate directly with the masses. Futurists like Mayakovsky and Malevich revolted against the boring old world. Like many fellow artists elsewhere in Europe, they were fascinated by machines and modern technology and wanted to reflect this in their art. Constructivists like Rodchenko, Tatlin and Lissitsky wanted to create a new proletarian culture based on the worker and on industrial technology. They concentrated on designing clothes, furniture, offices and everyday objects in an 'industrial style', using straight lines and geometrical shapes which they thought would liberate people. These two avant-garde schools influenced each other and sometimes it was difficult to tell a Futurist from a Constructivist.

Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935)

Malevich believed in the supremacy of geometric forms over realism and created his own system of art, Suprematism. Malevich is seen now as an important figure in the development of modern art though his work would have made a limited impact on workers, peasants and most Bolsheviks. He was regarded with suspicion and arrested in 1930. On his release he returned to more figurative painting but he did not toe the line completely. When he was buried in 1935, it was in a coffin decorated with Suprematist designs he had painted himself.

SOURCE 16.12 *Three Female Figures*
K. S. Malevich, 1928–32

**Vladimir Mayakovsky (1895–1950)**

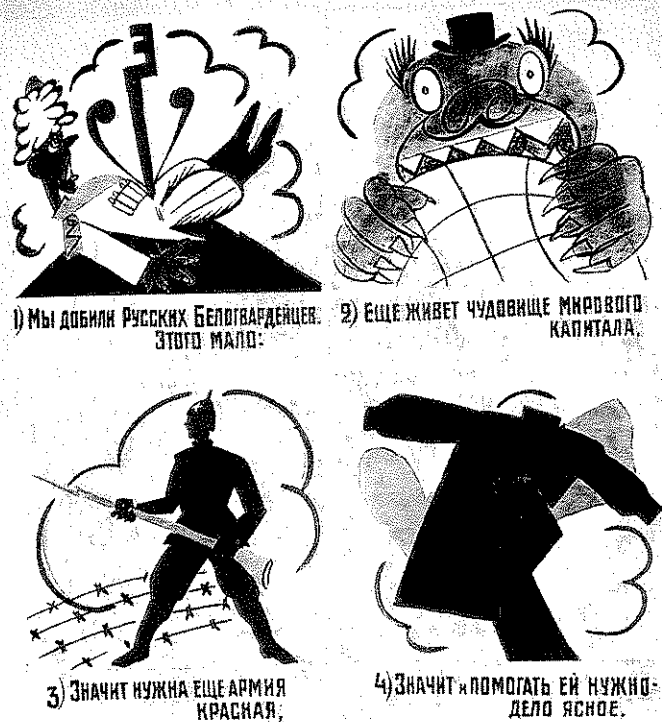
Mayakovsky was a young poet, playwright and artist of great energy who had joined the Social Democrats at the age of fifteen and was repeatedly jailed as a teenager for subversive activity. He was a Futurist and naturally welcomed the revolution wholeheartedly. He worked with the Bolsheviks producing posters and 3000 captions or slogans on a wide range of topics, from encouraging resistance during the Civil War to getting people to drink boiled water during an epidemic.

His play *The Mystery Bouffe* was a parody of the Biblical flood in which the unclean (proletariat) triumph over the clean (bourgeoisie). This was produced by Meyerhold (see page 315) as were the satires *The Bedbug* and *The Bath House*, fierce attacks on the smugness of petty leaders which exposed Communist bureaucracy. Both plays were soon withdrawn.

Mayakovsky was very egotistical: his first play was *Vladimir Mayakovsky* and his first book of poems *I*. His autobiography *I Myself* hardly showed him as the collective man. By 1930, he had grown disillusioned with the Communists. Always emotionally volatile, unhappy in love and denied a visa to go abroad, he committed suicide in April 1930. In 1935, when Mayakovsky was safely dead, Stalin proclaimed him 'the best and most gifted poet of our Soviet epoch'. Study of his work became compulsory in schools but his satires were not mentioned and neither was his interest in Futurism nor his suicide.



SOURCE 16.14 Mayakovsky in front of propaganda posters in the window of ROSTA, the Petrograd telegraph office

ПОМНИ О ДНЕ КРАСНОЙ КАЗАРМЫ

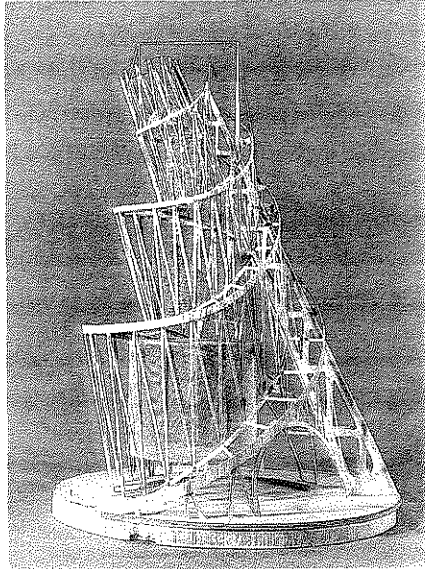
SOURCE 16.13 A ROSTA window poster produced by Mayakovsky to mark 'Remember Red Army Barracks Day' in 1920. The slogans read as follows:

- 1) We've finished off Russia's White Guards. That's not enough.
- 2) The ogre of world capitalism is still alive.
- 3) That means we still need the Red Army.
- 4) And that means we've got to help it out – the task is clear

Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953)

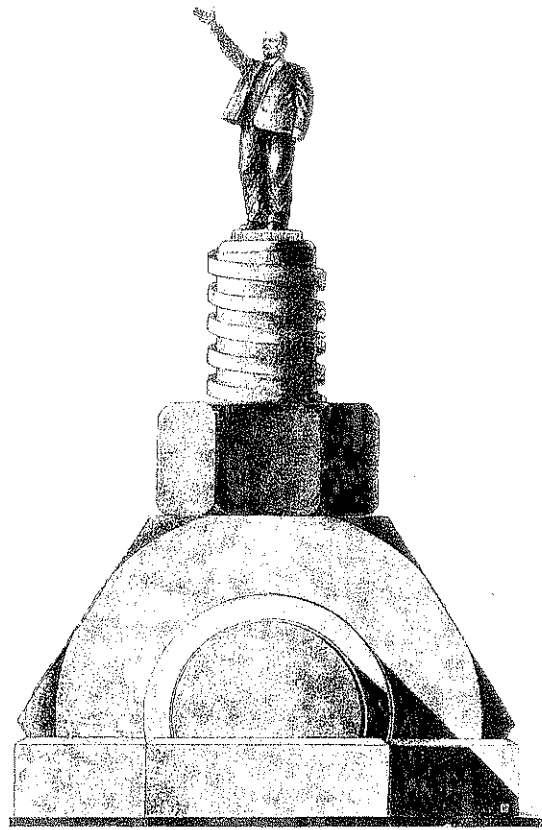
Tatlin's 'Monument to the Third International' (the Comintern) was to be a tower twice the height of the Empire State Building. It was to be made of glass and iron and contain revolving glass shapes - cylinder, hemisphere, pyramid and cube - which would revolve at different rates: once a year, once a month or once a day. It was also to contain a propaganda centre equipped with telegraphy, telephone and radio, and a vast open-air screen. It was completely impractical and never got beyond the model stage.

SOURCE 16.15
Tatlin's Monument to the Third International
1919-20



SOURCE 16.16 A classic image of Soviet industrial art from the mid-1920s. The caption reads 'Lenin is Steel and Granite'

Да будем мы всею сталью и гранитом.



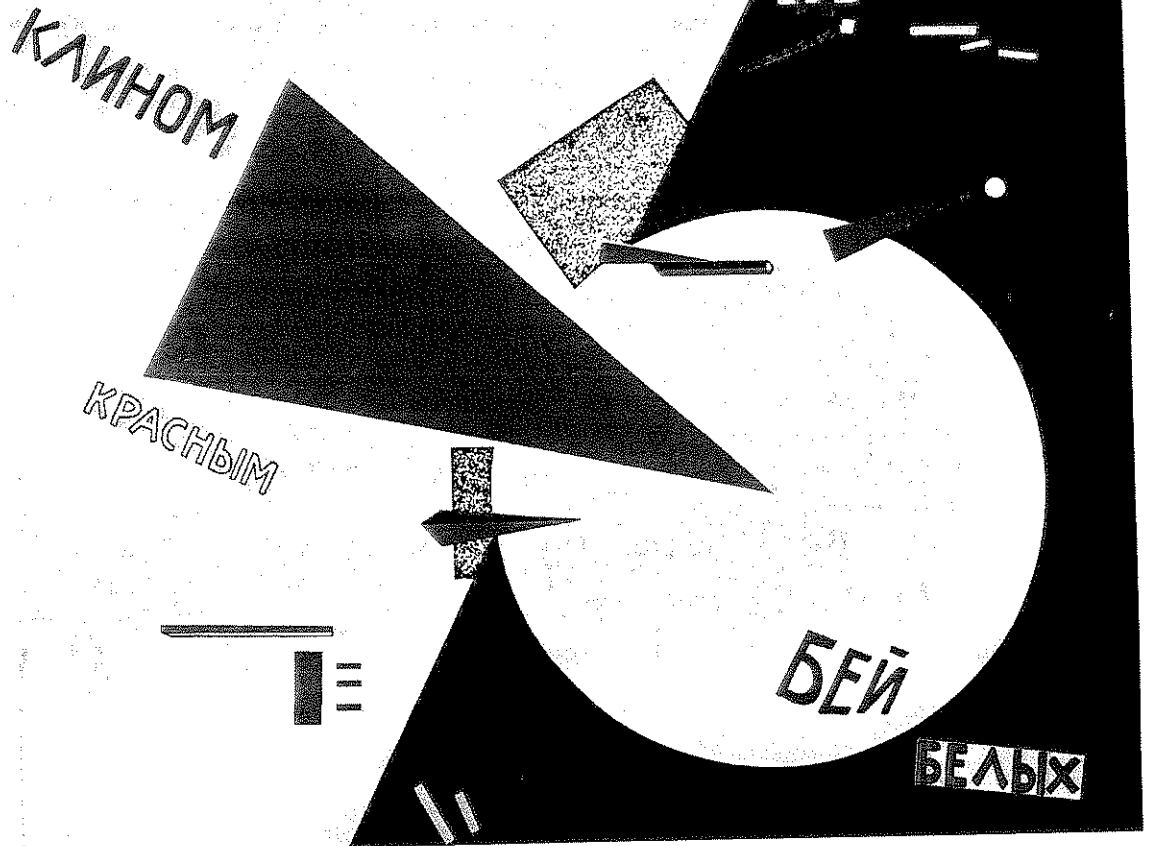
Да будем мы всею сталью и гранитом.

ЛЕНИН-СТАЛЬ И ГРАНИТ.

Помыслил В. И. УДОВИЧА-ЛЕНИНУ
скульптор: Г. Г. ГИНСКИЙ
г. Ленинград

SOURCE 16.17 A Soviet poster celebrating the electrification of Russia





SOURCE 16.18 Lissitzky's poster, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*. Lissitzky was influenced by Malevich and the belief that the pure geometric form was superior to representational art. In this poster he expressed a political idea clearly and simply through an arrangement of geometric shapes

Agitational art

The avant-garde artists were drawn into producing propaganda for the Bolsheviks. Malevich and Lissitzky produced 'agitprop art' and their designs were reproduced on agitprop trains (mobile propaganda centres; see Source 7.10, page 138), ships and banners, and above all, on posters displayed in the Petrograd ROSTA (Russian Telegraph Agency) windows. More than 1000 ROSTA posters were created over a two-year period. Agitprop theatre broke down barriers between actors and audience, encouraging the audience to respond vocally to the actions of the play. Meyerhold and other directors produced street plays designed to stir up hatred of the old bourgeoisie and encourage people to support the new regime.

Lenin wanted to take art into the streets and had a plan for monumental propaganda. He proposed that the streets of the major cities should display posters and slogans to educate the citizens 'in the most basic Marxist principles and slogans'. So Moscow City Soviet was draped with the huge banner 'The proletariat has nothing to lose but its chains'. Even more important than these slogans, in Lenin's view, were statues 'of great figures of social and revolutionary activity'. He provided a list of 66 names and personally unveiled the joint statue of Marx and Engels on the first anniversary of the revolution.



SOURCE 16.19 Lenin makes a speech at the unveiling of the memorial to Marx and Engels in Moscow, on the first anniversary of the October Revolution, in 1918



SOURCE 16.20 A detail from a ROSTA window poster. The early posters were done as single copies but later ones were stencilled and reproduced hundreds of times. The posters were not always easy to interpret but the message of this one is very clear

Another element of mass agitational art was street processions. These built on a rich tradition of public festivals and, in the Orthodox tradition, icons were carried across the village or town, though now they were Communist rather than religious icons. May Day and the anniversary of the October Revolution became the great ritual festivals of the new atheist Marxist-Leninist state. Lenin encouraged popular revolutionary celebrations but he wanted them to be carefully organised and controlled rather than spontaneous.

Probably the best example of mass street theatre was the great re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace in November 1920. It involved 10,000 people and included the Winter Palace itself as, in the words of the director, 'a gigantic actor and a vast character in the play ... each one of the 50 windows of the first floor will in turn show a moment of the development of the battle inside.' There were fireworks and music - indeed it was far more dramatic and more damaging to the building than the original event. It was a stage-managed October as it should have happened, with Lenin directing.

Cinema

The shortage of supplies of film equipment made film production very difficult during the Civil War, but by the summer of 1918 the agitproptrains were in action and equipped to spread political propaganda through films, plays and other media far and wide. In the early 1920s a special unit, Proletkino, was formed specifically for the production of political films in line with party ideology.

In 1925, however, the Politburo's decision not to intervene in matters of form and style in the arts allowed the Soviet cinema a brief period of great creativity. The most outstanding film-maker of this period was Eisenstein, who was anxious to show the power of the people acting together, as in his famous film of the Bolshevik revolution, *October*. However, Soviet audiences tended to prefer Hollywood comedies to his sophisticated work. Although the number of cinemas grew fast, and 500 million tickets were sold in 1928, the cinemas were almost entirely restricted to the towns. In 1928, the first All-Union Party Congress on Film Questions met and tighter control was imposed. It ruled that films should be accessible to the mass audience, and emphasised socialist ideas along strict party lines.

Cinema was, in theory, the ideal medium of propaganda, visual, technological, controllable. Lenin was especially keen for it to be used in areas where cinemas 'are novelties, and where therefore our propaganda will be particularly successful'. He recommended concentration on documentary film and newsreels, the making of short agitki on scientific topics, and encouraged the use of cinemas on agit-trains. He agreed that capital should be sought from private sources at home and abroad, 'on the condition that there should be complete guarantee of ideological direction and control by the government and the party', a statement which summed up his whole approach to the cultural revolution he so much desired. For Lenin propaganda, education and cultural development were not peripheral aims but absolutely central to the building of socialism.

What does the rise, fall and rise again of Eisenstein tell us about the relationship between the government and the cinema?

Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948)



SOURCE 16.22 Still from Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin*

Eisenstein was the best-known Soviet film director of the twentieth century. He worked with the Bolsheviks and for the Moscow Workers' Theatre before moving into the film industry. His first film was *Strike* (1924), with a clear message about how the workers were oppressed and how they could resist. Two of his best-known films were commissioned by the Central Committee: *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1928). His radical new filming techniques, editing together different images to build tension and produce a dramatic climax, are seen most famously in the 'Odessa Steps' scene in *Battleship Potemkin* and contributed to its huge international success.

October provided the classic heroic images of the revolution, but was far more dramatic than the reality; more people were killed and more damage was done to the Winter Palace than in the real event. However, the film was strongly criticised by the party leadership. The first All-Union Party Congress on Film Questions ruled that Socialist Realism was the only acceptable artistic style. In 1926, Stalin proposed that Eisenstein should make a film on the need for collectivisation. Eisenstein relied on his experimental style and focused on tractors and a cream separator to symbolise the transition from primitive farming to the mechanised modern agriculture. The film was excessively re-edited on Stalin's orders and re-titled *The Old and the New*. It was released in 1929.

Eisenstein was attacked during the Cultural Revolution of 1928 to 1931 (see page 302) and fell out of favour. He did not come back into favour until he made *Alexander Nevsky* in 1938. This film was commissioned by Stalin. It featured the Russian prince Alexander Nevsky who defeated invading German knights in a battle in 1242. The film was intended to strengthen Russian nationalism in the face of the growing threat from Nazi Germany. It ended with Nevsky saying 'Go tell everyone in foreign parts, anyone who comes to us with a sword will perish by the sword.' It was withdrawn after the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 but became required viewing once Germany had invaded the USSR. Eisenstein was later to make a two-part film on Ivan the Terrible, one of Stalin's heroes.



How much change occurred in education?

FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes on:

- the aims of Communist education
- changes in schooling
- the liquidation of illiteracy
- the role of youth organisations.

Before reading this section, discuss ways you would expect the Communist regime to change education, particularly the school curriculum.

For Lenin, education was an essential building block in creating a socialist society. Each child was to receive nine years of free, universal education. The aim was to combine education and political propaganda; Lenin did not believe that education could be 'politically neutral'. The 1919 Party Programme defined schools as 'an instrument for the Communist transformation of society'. Even learning the alphabet could carry a political message: A = All power to the soviets, B = Bolsheviks, C = Communist; and simple rhymes spelt out the achievements of Soviet power. Pupils were to be cleansed of 'bourgeois' ideas. Religious teaching was to be replaced by an emphasis on Communist values and atheism.

Schools were placed under the Commissariat for Enlightenment. The head of the Commissariat, Lunacharsky, was interested in progressive Western teaching ideas, such as those of John Dewey which stressed 'learning by doing' and the importance of work and play. So between 1919 and 1920, schools were encouraged to follow a more liberal line focusing on the development of the child's personality. The authority of teachers was reduced and they were designated as 'school workers' who shared administrative control with committees drawn from older pupils and factory workers. Teachers were forbidden to discipline pupils or set homework and examinations. Some radicals wanted to do away with schools altogether.

On the whole, schooling was a disaster area. The new school system failed, although in many areas it was never put into use. The vast majority of teachers were not Communists (3.1 per cent in primary schools and 5.5 per cent in secondary schools), had a poor understanding of progressive methods and did not know what was expected of them. Teaching went on much as it had done before the revolution, only worse because teachers had lost their authority. As a result, this more liberal approach was abandoned and more traditional methods restored with the introduction of the NEP in 1921.

Matters did not, however, improve much. Under the NEP, financial pressures meant that the idea of universal schooling had to be abandoned. Many children left school: by 1925, the numbers of schools and pupils were barely half the totals of two years earlier. Schools did not have the proper resources and the teachers were very badly paid (in 1925, a teacher received a fraction of an industrial worker's pay). There was also a lasting legacy of falling standards and failure of authority in many schools (see Source 16.25).

SOURCE 16.25 R. Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, 1995, p. 315. Pipes believes that the following extract, written in the style of a fifteen-year-old boy's diary, reflects the atmosphere of the early Soviet classroom

October 5

Our whole school group was outraged today. This is what happened. A new school worker came to teach natural science, Elena Nikitishna Kaurova, whom we named Elnikitka. She handed out our assignments and told the group: 'Children!'

Then I got up and said: 'We are not children.'

To which she: 'Of course you are children, and I won't call you any other way.'

I replied: 'Please be more polite or we may send you to the devil.'

Elnikitka turned red and said: 'In that case be so good as to leave the classroom.'

I replied: 'In the first place, this is not a classroom but a laboratory and we are not expelled from it ... you are more like a teacher of the old school. Only they had such rights.'

That was all. The whole group stood up for me. Elnikitka ran off like she was scalded.

In the 1920s there were two main strands in the school curriculum:

- general education, which included learning about Communism and the history of the revolution
- practical education, focusing on technical subjects and industrial training, with visits to factories, state farms and power stations.

The Bolsheviks wanted to increase the number of party members, especially those from working class or peasant backgrounds, who had engineering and technical skills. However, the new Soviet citizen was also to have a knowledge of culture as well as industrial skills. The emphasis on indoctrination remained throughout the 1920s, but a survey in 1927 of schoolchildren aged eleven to fifteen showed that they had become increasingly negative towards Communist values as they got older, and nearly 50 per cent still believed in God.

Literacy

Before the revolution, the illiteracy rate was about 65 per cent. This explains some of the Bolshevik emphasis on visual propaganda, and sending agitprop trains all over the country. The Bolsheviks attached great importance to universal literacy so that all citizens could be both exposed to their propaganda and taught modern industrial skills. In December 1919, the 'liquidation of illiteracy' was decreed for all citizens aged between eight and 50. Illiterates who refused to learn faced criminal prosecution. Tens of thousands of 'liquidation points' were set up in cities and villages and between 1920 and 1926 some five million people in European Russia went through literacy courses.

Youth organisations

The Bolsheviks did not leave indoctrination to non-Communist teachers. They had a mission to capture the hearts and minds of the young. Two youth organisations were set up: the Pioneers for children under fifteen and the Komsomol for those from the age of fourteen or fifteen into their twenties. The duty of these organisations was to inculcate Communist values and to promote loyalty to the working class. In later years, they were used as instruments as social control and to promote discipline in schools. The Pioneers were much like the Boy Scouts, with activities, trips and camping. The Komsomol was much more serious and was used by the Communist Party to take propaganda into the towns and villages and to attack religious beliefs and bourgeois values. Komsomol membership was seen as a preparation for entry into the Communist Party. The Komsomol played a very important role in the Cultural Revolution of 1928–31 (see pages 302–303).

SOURCE 16.26 *He Who is Illiterate is Like a Blind Man. Failure and Misfortune Lie in Wait for Him on All Sides.* A poster promoting literacy from 1920



SOURCE 16.27 A member of the Komsomol

D What impact did the Bolsheviks have on religion?

FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes on these key areas:

- Bolshevik policy towards the Church
- the Church's response
- the significance of the 1921–22 famine
- Lenin's attitude to the campaign against the Church during the famine
- the impact of Communist policies by 1929.

The Bolsheviks were aggressively atheistic. They saw religion as a sign of backwardness. Lenin declared that the party's aim was to 'destroy the ties between the exploiting classes and the organisation of religious propaganda', and replace it with scientific education. Lenin forecast that 'Electricity will take the place of God. Let the peasant pray to electricity; he is going to feel the power of the central authorities more than that of heaven.' This attitude brought the Bolsheviks into direct conflict with the Orthodox Church, which was central to the lives of millions of peasants and an integral part of the village community.

In January 1918, the Bolsheviks issued the Decree on the Separation of Church and State which declared that the Church could not own property, church buildings had to be rented and religious instruction in schools was outlawed. Priests and clerics were declared 'servants of the bourgeoisie'. This meant that they were not allowed to vote and did not receive ration cards, or got those of the lowest category. Patriarch Tikhon, the head of the Orthodox Church, denounced the Bolsheviks and called upon the faithful to resist them by all possible spiritual means. The battle was on for the people's soul.

The Bolsheviks mounted an enormous propaganda onslaught. In 1921, the Union of the Militant Godless was established, with branches across the country. It held events such as debates to prove that God did not exist. It had its own newspaper which attacked the clergy as fat parasites living off the peasantry. Relics and icons were ridiculed – for example, weeping icons were shown to be operated by rubber squeezers. Peasants were taken for rides in planes to show there was no God in the sky. Atheist art showed a pregnant Virgin Mary longing for a Soviet abortion. At the same time, Communism was promoted as the new 'religion'. Public and private religious rituals were Bolshevised: Christmas and Easter became Komsomol Christmas and Easter;

instead of baptisms, children were 'Octobered', with new names such as Revolyutsiya and Ninel (Lenin spelt backwards); Red weddings were conducted in front of a portrait of Lenin rather than an altar, with the couple making their vows both to each other and to the principles of Communism.

This anti-clerical propaganda was accompanied by more direct action, particularly after 1921. Lenin used the famine of 1921–22 to demand that the Church surrender its valuables, including consecrated vessels used in rituals, for famine relief. Instructions were sent to local soviets to seize the valuables. But there was bitter resistance. Unarmed civilians, often old men and women, fought soldiers equipped with machine guns. More than 8000 people were executed or killed in 1922 in the anti-Church campaign, including the Metropolitan of Petrograd (a leading churchman only just below the Patriarch in rank), 28 bishops and 1215 priests.

The Politburo was alarmed by this level of resistance and decided to suspend the action. But Lenin, who saw this as the opportunity to smash the Church, overruled them. The Russian historian Volkogonov, who has enjoyed unrestricted access to Russia's archives, has seen in Lenin's papers an order from him demanding to be informed, on a daily basis, about how many priests had been shot.

SOURCE 16.28 Red Army soldiers looting a church



SOURCE 16.29 Lenin, quoted in R. Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, 1995, p. 338

It is now and only now, when in regions afflicted by the famine there is cannibalism and the roads are littered with hundreds if not thousands of corpses, that we can (and therefore must) pursue the acquisition of [church] valuables with the most ferocious and merciless energy, stopping at nothing in suppressing all resistance . . . The greater the number of representatives of the reactionary bourgeoisie and reactionary clergy we will manage to execute in this affair, the better . . .

There was also a campaign to split the Church from within. The 'Living Church' movement, backed by the OGPU (which had replaced the Cheka), hailed the revolution of October 1917 as a 'Christian deed' and denied that the Communists persecuted the Church. The Soviet government, it declared, alone in the world was striving to realise 'the ideal of the Kingdom of God'. Tikhon gave in, frightened that the Church would be split permanently. The Orthodox Church leadership gave no more trouble to the Communists.

Nevertheless, the Orthodox religion was not destroyed. Surveys of the peasantry in the mid-1920s revealed that 55 per cent were still active Christians. They continued to support priests with voluntary donations and carried out centuries-old religious practices. It is a mark of the durability of the Orthodox faith that the collapse of Communism in 1991 saw the immediate revival of the Church and large congregations for services.

KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 16

Were Soviet culture and society transformed by the October Revolution?

- 1 Soviet Russia had the most liberal divorce and abortion laws in Europe, but generally they worked against women. Childcare was supposed to become the collective responsibility of the state; in reality seven to nine million children lived on the streets in gangs of orphans.
- 2 Alexandra Kollontai was the only woman among the leading Bolsheviks, but the impact of her radical feminist ideas was limited.
- 3 The Bolsheviks believed in mass art that had to serve the new state. Some avant-garde artists were initially attracted to the regime but the relationship soured as political control increased.
- 4 Lenin was especially keen on the cinema and Eisenstein was an outstanding film-maker, but political control curbed his freedom later on.
- 5 Education was an essential element in building socialism but schools in the 1920s were not one of the Bolsheviks' successes.
- 6 The campaign to liquidate adult illiteracy had a higher success rate.
- 7 The Bolsheviks were aggressively atheistic and over 8000 believers were killed in the anti-Church campaign of 1922. However, religious belief persisted, especially amongst the peasants.