Politics and history of 20th Century Europe shifted radically, swinging like a pendulum in a dramatic cause and effect relationship. I explored the correlation between art movements and revolutions, focusing specifically on Russian Constructivism and the Russian Revolution in the 1920s, as well as the Punk movement in East Germany that instigated the Fall of the Berlin Wall. I am fascinated by the structural similarities of these movements, and their shared desire of egalitarianism, which progressed with the support of opposing political ideologies.

I chose fashion design because it was at the forefront of both Constructivism and Punk, and because it is what I hope to pursue as a career. After designing a full collection in 2D, I wanted to challenge myself by bringing one of my garments to life. The top is a plaster cast cut in half and shaped with epoxy and a lace up mechanism so that it can be worn. A paste made of plaster and paper pulp serves to attach the pieces of metal and create a rough texture that produces the illusion of a concrete wall. For the skirt, I created 11 spheres of various sizes by layering and stitching together different shades of white, cream, off-white, grey, and beige colored fabrics, with barbed wire and hardware cloth, that I then stuffed with Polyfil.

The piece is wearable, and meant to constrict one's freedom of movement – just like the German Democratic Party constricted freedom of speech in East Germany. The bottom portion is meant to suffocate the body in a different approach, with huge, outlandish, forms like the ones admired by the Constructivists.

Emily C.
District of Columbia

Emily C.

"History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes"

- Mark Twain

Historically, social movements have swung like a pendulum, constantly reacting to the past in order to move into the future. When we correlate art movements and revolutions in 20th century Europe, specifically Russian Constructivism that created art "in service of the [Russian] Revolution" in the 1920s, and the Punk movement in East Berlin that brought about the Fall of the Berlin Wall, we witness that these events had structural similarities and the end desire of egalitarianism, but progressed with the support of opposing political ideologies.

The Constructivist Movement, Russia's last and most influential modern art movement of the 20th Century, rose to prominence alongside, and "in service of," the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Beginning roughly in 1915, and informed by Suprematism, Cubism, and Futurism, the Constructivist Movement flourished until the 1930s as an entirely new approach to creating art that sought to replace the traditional artistic concern of composition with "construction." Constructivist art was abstract, geometric, experimental, devoted to modernity, and rarely emotional. Constructivists believed that materials should dictate the form of an artwork and that they should only be employed in accordance with their capacities in such a way that demonstrated their utility - this was known as an "ethic truth of materials." Constructivists were dedicated to serving a modern, communist society, and, through the deep investigation of materials in their artwork, created functional objects for mass production. Art was to be created not in order to express beauty, the artist's outlook, or to represent the world, but to create a blueprint for modern life. Firmly embracing the new social and cultural developments growing out of the October Revolution of 1917, and wanting to use art for the common good and in line

with Communist principles, Constructivists works involved architecture, interior design, fashion design, ceramics, textile design, typography and graphics.

Vladimir Tatlin is recognized as the father of Constructivism. Tatlin's "Pamiatnik III Internatsionala" or "Monument for the Third International," unveiled in 1919,  marked the formal beginning of Constructivism. Often referred to as "Tatlin's Tower," the spiral shaped building was meant to be made of steel and glass and rise taller than the Eiffel Tower. Functioning as a government office building, this celebration of the Russian Revolution was modern, functional, and dynamic, setting the principles for his contemporaries to follow. However, like many of the Constructivists' ideas, it was never built on a large scale due to economic shortages. Established in 1921, The First Working Group of Constructivists included Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova and Lyubov Popova. Members of this group also referred to themselves as artist-engineers, because of their reverence of machines, technology, modern mediums, and functionality. In 1923, they published a manifesto in their magazine, *Lef,*  that stated, "The material formation of the object is to be substituted for its aesthetic combination. The object is to be treated as a whole and thus will be of no discernible 'style' but simply a product of an industrial order like a car, an aeroplane and such like. Constructivism is a purely technical mastery and organisation of materials." The Constructivists sought, "to find the Communist expression of material construction," in order, "to establish a scientific base for the approach to constructing buildings and services that would fulfill the demands of Communist culture." Thus, they believed that art had no place sitting in an artist's studio and instead should be formulated in laboratories and factories. At an exhibition titled "5 x 5 = 25," where Aleksandra Ekster, Lyubov Popova, Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and Alexander Vesnin each presented five works, the Constructivists even went so far as to

declare that painting was "dead" in the sense that it should be considered valuable only in designs for eventual constructions. Applied and decorative arts thrived under the movement's ambitions to enter mass production.
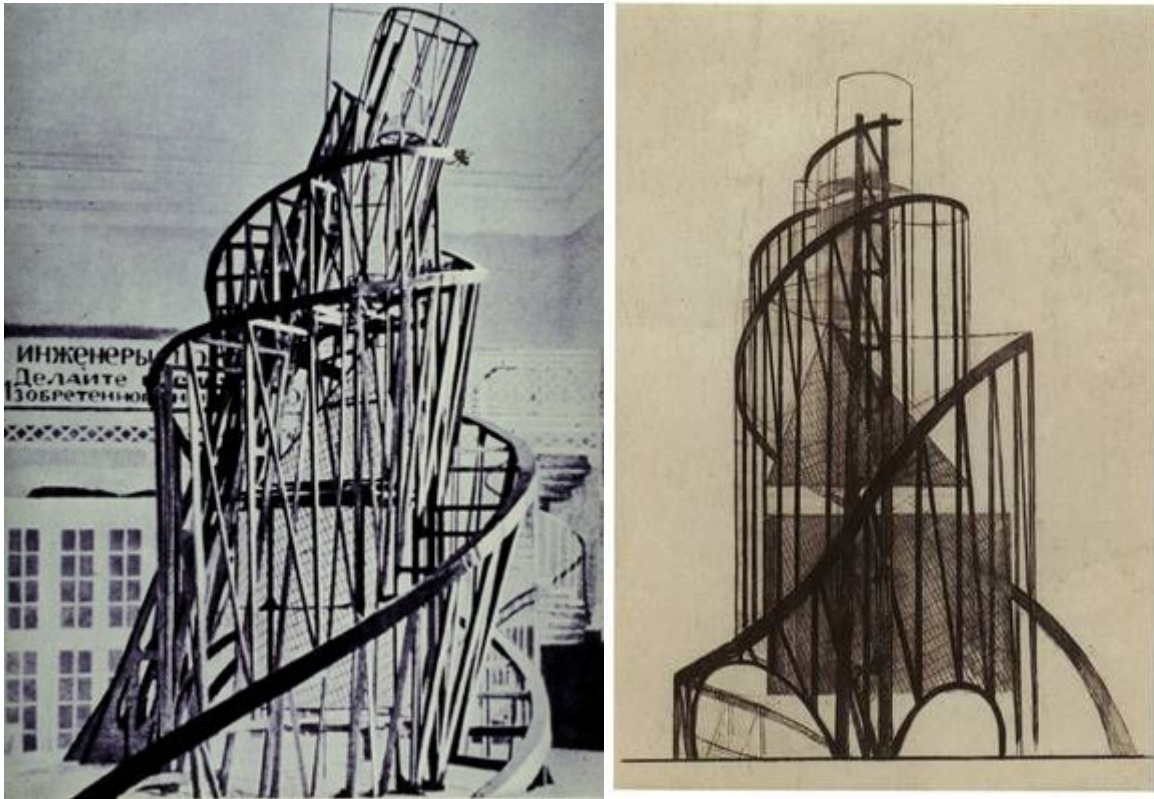

Tatlin's Tower

A particularly notable Constructivist is Lyubov Popova, who began her career as a painter and pioneer in Cubo-Futurism. Identifying herself entirely with the Communist Revolution, she joined the Constructivist movement with the revolutionary urge of to remake a new physical world. She created designs for posters, books, textiles, theater, and fashion that promoted the Communist agenda and created new art and entertainment fitting for the members of a modern, communist society. Popova's textile manipulations featured repeating geometric patterns thought more fitting to modern life and mass production than florals or traditional geographically-keyed patterns. Her use of intersecting circles and spacing of stripes added movement and tension to the fabric, thus creating a sense of dynamism and producing the effect

of different textures. This technique not only reflects the minimal theme of constructivism, where the artwork is broken down into its most basic elements, but also indicates the concern of economic conservation of materials. Popova even began designing symbolic patterns featuring the five- pointed star of the red army and the sickle and hammer, and textiles quickly arose as the focus of creative concern in the Communist Revolution. To the Constructivists, painting was linked with the capitalist cultural ideology, and although never completely outlawed, always worked to complement fabric designs that could suit ordinary people from all walks of life.



Textile Design by Lyubov Popova

Perhaps most fascinating was how Lyubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, Alexander Rodchenko, and Alexandra Exter were all united in their exploration of fashion design, believing their designs could achieve the broadest impact in aiding Soviet society. Constructivist clothing reflected utilitarian functionality and mass production, while representing the end of oppressive elite aesthetics. Clothing was to be geometrical and "free the body,' unlike the physically constricting aristocratic clothing of the past s made solely in the name of beauty. The Constructivists wanted to eliminate gender and class distinctions in clothing, so that everyone would appear equal. Varvara Stepanova, who worked alongside Lyubov Popova at the Tsindel

(The First State Textile Factory)  where they were both were Head of Textile Design, is credited with inventing the Prodezodezhda (work clothing) and Sportodezhda (sports clothing). Stepanova began her clothes making career with theater costume design; thus the Prodezodezhda included theater costumes as well as professional clothing. Stepanova's designs exaggerated the movements of actors and transformed the body into a dynamic composition of geometric shapes and lines. Sportodezhda were unisex, and often belted, with characteristic graphic forms. The clothing was meant to be as functional as possible, using contrasting colors to emphasize the body and easily distinguish between teams. Constructivist clothes had no room for individual aesthetic preferences or societal differences, and worked instead to illustrate the practical role of the wearer in the community.


Clothing Designs by Lyubov Popova and Alexander Rodchenko

Harmoniously with Constructivism, artist and costume designer Alexandra Exter reduced traditional costumes into basic shapes and contours. Just like her peers, Exter was attracted to the dynamism of theater and sought to capture the actor's movements in 3D. Exter embraced the principles of modern constructivist design by abstracting the body to its fundamental form,

transforming organic shapes into sharp geometrical ones.. Having stated that, "the very

environment of Russia needs color," Exter often paired contrasting colors and dressed both

aristocrats and peasants in equally bright, vivid colors. Theater played a significant role in

Constructivism and the Communist society in general, because it was an apparatus for

influencing the public and culture like propaganda, while simultaneously keeping people

entertained.



Theater Costume Designs by Alexandra Exter

The influence of Constructivism was not limited to Russia; in fact, the work of Alexandra

Exter, Varvara Stepanova, and Lyubov Popova is undoubtedly evident in German artist and

Bauhaus resident Oskar Schlemmer's costumes for the Triadisches Ballett (Triadic Ballet),

premiering in September of 1922 in Stuttgart, Germany. During his nine year stay at the

Bauhaus, Schlemmer toured his ballet to increase attention toward the school.  Schlemmer

viewed  the human body as a brand new medium and, similar to the Constructivists, was focused

on expression through stylized movements and abstraction of the human body. Intriguingly

enough, he began his "choreographed geometries" by creating what he called his "figurines" in

order to transform the human body through costume. Incorporating circles, spheres, hoops,

cones, and stilts, he reconstructed the body into a geometric sculpture. Additionally, the Triadic Ballet was divided into three parts, with colors dictating different moods. The first act appeared completely in yellow, symbolizing cheerfulness; the second act, pink, symbolized festivity; and the third act represented mystique through the use of the color black. Evidently, Schlemmer used color similarly to the Constructivists, with precise intent and to enhance the overall message. Not only does Schlemmer's work reflect the Constructivist themes of simplification, modernization, geometry, strategic use of color, and freedom of the body, but his creations looked as if they were one of Alexander Rodchenko's sculptures coming to life, and could comfortably reside in one of Lyubov Popova's theater set designs.

   Although it may appear that Communism ushered in a new era of flourishing arts into Europe, the reality of the Constructivists efforts were distorted and ultimately detrimental. In the aftermath of World War II, during the Potsdam Conference, Germany was divided into four military occupation zones by the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. Ultimately, due to the desire of the French, British, and Americans to combine their zones into one united "West Germany" in 1947, and their issuing of a new currency to those western zones, the Soviet Union imposed the Berlin Blockade. Following the division of Germany into two parts, the capitalist west and communist east, the Soviets built the Berlin Wall to prevent their citizens from escaping to the freedom of the west. Officially known as the German Democratic Republic (GDR/DDR), East Germany was a satellite state of the Soviet Union and a part of the Eastern Bloc that also included Poland, Albania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. These countries citizens were subject to limited civil liberties and controlled through various inhumane secret police organizations, without any opportunity to escape or criticize the government.

The Ministry for State Security (Staatssicherheitsdienst, in German), frequently called the Stasi, was the official secret police agency of the German Democratic Republic. The Stasi's origins began in 1917, when the Russian communists founded 'The Emergency Commision for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage'. Known as 'Cheka' for short, the commission was a vital instrument for the communist party to establish their regime by terrorizing the population and executing their enemies - this later became the infamous KGB (Committee for State Security). After the Red Army occupied East Germany in 1945, the Soviets quickly introduced this same concept to the Germans by founding the Stasi. The Stasi idolized the Cheka, called themselves "Chekists", and even modelled their logo after the Cheka's. Headquartered in East Berlin, the Stasi was known as "the shield and sword" of the communist party and was one of the most ruthless, effective and oppressive intelligence agencies to have ever existed. The objective of the Stasi was to spy on the population in order to prevent and fight opposition to the party, and they went to extreme extents to do so. They wiretapped phones, opened all personal letters, watched people through secret cameras, shadowed people - following them and documenting their every move- and even collecting people's scents. The Stasi relied on a group of an estimated 200,000 informants to collect information for them. There was no way of telling whether someone was an informant or not - often times it was your best friend, parent, lover, or neighbor- and even members of underground opposition groups were coerced into being watchdogs. Not only did the Stasi unjustly imprison and physically abuse those who they deemed "enemies of the state," they engaged in monstrous torture methods that included isolation, sleep deprivation, and various psychological tricks. What was arguably most grotesque was their policy of "Zersetzung" which translates to 'biodegradation' or 'corrosion' in English.

The goal of Zersetzung was to destroy someone's self-confidence by damaging their reputation, organizing failures in their careers, and meddling in their love life. For example, the Stasi could break into someone's home and move things around to cause arguments in a family, and never be found out.

The Stasi did not wait until someone descended to punish them; they wanted to know what their citizens thought, what they were planning, why they were not conforming to the 'perfect' socialist system, and how to control them best. Through inflicting betrayal, mistrust, and fear on the population, the Stasi skillfully oppressed the people of East Germany for so long, calling into question how it was possible for the regime to fall in 1989.

The biggest enemy of the Stasi was undoubtedly the Punks of East Germany. The East German Punks opposed the controlling totalitarian regime and how it impacted every aspect of their lives. The dictatorship decided what schools they went to, what jobs they received, where they lived, what they should wear, what art and entertainment they could view, and even what they were allowed to think. The Punks felt as if they had "too much future" and no say in who they could be or what choices they could make, because everything was decided for them. Punk music first streamed in to East Germany from West Berlin. By tapping into Western radio stations, which was strictly forbidden by the GDR (German Democratic Republic), German youth were exposed to bands like The Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Ramones, Chelsea, Slaughter and the Dogs, Wire, Stiff Little Fingers, and The Stranglers. Punk music resonated with German youth because it expressed the anger they felt towards the regime, when they had no other outlet to turn to. Although Punk entered East Germany from the West, the punk youth of East Germany had no interest in the glorification of the West or wanting to Westernize. They took the message of bands like The Sex Pistols and transformed it into their own unique outlet of music where they

were talking about their own lives and struggles. In fact, East German punk was uniquely

Eastern, which is why it was such an imminent threat to the Stasi. The Punks were trying to take

control of the basic, yet crucial decisions in their lives, which was extremely dangerous to the

entire system the regime was built on. For decades the East German population was given one

option, total obedience to the party, which was ingrained in their brains since their early youth by

communist organizations like "Free German Youth."

   The only thing more dangerous than Punk music, which ignited the fire of opposition in

the hearts of thousands of German youth, was the Punk aesthetic. Punk fashion provided an

explicit way for people to show their opposition every time they stepped out in public. Punk

Music provided East German teens with the seeds of nonconformity through their poetry and

lyrics, but through the related fashion, they were able to take those ideas and twist them into their

own creations that mirrored their subversion to the system. In a structure where even cutting your

hair was a punishable offence, having people fearlessly walk out in public with holes in their

clothes, wearing studs, chains, and spikes, with their hair cut into colorful Mohawks, and phrases

such as "DESTROY" and "I AM AN ENEMY OF THE STATE" adorned on their clothing

indicated a massive crack in the system. Although the Stasi responded to these infractions with

vigor, devoting tens of thousands of hours in labor to squash the punks attempts at liberation,  the

punks kept fighting. No matter how many times they were arrested, ridiculed, beaten, and sent to

jail they continued to resist, setting an example and paving the way for the entire population.

Additionally, the Stasi's  intense use of violence and paranoid prosecution backfired and sparked

criticism from members of the public not involved in the punk movement, helping to further

widespread, radical, social change.

East German Punks and Underground Fashion Shows

Just like the Constructivists, the Punks aimed to create a new society for themselves that fit their needs as liberated human beings. They were incredibly skilled at carving out space for themselves to exist and express themselves under the terrorizing, watchful eye of the dictatorship. They gathered in abandoned apartments, churches, and illegal, off-the grid spaces, and even figured out how to make money illegally by making and selling clothing and jewelry. Shockingly, something that thrived in the tyrannical, grey, conformist East Berlin was the underground, avant-garde fashion scene exploding with creativity and expression. As intricately detailed in Marco Wilms' 2009 Documentary, *Ein Traum in Erdbeerfolie* (*A Dream in Strawberry Foil*), commonly called "Comrade Couture," Punk, Goth and New Wave aesthetics blended to create a unique fashion fantasy. Self-identifying Punk designers, artists, photographers and models organized in abandoned churches, bath houses, and artist ateliers, where they held theatrical fashion shows. Due to the secrecy of the group and their lack of resources because of a struggling economy, they presented freakish clothing made out of striped

plastic bath curtains, hospital organ bags, strawberry foil (what farmers used to cover strawberry fields), and whatever they could find. The two most prevalent avant-garde fashion theaters were called "Chic, Charmant und Dauerhaft" (Chic, Charming and Enduring) and "Allerleiraun" (All-kinds-of-fur). These groups were provocative, individual, alternative and daring - everything the regime had raised them not to be. As Marco Wilms himself said, "A tiger in a cage is much wilder than a tiger that is free to roam." The greater the Stasi crackdown was on these groups, the harder they would fight. In 1979, Micha Horsching, an adolescent East German punk, had predicted that the German Democratic Republic would collapse in 10 years. On November 9th, 1989, The Berlin Wall fell.

The Constructivists and the Punks were both passionately after equality and total egalitarianism, but in opposite approaches. The Constructivists were completely devoted to equality through Communism, where the elimination of private property meant no economic classes. Oppositely, The Punks wanted each person to have the equal opportunity to achieve whatever they wanted to, and the freedom to decide their own futures, in the form of Capitalism. Both of these movements were centered around the desire to create a modern society that functioned around their own needs, and not those of the government before them. Likewise, the Constructivists and the Punks created art, especially in the realm of fashion, for the ultimate goal of liberation and serving a revolution. Therefore, even though they fought for opposing ideologies and the Punks were working to break down the system the Constructivists built, they operated in the same pattern. Finally, the Punk movement was a radical reaction to the also radical reaction that the Constructivist communists had to the system in place before them. Ultimately, the close examination of these two art movements and the revolutions they served,

reveals that social movements have historically behaved in a severe cause and effect manner, where the pendulum swing becomes evident.

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