

El Lissitzky's *Had Gadya*, 1919

by Victor Margolin

Few works of graphic art have been the object of so much commentary as Lissitzky's *Had Gadya*. His ten splendid lithographs of the seder song tell the story of a series of assailants who consume each other until the final one, the Angel of Death, is destroyed by God. Jewish Lissitzky scholars tend to see in this story a parable of the Russian revolution. Both Alan Birnholz in his PhD dissertation of 1973 and Ruth Apter-Gabriel, in an essay published in 1987, take this position. Apter-Gabriel believes that Lissitzky substituted the redemptive power of the Communist Revolution for the power of God as it is described in the story.

When I was writing a chapter on Lissitzky's early work for a book on the avant-garde, I had difficulty with the assertions of my predecessors that Lissitzky unequivocally supported the revolution. A simple look at the historical facts shows Lenin's intention to reduce or eradicate the identities of the nationalities and his creation of a Jewish Bolshevik organization the *Evseksiya* that was charged with eliminating the Yiddish cultural milieu of which Lissitzky was an active participant. What further dissuaded me was the ambiguity of Lissitzky's statements about his non-objective *Prouns* paintings. If he were supportive of the revolution and had created *Had Gadya* to express that position, why would he not be more clear about the meaning of his paintings, which he began the same year? I concluded that Lissitzky's reluctance to define the *Prouns* as political parables was due to his ambivalence about the revolution. He was caught between the affirmation of a new secular Yiddish culture and the Bolshevik government's attempt to eradicate it. My interpretation is based on the argument that not all members of the avant-garde had the same stake in the revolution and therefore not all shared a common belief in its value.

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