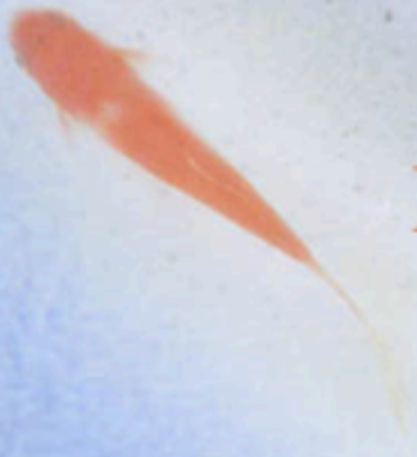


**Building Bridges,  
Moscow and Berlin  
The Golden Twenties**

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# Building Bridges, Moscow and Berlin The Golden Twenties



Building Bridges, Moscow and Berlin: The Golden Twenties

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It is only fitting that we begin with the object, French *objet* the German *Gegenstand*, the Russian *вещь*, meaning the *thing*. This was the title of the short-lived but brilliant and valiant attempt to merge the new art of Constructivism and new forms of literature under the covers of a Russian, French, German language journal published in Berlin in 1922 by EL Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg. By its very nature the movement negated the primacy of a subject – critics would call it “subjectless” – and consequently its products were outside the realm of narrative. We will have to straddle that line to create not only a series of images, objects, “things” if you wish, but also to bridge the gap by identifying some connections between the graphic arts and literature, Russia and Germany. If that organization at times seems confusing, then let some of the images, the sounds, and the words stand on their own. Ultimately I hope to look at a set of snapshots in time and place, the year 1922 in Berlin, and examine its centrality for Russian culture, art, and literature, and then its intersections with German and consequently European culture, ending with a note of its impact on subsequent events in the twentieth century.



For a few years at the beginning of the 1920s, Berlin became the cultural center of Russian artistic life. Russian writers, actors, and artists supplied Berlin's newspapers, journals, and art exhibitions with an extraordinary array of creative output. A simple listing of the names is awe inspiring. So many would make significant contributions to their own cultures and to the Western tradition. In the art world especially their names and works are inextricably intertwined with the history of modern twentieth century art. El Lissitzky and Vasily Kandinsky are two whose works hang in the New York City Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art. The writers may be less well known abroad, although who can imagine Russian literature of the twentieth century without Boris Pasternak's novel, *Doctor Zhivago*? Vladimir Nabokov was just emerging as a writer, and would go on, of course, to greater fame for his English novels, *Lolita*, *Invitation to a Beheading* and others that have earned their place of honor in American literature. His father was editor of one of the Russian language newspapers in Berlin at the time, and his assassination was a sign of the growing intolerance for political diversity. Nabokov's archives are in the New York Public Library. Maxim Gorky was in Berlin and Germany at the time. He had a world reputation and had been to New York some fifteen years earlier. We will mention more and elaborate on a few key figures in a moment. But first we need to answer the question, "Why were all these Russians in Berlin?"

Several factors at the beginning of the 1920's, among them political, economic and historical-cultural, combined to make Berlin an appealing community for the Russian intelligentsia. First the political. Berlin had emerged from World War I somewhat poorer and wiser than before—but its cultural and architectural heritage were intact. In 1920 with the unification of the surrounding communities Berlin became a metropolis of four million inhabitants. The events of the nineteen thirties have overshadowed the city's heritage of tolerance. In the seventeenth century Berlin had granted refuge to the Jews of Europe and later to the French Huguenots. In the early 1920's some 100,000 Russians lived here and another 300,000 were scattered around other parts of Germany.

Political factors likewise favored Berlin. After the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 had brought an early cessation of hostilities between Russian and Germany. The Bolshevik regime desperately needed trading partners and the Weimar Republic still smarting from the burden of the Treaty of Versailles had signed an economic agreement in Berlin in May of 1921 that resulted in *de facto* recognition of Soviet Russia. By November 1921 Russia had permanent diplomatic representation in Berlin and on April 16, 1922 the Treaty of Rapallo between Germany (the Weimar Republic) and Bolshevik Russia extended diplomatic and economic relations as each renounced all territorial and financial claims against the other following World War I. The two governments agreed to normalize their diplomatic relations and to "co-operate in a spirit of mutual goodwill in meeting the economic needs of both countries". The treaty actually contained in it the first seeds of what would become World War II, a secret annex that allowed Germany to train their military in Soviet territory, in violation of the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty of Rapallo ended the diplomatic isolation of both countries in the wake of World War I and the Russian Revolution of 1917. It was quite frankly a reaction of both nations to the Treaty of Versailles and the positing of a united front against the West.

The economic conditions in Germany at the time also played a considerable role in attracting a critical mass of literary and cultural figures. Differences in the value of currencies resulted in a particularly low cost of living for those with access to the more stable currencies. Thus a writer or

publisher who could sell some of his or her works in Paris, or London or New York, could benefit from an advantageous exchange rate. This seemingly favorable arrangement would soon have the drastic consequences of hyperinflation for those living in Germany, but for most of 1922 there was a real window of opportunity in Berlin. In that year Berlin would have forty Russian language publishing houses, three major daily Russian newspapers and more than twenty Russian journals.

The emergence of the Russian press and printing industry in Berlin is a topic once well documented. As the Bolshevik authorities consolidated their political gains in 1918, they succeeded in stifling newspapers and journals unsympathetic to their cause and views in those areas where they had military control. The Civil War in Russia presented a complicated picture of temporary papers in pockets unoccupied by the Bolsheviks. At least as effective as the political and legal obstructions to printing were the material difficulties and shortages of newsprint, ink and paper which even when available were allocated to more mundane and pragmatic areas.

Within the borders of Bolshevik Russia precious little was printed. There were the publishing houses of Alkonost' and Gržbin, but the figures for new book titles which appeared in 1920 were disappointing: Great Britain produced 11,026, America 8,329, compared with Germany that had 32,345, while Russia had a meager 742. Meanwhile the explosive growth of the numbers of Russians living abroad, including many of the intellectual elite, constituted fertile grounds for literally hundreds of publishing ventures. Figures vary on this account. One source claims that Berlin had fifty five Russian language periodicals in 1922 and identified 471 Russian language books published in the city in that year. Many of these ventures were short-lived (the collapse of the German economy in 1923 would doom them), but while they flourished, Russian writers prospered. The publishing houses that sprang up would soon compete with each other for writers and works as vigorously as they advertised their wares in the newspapers. And the center of this activity would become Berlin.

Aleksandr Jashchenko, the editor of the leading bibliographical journals of the Russian emigration summed up some of the reasons for Berlin's prominence:

"By the beginning of 1922 the significance of Berlin in the field [of publishing] had been established. The freedom and tolerance of the German republic, the friendly and hospitable relationship of the German people (the only ones who had been a true friend of Russians in the most difficult days), the assembly here, because of those reasons, of significant intellectual and entrepreneurial forces, the low cost of production, the skill and adaptability of German typography, a highly developed system of international trade, the liberalism of German legislation of the press - all these and many more conditions facilitated Berlin becoming in actuality the third (intellectual) capital of Russia. The laws of the economic competition . . . resulted slowly but surely in that almost all the Russian book publishers in countries other than Germany were forced to cease operations or transfer their book publishing to Germany."

The final factor, the historical-cultural one, need only be touched upon. Germany had long held attraction for Russians. Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Chekhov had frequented the spas and casinos of

Baden Baden; many Russians had made frequent study trips abroad to German Universities of Heidelberg, Marburg, Berlin and other cities. Many Jewish families sent their sons abroad to get the higher education closed off to them in Tsarist Russia. Then there was the rich German cultural heritage that found resonance in Russian intellectual families at the turn of the century. Andrei Bely, who himself would become a leading figure in Berlin in the 1920s recalls:

I considered my first real contact with culture to be those evenings of a distant past when my mother would play Beethoven's sonatas and Wagner's preludes.... My first touch of poetry was when my German governess would read aloud the verse of Uhland, Goethe and the tales of Anderson. Music, Uhland, Goethe and Anderson awoke in me an unending love of art, a love that with a certain childish reticence I kept thoroughly concealed. The esthetic forces awakening in me were connected with Uhland and Anderson, and that later manifested themselves on the character of my youthful symphonies, were held together in strict Germanic tones. Perhaps that is why there still lives in me a love of old Germany and of Germany itself, for the German music of Beethoven, Schuman, Wagner, for the art of Dürer, Wolflgemut, Grünewald and Striegel, for the poetry of Goethe, the romantics, Nietzsche, for the philosophy of Kant, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Rikkert and again Nietzsche, for the mysticism of Eckhart, Böhme, and among the contemporaries Rudolf Steiner. Everything that I loved in the West was automatically connected for me with Germany.

As much as there were reasons to come to Germany, there were dark clouds on the horizon in Russia for intellectuals. In August of 1921 Aleksandr Blok, a key intellectual figure sympathetic to the revolution had died. More menacing was the arrest and ultimate execution of the poet Nikolai Gumilev. This signaled an end to the "hands-off-policy" on intellectuals, and the fall of 1921 saw significant departures.

I have proposed elsewhere that "Russian Berlin" be dated from the fall of 1921 to October 1923 – neither the starting nor ending dates are arbitrary. The arrivals in Berlin of several Russian writers in the fall were noted on the pages of the newspaper, *Golos Rossii (The Voice of Russia)*: Aleksei Remizov on September 27, 1921; Maksim Gorky September 29. On November 22, 1921 (3), the paper announced "The famous writer Andrei Bely had arrived in Berlin." While there were some signs of emerging literary activity in Berlin in September and October, it was in November that Aleksandr Drozdov's journal, *Spoloxi (Northern Lights)*, first appeared with poems by Sirin (Sirin-Vladimir Nabokov) and the Moscow Art Theater was performing. By late November 1922 the literary elite currently residing in Berlin included Aleksei Tolstoy, Aleksei Remizov, Lev Shestov, Ilya Erenburg, and a dozen other important, albeit today forgotten figures.

Russian artists were also no strangers to Germany – they had considerable intellectual ties to the country. Two artists in particular were closely allied to Germany even before the war. El Lissitzky had studied in Darmstadt and Kandinsky had studied in Munich.



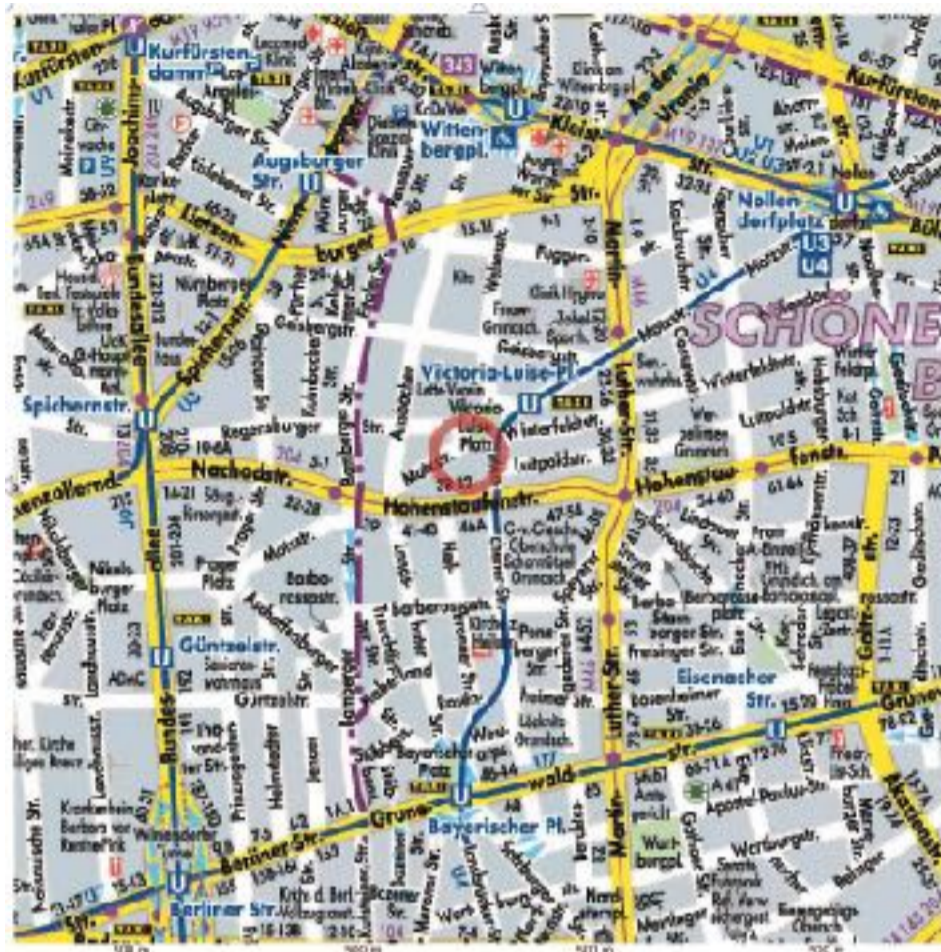
The center of this intellectual activity so colorfully described by Bely is “the part of Berlin that the Russians call Petersburg, but the Germans call Charlottengrad.... Bely himself would first settle in on Passauerstrasse directly across the street from Berlin’s Macy’s, the famous Ka-De-We (Kaufhaus des Westens).



The Wittenbergplatz was for Russians *le Parti du Plaisir*. There began the Charlottenberg “Kuznetsk Most.” Those who have been fortunate enough to walk the streets of Berlin will recognize most of these places even today.

Little remains of their physical presence. I pause for a moment to recall the words I wrote in 1984 when I first began my study of Russian Berlin. The Russian cemetery at Wittestrassen (Russkaja Pravoslavnaia Cerkov' sv. Ravnoapostolnykh carej Konstantina i Eleny) guards peacefully the remains of the few hundred Russians who perished in the city after 1917, including the grave of V. D. Nabokov (the famous author’s father). Most of the houses are gone too—victims of the bombing of Berlin. Twenty percent of all the buildings were destroyed and another fifty percent severely damaged. The Cafe Landgraf, the Grand Casino Nollendorf and the Cafe Leon (actually the Cafe and Conditorei of Gustav Leon) where Erenburg, Remizov, Esenin, Pasternak, Majakovskij, Sklovskij, Cvetaeva, Xodasevic, A. Tolstoj and A. Belyj would come together are no longer to be found. The Prager Pension and Prager Diele are gone. Here at Erenburg’s *Stammtisch* the literary elite would gather and in the words of Belyj “*pragerdil'stvovat'*.” A curious exception is the house at Viktoria Luise Platz 9 where the top floors were occupied by the widow Ella Crampe’s Pension. Xodasevich lived here with Nina Berberova. So, too for a time, did Andrei Bely, Geršenson and Nikolai Nikitin. For one of the first discussions of the Berlin emigration see HANS VON RIMSCHA, *Rußland jenseits der Grenzen 1921-1926*, Jena 1927. An excellent overview is contained in FRITZ MIERAU, *Russen in Berlin: 1918-1933: Eine kulturelle Begegnung*. Weinheim, 1988. When I returned in the summer of 2005 to walk those same streets again I found a glorious sense of urban renewal that has restored many of these squares or circles to their former beauty.

I have published on my website: **A Walk through Berlin with Andrei Bely.**



“Begin at his last address where he lived from September 1922 until October 1923 at the Crampe Pension located in the historic Viktoria Luise Platz 9. (U-Bahn Viktoria Luise Platz). You can walk down along Motzstrasse to Prager Platz, where the famous Prager Diele, Ilya Ehrenburg’s Stammtisch and residence were located and where Bely met Marina Tsvetaeva in May of 1922. Another frequent hangout was the Flora Diele at Motzstrasse 65 (on the corner of Martin Luther Strasse).

But be sure to head up toward Nollendorfplatz where the now gone Café Leon was the meeting place for the Berlin House of Arts. Not far away was the Café Landgraf at Kurfürstenstrasse 75, also home to the House of Arts for a period. Also on Kurfürstenstrasse 115-116 Russians held their ball to raise funds for the starving in Russia. At Kleiststrasse 10, the Logenhaus, Bely would introduce Thomas Mann, who lent his own support to that relief effort.

If you walk to the famous KDW at Wittenberg Platz, then along Tauentzienstrasse you can look left, where a parking garage has replaced Bely’s first residence in Berlin Passauerstrasse 3. Off of Wittenberg Platz you can follow Bayreuther Strasse to Number 10 where the Remizovs would first reside at the Pension Schnabel before moving to something more permanent at Kirchstrasse. Most of the houses and cafes were destroyed during the war. Curiously when the city was rebuilt, more often than not a new café arose where an old one had stood.”

The very “best of times” in Russian Berlin were in 1922, and I would like to focus on two segments of that year, March/April and October/November, as pivotal in understanding the challenges to Russian intellectual life.



March 1922 was the apex of intellectual life of Russian Berlin. April 1922 represents a key turning point – the beginning of the end – for those blessed with hindsight. Russians of all political factions as well as Europeans could still join together in a common cause. The most compelling of these was the urge to help the starving in Russia, the Famine of 1921-1922 that called forth international relief efforts. The month that was rich with cultural and social events, balls, concerts, lectures, meetings, began optimistically for the Russian community, but it would end in tragedy and signal hard times to come.

On March 1, 1922 the price of the daily newspaper edited by the senior Nabokov, *Rul'* (*The Rudder*), was raised from 1 Mark to 1,50 Mark. The next day the paper reported that another Russian language newspaper, *Golos Rossii* (*The Voice of Russia*), was preparing legal action against the editors of *Novyj Mir* (*The New World*) for personal attacks on its editors. According to the latest official count, the number of foreigners in Berlin had reached 220,000, with Russians constituting the largest group. On March 7 an ominous foreshadowing in retrospect appears in an announcement of the arrest of Socialist Revolutionaries in Moscow. Scores of them, the intellectual elite, would be expelled from Russia in the fall of 1922. (A phenomenon that some of you might remember was repeated by the Soviet government in the 1970s and 1980s). On March 7 and again on March 10, there was an announcement in *The Rudder* for a March 10<sup>th</sup> meeting. A report of that March 10 public meeting held at the Philharmonic Hall, Bernburger Straße 22-23 was carried under the headline "A Meeting to Aid the Starving." Chaired by Vladimir Nabokov senior, at the meeting Andrei Bely spoke of the responsibility of the Russian intelligentsia to put aside its opinions on the cause of the famine and simply come to a realization of the necessity to assist those who were starving.

Bely was apparently both eloquent and convincing. Testimony to his power of persuasion was a note printed a few days later that an anonymous female donor had sent through her children 100 Marks and two golden chains with a note in which she mentioned that after the speech by Andrei Bely "all of our golden ornaments seem to bear the mark of the dark spirit" and that she was donating them to help the starving. In all the evening raised eighty-five thousand Marks.

This first fund raising event had barely passed when ads appeared for another event to be held on Sunday evening, March 19, a concert ball at the Brüdervereinshaus on Kurfürstenstrasse for the aid of starving children in Russia. The artistic group Blue Bird (*Синяя птица*) was scheduled to perform along with Bely and Aleksei Remizov.



I have mentioned his name already several times. Perhaps because I began the research for my dissertation on Andrei Bely in the New York Public Library, and because he has dominated so much of my own scholarly career, I assume him to be a household name. Vladimir Nabokov, would call Bely's novel *Petersburg*, one of the greatest of the twentieth century. Like most Russian modernist novels, however, it lacks any adequate translation. Bely was the golden boy of Russian symbolism. Brilliant, eccentric, with sometimes encyclopedic knowledge that ranged from philosophy and aesthetics to natural history, Bely was to the Russian language and Russian prose, what James Joyce is to the novel and English language. Both stretched language and thought to the outer edges of comprehensibility. The major

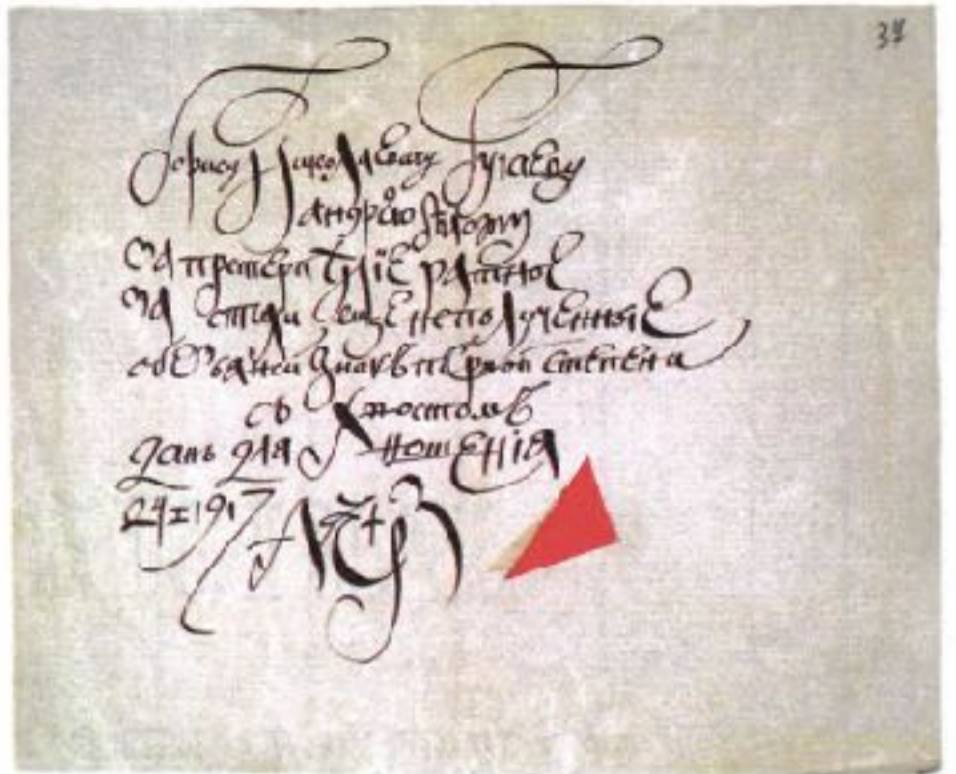
difference was that Bely believed in the “Magic of Words,” in the ability of art to go beyond the confines of our earthly perception of time and space, our waking existence, and provide insight into the ethereal world. Here Bely was inspired by Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy. Those familiar with Waldorf Schools here in the United States or the American Anthroposophical Society with a bookstore and reading room on 15th Street in Manhattan will recognize his name. Christian Morgenstern and Wassily Kandinsky, I might add, were both equally fascinated and attracted by Steiner’s teachings. In Berlin Bely would assume the role of the leading literary and social figure, organizing and participating in several groups including the Russian House of the Arts in Berlin. He published twenty two major works in the short span of two years – and breathed new life into his own literary career.



Bely would be joined by Alexei Remizov, one of the most prolific writers of the Berlin period. Remizov was near-sighted, short, and impish in delightful, albeit for some disturbing ways. Remizov too would publish dozens of works in his two short years in Berlin.

He had formed his own Simian Chamber - the Great Free Order of the Apes or Planet of the Apes - into which he inducted members, held meetings, and celebrated their membership with handmade certificates that are highly valued today by collectors.





Both Bely and Remizov were central figures at the most important event of March 1922 that brought together the German and Russian literary communities. As we have said starvation in Russia served as a common cause uniting various political factions in the emigre community. On Monday evening, March 20, the House of the Arts arranged for the appearance of Thomas Mann who spoke at a benefit performance for writers in Petrograd in the Logenhaus (Kleiststraße 10).

Mann spoke first on the theme of Goethe and Tolstoi after which Bely thanked the writer (in German) for his help. At the second half of his performance Mann read from his *Das Eisenbahnunglück*. Bely stands as something of an exception among Russians, having published some works in German, for example "Die Antroposophie und Russland" in the journal *Die Drei*. Bely's remarks that evening were eventually found and published in Russian translation, and then in the original German text. They are significant as testimony to one of the very few documented intersections between the Russian literary community and its German counterpart. Russian, i.e. the Russian language, was both the means of communication which fostered community, while at the same time the lack of Russian proficiency excluded most Westerners from entrance into that Russia Abroad. A few excerpts of Bely's comments - now in my own English translation point to the significance of Mann's participation.

... on behalf of the Russian writers and Russian audience permit me to express our gratitude. We thank you for the enormous artistic pleasure that you have prepared for us, and even more that you answered our call, in these difficult times, as we stand helpless before the enormousness of the misery that has overtaken our country, .... Seeing you with us today, after the all the horrors of the war years, we can believe again that once more we can all relate to one another as people, regardless of one's nationality. Today you have come to us as a German writer, today a common cause had united us. May such instances of individual interactions, individual encounters between Germany and Russia repeat themselves more often, so that in the face of never ending human sorrow and never ending human joy, from one heart to another heart we will spin a yarn of true brotherly love and unity.

Just when the community had seemingly come together, united by the need of Russians in the motherland, the passing of an era could be seen. Roman Goul, long time editor of the Russian *Новый журнал* (*New Journal*), a resident of New York City, but a youthful witness to the events of Russian Berlin, cited the tender sensitivities of the intellectual community, quick now to take offense as a key reason behind the demise of several publishing ventures. A tug of war was beginning for the minds and hearts of Russians, drawing some home to Russia, threatening the final break with those who remained in Europe. Events soon conspired to make Russia's writers focus on more important issues, life's choices and death. Political developments would soon force many to make a choice of being "with them" or "against them." The newspaper *Накануне* (*On the Eve*), sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause, seen by some as an instrument of the Russian government, began publishing in the final days of March.

The regular meeting of the House of the Arts scheduled for March 31 was dedicated to the memory of V. D. Nabokov who had been shot on March 28.



This assassination, perhaps more than any other event, symbolized the new emerging intolerance in the Russian emigre community. Nabokov, now better remembered as father of the author, a leading figure the Kadet Party (Constitutional Democrats) was shot several times as he attempted to protect Pavel Miliukov, who had just finished the first half of his lecture. On March 30, a funeral service was held at the old Russian Embassy Church, which had continued operating at Unter den Linden 7 even after the fall of the Romanovs. Along with representatives of Russian groups, Andrei Bely was present. On



March 31 the body was transferred to the Orthodox Church attached to the cemetery in Tegel, and on the next day, April 1, Nabokov was buried.

That March 31 meeting of the House of the Arts found the group in another location, this time the Nollendorf Casino on Kleiststraße 41. A curious argument developed between A. Bely and Aleksei Tolstoi on the theme of the "Changing Signpost" movement supported by the new Russian newspaper *On the Eve*.

This was an issue of great concern to many and one that would seriously divide the emigre community in Berlin. The Bolshevik newspaper, *New World*, announced in the April 5 issue that it was ceasing publication, and *On the Eve* had begun just a few days previously in the last week of March.



There was widespread belief that the paper was sponsored by and controlled from inside of Russia. The demise of *New World* caused few tears at *The Voice of Russia* which reported in its article: "This is a matter of simple change and renewal. *New World* dies in order that in its place it immediately arises in a worthy successor and heir as *On the Eve*" (April. 6, 1922, 2). While some were quick to denounce this idealized view of Bolshevism, the movement nevertheless succeeded in attracting a number of followers and in some ways served as an intermediary stage on the road back to Russia. For more on the *smenovexovcy* (changing signposts) cf. Peter Drews, "Russische Schriftsteller am Scheideweg – Berlin 1921–1923," *Anzeiger für Slavische Philologie*, 12 (1981), 120-132.

It was into this whirlwind of events that the journal, *The Object*, made its appearance. The first issue was dated March-April, 1922. Let us take a moment to examine it more closely.



The title page itself, the bold red cover with the stark lines of El Lissitzky and the backward "L" shape that would adorn his own stationery and become his signatory trademark were intended to signal a new Age in Art, both a return and step forward – a rapprochement, a reunification of the artistic bonds that had existed between Russian artists in particular and their European counterparts. Lissitzky was no stranger to this world and there could hardly have been a better representative. He himself had studied and lived abroad. We might also note the cosmopolitan factor, the linguistic competence in German of Lissitzky and in French of Ehrenburg. Language was less necessary of course for artists – their works spoke for them, unlike the writers who lived in linguistic exile inside their own Russian language communities surrounded by a foreign linguistic, literary and cultural reality. Words and languages when shared in common facilitate communication – indeed encourage it; but when a common language is not available – the Tower of Babel

syndrome – babble ensues. Curiously the Russian word for German is немец derived from the root нем in the adjective нем-ой, meaning «dumb», without speech.

Let us position or sandwich the journal, *The Object*, between its two editors and creators, El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg.

Лазарь Маркович Лисицкий better known as *El Lissitzky* was born in 1890. Like many other Jews living in the Russian Empire at the time, Lissitzky went to study in Germany. He left the Russian Empire to study architecture and engineering at a [Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt](#). In 1920 he worked at Vitebsk along with Chagall and Malevich. In 1921 he came to Berlin where he assumed the role of Russia's cultural representative. His career has several aspects that should interest us: his own contributions to art, and his graphic work that illustrated the covers of books of Berlin, and his attempts to unite the artistic forces of Western Europe under a single banner.

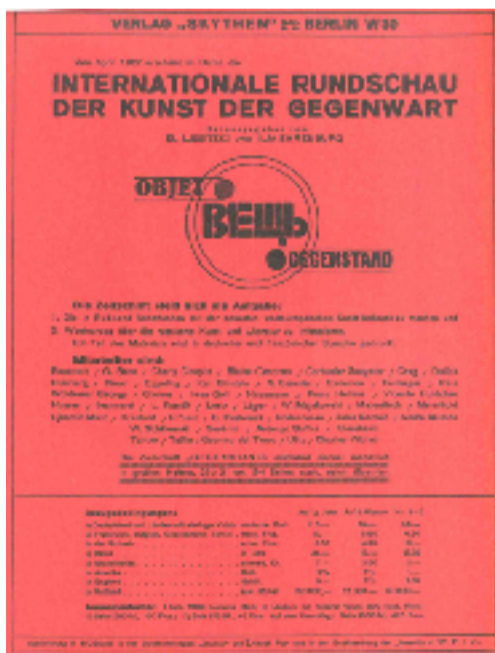
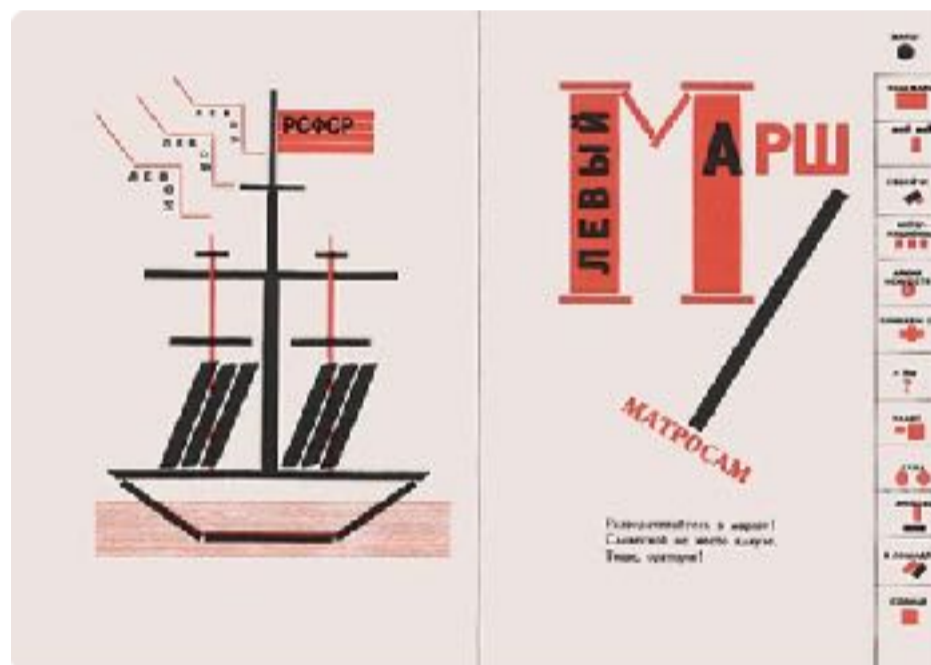
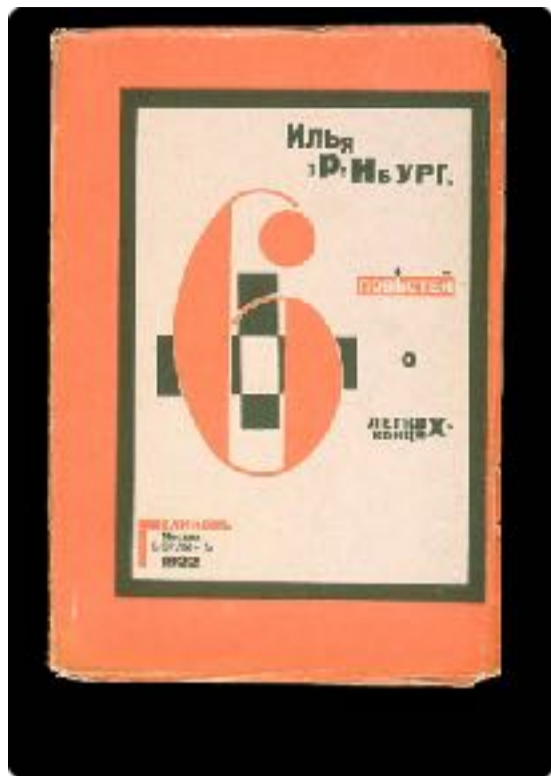


Lissitzky's own major contribution to art was what he himself called the Proun. Pro- OON – actually an abbreviation of the Russian проект утверждения нового (a project asserting the new). This project or object in art moved beyond the suprematism of Malevich—and two dimensional design. Although we should note that Lissitzky himself produced a number of suprematist style works, including the famous *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*.



But his leap into the third dimension exhibited an aspect of architecture as much as it was of art, and it would echo later in the works of the Bauhaus and Constructivist movement. As architecture as much as art, it lent itself naturally to the conviction of the utilitarian nature of art. This notion that art had a purpose beyond itself was supported both by Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, and would a decade later turn from an artistic credo into a decree of Socialist Realism, demanding that all art serve the aims and needs of the revolution and society.

In addition to his paintings, Lissitzky was quickly becoming a master and innovator in typographical design. His covers for the works of Ilya Ehrenburg and Vladimir Mayakovsky created in 1922 and 1923 indicate that mastery. His own innovation and combination of art and typography are wonderfully captured in his book, *Two Squares*, that foreshadowed by half a century Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "The Medium is the Message."



But let's turn back to *The Object – The Thing*. (I want to point people in the direction of an extraordinary 1994 Verlag Louis Mueller in Baden reproduction and commentary with translations into English by Roland Nachtigaele and Hubertus Gassner, on which I have relied heavily.) The journal itself appeared only twice, the first issue of March-April 1922, numbered 1-2 has thirty two pages of text enclosed in covers of brilliant red.

The inside cover points to the purpose and to the supporters, or like thinkers, sympathizers. They included Charlie Chaplin, Sergei Esenin, Boris Pasternak, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Viktor Shklovsky, Rodchenko, Tatlin, and more than a dozen French and Germans: Charels Vildrac, Jules Romain, Courboiser-Saugnier.



The stated purpose of the journal on the inside cover was "To inform those working in Russia of the very latest in Western European Art" and "To inform Western Europe about Russian art and literature."

The first page of the new journal is a striking example of what in retrospect was "wishful thinking" on the parts of Ehrenburg and Lissitzky. Their manifesto printed in German, French and Russian called for a recognition that after the seven years of separation caused by the tragedy of World War I that art is International. The manifesto goes on to declare that "the main element of modern art is the Dominance of The Constructivist Method. ... Art is not to embellish life, but to organize it. We have called our journal, *The Object*, because for us art is the creation of new objects – new things."

The pages of the journal did indeed unite under one cover notes on art, poetry, a news section on the latest developments in art including word of the Dusseldorf Art Exhibit scheduled for June 1922 and sections on dance, music and cinema.

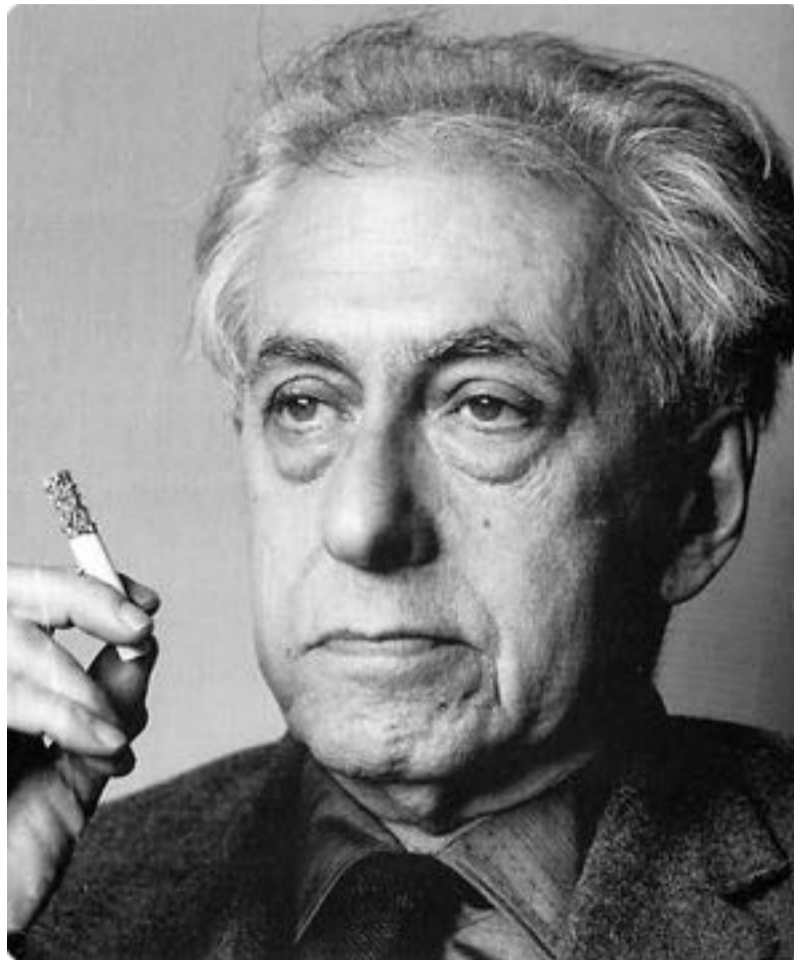
The second and final issue of May 1922, Number 3 was enclosed in burnt orange.



It contained more of the same, along with a running commentary concerning critical reactions to the first issue, perceived by at least some as a threat to art itself.

The Erste Internationale Kunstausstellung mentioned in *The Object* was held in Düsseldorf from May 28 to July 3, 1922. Lissitzky along with Hans Richter (who would make a name for himself in modern film and teach film at the CCNY and whose archives at the Museum of Modern Art) set off for Düsseldorf hoping to unite under the label of "Constructivism" those who opposed expressionism and what they labeled "impulsivism." Ivan Puni, who himself would figure later in the year in Berlin argued instead on behalf of emotion and intuition as the sources of all art. In fact the "progressive artists" of Düsseldorf essentially rejected the utilitarian, rational approach to modern art proposed by Lissitzky. One could go on: the battle lines were drawn and the ongoing conflict of the whether the true purpose of art is *dolce* or *utile* – beauty and entertainment or informative and practical continues today.

Let us return back to back again to Berlin and Ehrenburg – the other author of *The Object*.



Perhaps no one was more cosmopolitan of the Russians than Ilya Grigorevich Ehrenburg born 1891 in Kiev. In 1906 both Ehrenburg and Nikolai Bukharin joined the Bolshevik organization. Bukharin would be a leading Bolshevik, later editor of *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, a political player along with Lenin and Stalin until his execution in 1938, and the fairy godfather for Ehrenburg. In 1908 Ehrenburg was arrested, released, went to Paris where he met Lenin and also made the acquaintance of Picasso and Marc Chagall.

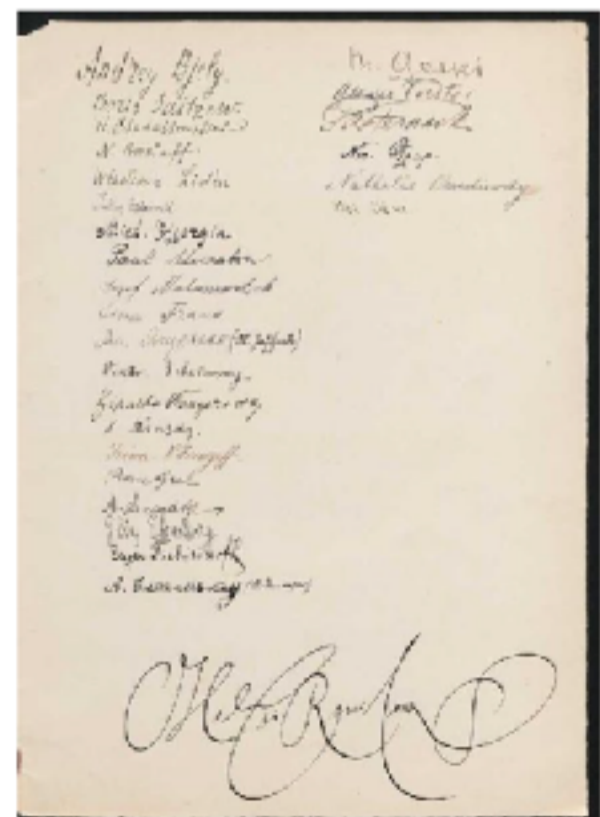
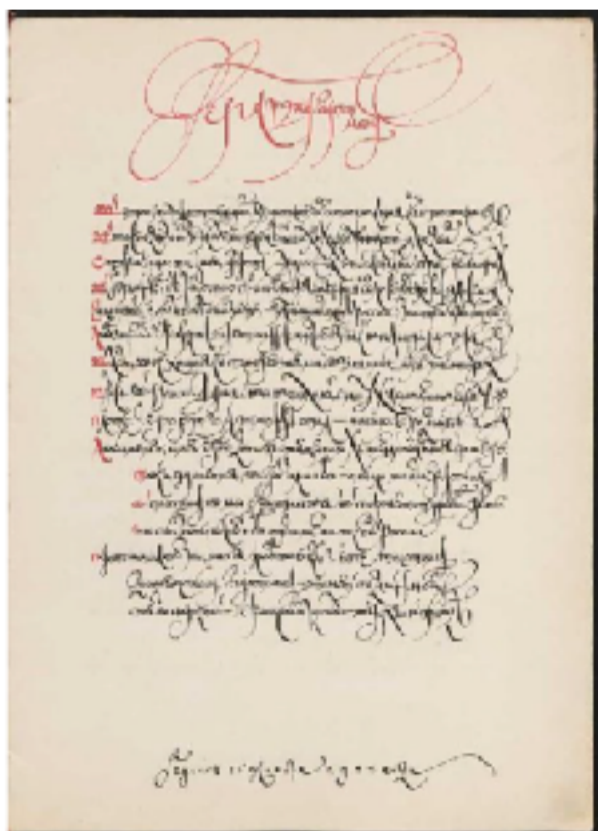
In World War I Ehrenburg worked as a war correspondent for Russian newspapers. In 1919 he married Lyubov Kozintseva, herself an artist and a lifelong connection for Ehrenburg with the community of artists, including El Lissitzky.

With Bukharin's help, Ehrenburg was one of the first Soviet intellectuals to be granted a passport to travel abroad first to Paris in March 1921. When in October 1921, Ehrenburg moved to Berlin, his own *Stammtisch* – table at the local bar and grill, became THE gathering place for the literary elite living in or traveling through Berlin. The Prager Diele on Pragerplatz was where Berlin's literary and sometimes artistic elite assembled to pay homage to the man and be in his company, while at the same time encountering all of Russian Berlin. Ehrenburg, forever the optimist, might have seemed to some an example of having your cake and eating it too—being able to look and write critically of the Bolshevik regime, without necessarily incurring its wrath. But Ehrenburg was not above controversy, and his name figures prominently in some of the literary scandals of the day.

The 1922 Erste Internationale Kunstausstellung in Düsseldorf did not bring unity to the world of art—if anything it highlighted the essential split between two competing concepts of what art could and should be and what it should do. Tempers did have a chance to cool during the heat of the summer spent at North Sea resorts of Swinemünde, but the fall of 1922 signaled the end of the days for “peaceful co-existence” of political factions. Two events were a last chance to celebrate collectively. The first was a celebration to honor the thirtieth anniversary of Maxim Gorky’s literary debut with the publication of his story “Makar Chudra.”



In November to celebrate the sixtieth birthday of the German writer, Gerhardt Hauptmann, a gala was held in Berlin. The Russian literary elite were not invited, but Andrei Bely authored and Aleksei Remizov illustrated series of texts four versions Russian Cyrillic, Russian Glagolitic, German German script signed by twenty seven Russian writers in Berlin at the time that have been preserved in the archives of the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. Cf. Beyer, “ANDREI BELY, GERHART HAUPTMANN, ALEXEI REMISOW - EINE BEGEGNUNG IN BERLIN: Zum 150. Geburtstag von Gerhart Hauptmann. *Bibliotheks Magazin*, I (2013), 76-80.





In the fall of 1922 more Russian intellectuals, this time expelled from their homeland would arrive, inflation was on the rise and the seeds of the dispersal again of the Russian artistic and intellectual community a year later in the fall of 1923 were already in place, but that is another story.

As mentioned above the Erste Internationale Kunstausstellung mentioned in *The Object* was held in Düsseldorf from May 28 to July 3, 1922. For our purposes, the scandal that broke apart Russian Berlin was an artistic one that spilled over onto the literary community. The specific occasion was an extraordinary exhibit of Russian art at the Galerie van Diemen on Unten den Linden # 21, which had opened on October 15. It presented works by over 150 artists and 500 works. Among those displayed were Burliuk, Chagall, Kandinsky, Kustodiev, Malevich, Benoi, Wasiliev, Zetlin and Tatlin. (A catalogue of the *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung*, Berlin 1922, can be found in Bibliothek zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz. )

### First Russian Art Exhibition, Gallery van Diemen, Berlin 1922



From r. to l.: D. Sterenberg, D. Marianov, N. Altman, N. Gabo, F. A. Lutz.



There is a catalogue of the exhibit, the cover designed by Lissitzky, that was sponsored by the Russian Peoples Commissariat for Art and Education. It attempted to gather under one roof representatives of all the movements of Russian art, so much of which had been cut off from the West by the war, revolution, and then ensuing civil war. The extensive catalogue with illustrations of many of the works would in themselves fill our time period. I have selected just a representative sampling of the artists and their works – even if not all these works were displayed at the van Diemen gallery.

I am not an art historian, nor do I pretend to be able to shed much light on the intricate and convoluted set of relationships and schools of art to which Russians belonged. But I am sure your breath will be taken away as was mine by the brief encounter that follows.

Beginning on the political and artistic right, the conservative old school of Russians, Viktor Vasnetsov (1848–1926) exhibited his *Battle of the Scythians and the Slavs*.



The World Of Art, a movement at the turn of the twentieth century, was represented by *The Merchants Wife* by Boris Kustodiev (1878–1927).





Also from the World of Art was Abram Arkhipov (1862–1930). *The Washer Women*.



The grouping , the Jack of Diamonds was represented by Pyotr Konchalovsky (1876–1956) in his *Oaks*.





Aristarkh Lentulov (1882–1943) also represented the Jack of Diamonds with his *Church with Red Roofs*.



The Russian expressionists had Marc Chagall (1887–1985), *Violins* and *I and the Village*.





David Burliuk (1882–1967), *The Russian Revolution*.



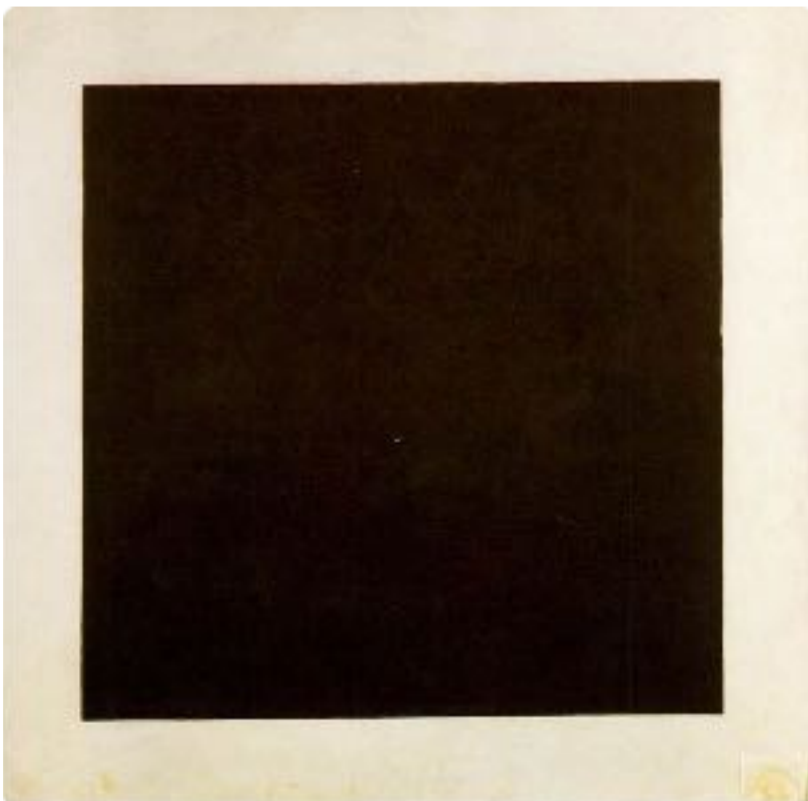
And the lesser known name at the time Pavel Filonov (1883 –1941), with his *Universal Flowering*.



Cubism can clearly be seen in the works of Ivan Puni (1892–1956), of whom more in just a minute.



The Supremacist school is embodied in Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935) *Black Square* and *Suprematism*. When Kazimir Malevich originated Suprematism, an art movement focused on fundamental geometric forms (squares and circles), in 1915 he was an established painter having exhibited in the Donkey's Tail and the Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) exhibitions of 1912 with cubo-futurist works. The proliferation of new artistic forms in painting, poetry and theatre as well as a revival of interest in the traditional folk art of Russia were a rich environment in which a Modernist culture was being born.

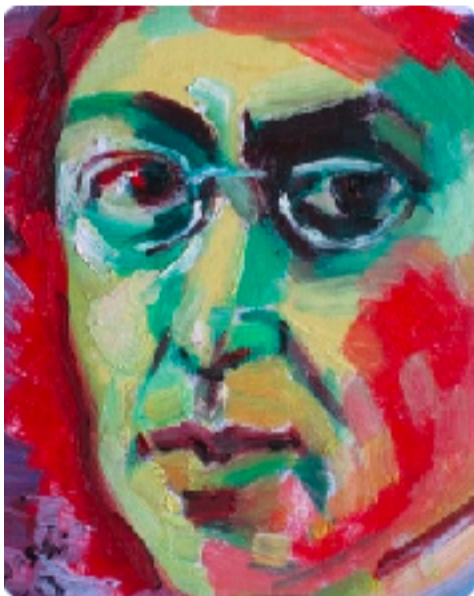




The school was also the inspiration for El Lissitzky in his *Proun 19d*.



Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) is a special case - considered a "mystic." There was his *Self-Portrait* and a work listed simply as *Composition*.



His own special contribution was his written work "The Spiritual in Art." As we have noted Kandinsky like Bely was influenced by Anthroposophy (and probably should not be studied outside of the context ).

The Constructivists included Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Composition #61*.



And to the left of all that was Natan Altman.



Altman's most famous painting may be his cubist portrait of Anna Akhmatova. But it was his poster art that evoked the greatest outrage.





So in fact this effort to please all, pleased very few indeed. While the exhibit ran from mid October to the end of December, the occasion that splintered Russian art and literature in Berlin occurred in the house of the Arts on Friday evening November 3. Andrei Bely who had just been elected president of the organization, a true mismatch if there ever was one, presided, or tried to offer a lecture by Ivan Puni.

Puni criticized the "subjectless" art, which after a few original designs had produced only "three hundred thousand combinations out of a single circle and a pair of squares. The result of this is that the artist, overwhelmed, tries to connect his art to some extraneous meaning...which brings forth the idea of utilitarianism. The artistic composition no longer justifies itself and so every subjectless artist wanted to be an engineer, or philosopher, or preacher, or organizer, or weaver, or midwife Very nice. But then comes the crash, since these people themselves see that there is nothing for them to do in art, this generation has ceased to exist for art. Whether the generation continues to exist in the guise of some dilettante engineer or midwife is absolutely irrelevant to us." The replies of Lissitzky, Natan Altman, Vladimir Mayakovsky came quickly. But then Viktor Shklovsky, famous later for this leading role in the Formalist School of Russian literary criticism, called some of Altman's pictures ones that even a "Schieber [swindler-crook]" wouldn't buy. To which a member of the audience cried out "Because he's a 'Schieber' himself."

With that any sense of decorum broke down, the meeting broke up as many stormed out. A few days later one of the factions formed its own Russian Writers Club.

Obviously the speech by Puni was simply the spark that incited a community where Ehrenburg had been recently insulted and every day saw the arrival in Berlin of intellectuals now being expelled from Russian that included Fedor Stepun and Nikolai Berdayev.

Things would never be the same again. The valiant attempt to bridge the gaps within the Russian community and beyond the Russian community were doomed to failure.

Yet what is left of the period? For many Russian writers, Russian Berlin of 1922 was their golden year. By the end of 1923 the hyperinflation overtaking Germany and violence in the streets probably reminded many of the events in Russia of 1917. Many returned to Russia, Bely who would publish little in the years before his death in 1934. His works were long ignored. Gorky moved on to Italy, returning only years later, and then to what most consider a not very happy existence. Some moved to Prague or Paris, Alexei Remizov died largely ignored or forgotten except for an aging group of Russians who kept alive his memory. Pasternak as we know would write the novel *Doctor Zhivago*, for which he was awarded the Noble Prize in literature, but feared to leave his county to accept it. Ehrenburg dies in 1967 – the ultimate survivor of them all. His own attempts to keep alive the memory of Russian literary figures were only partly successful in his lifetime. The uncensored version of his memoirs was published only in 1990. The lot of many writers was less than happy. Literary works of those who remained in the West and even of many who returned to Russia were suppressed or simply not reprinted. This condition prevailed well into the 1980s, and I am reminded of my age, for I remember clearly when it was Western scholars who could read and write and discuss Bely, Pasternak, Remizov, Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova, Nabokov and dozens of others.

And the artists? El Lissitzky returned to Russia in 1925 where he taught and worked more in architecture than in art until his death in 1941. David Burliuk would emigrate to the United States. Kandinsky went on to the Bauhaus school to teach until he departed Germany in 1933 and moved to Paris. Chagall went to Paris, then New York before returning to France in 1948. Puni went to Paris and died in France. Altman would go to Paris for a few years but returned and died in Leningrad. Rodchenko lived out his life in the Soviet Union but abandoned his expressionism in the final decades of his life. Malevich, too, remained largely in Soviet Russia, but succeeded in depositing many of his paintings in the West. In general all of this art that remained in the Soviet Union after the 1930s was kept under lock and key until the era of Mikhail Gorbachev. Whatever did remain was hidden from public viewing—a heritage ignored, denied, subjugated to a political will. Today it represents a proud moment in Russian history. Yet so many more of the paintings are in the West –many of them in New York City. I invite you to share the glories of Russian Berlin all over again.

One note of a similar occurrence. Russian Berlin and much of its legacy disappeared. The newspapers, journals, books, letters and diaries did not survive Hitler's rage or the war years. Nor except in Prague and perhaps the archives of the Russian secret service, whatever initials it was called by, was there an organized attempt to collect those materials. Sadly a similar phenomenon, Russian Brooklyn from the mid 1970s to late 1980s is in danger of a similar loss caused by oversight. Several hundred Russian writers, dozens of journals, Russian language newspapers, archives and documents are in danger of disappearing before our eyes.

In light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 there is little interest in the West to explore let alone celebrate the cultural legacy of Russians of bygone years. Perhaps on the model of the Cold War years a way will be found to keep alive that heritage and its memory by future generations of scholars. I invite the scholars among you, young and old, to examine and preserve those very rich contributions to Western civilization.

*This work was revised from a lecture presented at the New York Public Library in December of 2007.*