

# 100 Years On Revisiting the First Russian Art Exhibition of 1922

Edited by Isabel Wünsche  
and Miriam Leimer







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## Preface

The First Russian Art Exhibition, which opened its doors to the public one hundred years ago, on October 15, 1922, was an important step in familiarizing a broad western audience with the latest achievements in Russian art and in re-establishing cultural relations between Russia and the West after the First World War and the October Revolution. The scope of the exhibition—237 paintings, more than 500 graphic works, sculptures, stage designs, architectural models, and works of porcelain—was remarkably broad, ranging from traditional paintings in a figurative manner by artists such as Abram Arkhipov, Konstantin Korovin, and Boris Kustodiev to the latest avant-garde works, including cubo-futurist paintings by Nadezhda Udaltsova and Aleksandra Ekster, suprematist paintings by Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzky, and the constructions of Vladimir Tatlin, Naum Gabo, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Konstantin Medunetsky. The press coverage and numerous reviews sparked great interest and the exhibition attracted more than 15,000 visitors.

Apart from its artistic relevance, the First Russian Art Exhibition was, perhaps even more, a historically significant event. Organized in the year of the Rapallo treaty, it was an early step towards bilateral relations between the two young, still internationally isolated republics, Weimar and Soviet Russia. Political actors such as the German communist Willi Münzenberg; Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Enlightenment; the Russian diplomats Viktor Kopp and Konstantin Umansky; and even Lenin himself were involved in its planning and realization. On the German side, the exhibition project fit well with the newly established liberal state art policy in Weimar Germany and was promoted as such by the Republic's "art steward" Edwin Redslob as well as by Johannes Sievers in the Foreign Office. Thus, the show was not only a notable artistic event in the heart of the German capital in 1922 but served as an important tool of cultural diplomacy.

With this publication, we wish to commemorate this remarkable exhibition in the year of its 100th anniversary. The work presented here is the outcome of an international conference held in Berlin in October 2021; it reflects the latest research on the historical

aspects of the exhibition, exploring the circumstances of its conception, organization, and reception. This includes not only a comprehensive overview of its scope, but also an analysis of the agendas of the various organizations and promoters, details of the exhibition's realization, and the fate of the works after its closure. Further contributions explore the reception of the historic show and the impact it had on contemporary artists in Germany, the Netherlands, Hungary, the United States, and Japan. This broad historical perspective differentiates this volume from previous works, which have, above all, emphasized the exhibition's status as a "Station der Moderne."

The volume consists of four sections, framed by a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue and first part explore the multiethnic dimension of what was perceived as "Russian" in the early 1920s. In her prologue, Myroslava Mudrak focuses on the tendency toward a general "Russification" in Soviet art and culture at home and abroad that obscures or even repurposes the contributions of ethnic non-Russians in cultural modernism, a tendency that is still prevalent (not only) in art historical narratives today. Ulrich Schmid provides a historic overview, emphasizing that identification as "Russian" was not perceived in either ethnic or cultural terms but rather with a view to the territory of the fallen Russian Empire. The primary organizers of the First Russian Art Exhibition, Anatoly Lunacharsky, David Shterenberg, and Natan Altman were Jews from Ukraine and part of an internationally and culturally active elite; Monica Rüthers discusses the role of Jewish artists and the impact the Jewish Renaissance had on early Soviet art and culture. Looking beyond Wassily Kandinsky's role in German art history, Isabel Wünsche considers the encounters the German public would have had with the new Russian art prior to the 1922 exhibition.

The second part of the book is devoted to the history and politics of the exhibition. Reviewing its role in the creation of new forms of transnational solidarity between the West and Soviet Russia, Kasper Braskén reveals how International Workers' Relief illuminated the exhibition from the perspective of communist internationalism. Ewa Bérard reveals the various agendas connected with the exhibition project by highlighting the players involved in its organization.

This is complemented by Kristina Kratz-Kessemeier's analysis of the German responses to the Russian agenda and the efforts of the cultural representatives of the Weimar Republic to use the event for their efforts to establish a liberal art policy. Miriam Leimer discusses in her contribution the organization, venue, and scope of the actual show as staged at the Galerie van Diemen in Berlin in 1922. These essays are supplemented by short summaries on the main players and organizations involved in the exhibition project, as well as the artists who were instrumental in assembling and installing the works in Berlin.

The third part of the volume deals with the reception of the exhibition and its afterlife. Éva Forgács highlights responses to the Berlin exhibition by artists and art critics, revealing the high expectations and also the disappointment of some of the artists. The exhibition had a second venue in Amsterdam in 1923; Linda Boersma discusses the responses of the Dutch *De Stijl* artists. The Hungarian interest in the new Russian art is examined by Merse Pál Szeredi in his contribution on Lajos Kassák's interaction with Russian Constructivism in Vienna. A selection of Russian avant-garde works from the Berlin exhibition was acquired by Katherine S. Dreier and subsequently taken to the United States; Isabel Wünsche covers Dreier's efforts to introduce the American public to modern Russian art. Omuka Toshiharu discusses in his essay the encounters of Japanese artists with Russian avant-garde art and its impact in early 1920s Japan. The discussion of the exhibition in these contexts is further extended by short essays on contemporary artists, including their reactions to the exhibition and the inspiration they drew from the new Russian art.

The fourth part of the book presents the latest research on the historic museum collections in Moscow and Petrograd from which many of the works were drawn for the show in Berlin. Liubov Pchelkina and Irina Kochergina discuss their research findings with respect to works from the Collection of the Moscow Museum of Painterly Culture (MZhK) that they have been able to identify as having been shown in Berlin. Irina Karasik addresses the disagreements between the exhibition organizers and Petrograd artists regarding the appropriation of their work from the collection of the Petrograd Museum of Artistic Culture (MKhK).

Natalia Avtonomova, who has been researching the provenance and disposition of works in the Berlin exhibition for decades, has contributed an essay on selected paintings and graphic works that were shown in Berlin in 1922. Iryna Makedon, despite her current exile from her native Kyiv, was able to provide extensive documentation on the works from the exhibition that were subsequently dispatched to Ukrainian state museums. Dilyara Sadykova reports on one of the largest collections of avant-garde works from the 1922 Berlin exhibition, which was sent to the Krasnodar Regional Art Museum F.A. Kovalenko in the late 1920s. Another important lot is now in the Azerbaijan National Museum of Art in Baku and has been summarized for this volume by Naila Rahimova. Finally, in the epilogue, Ilia Doronchenkov discusses the avant-garde's utopian concept of *The International of Art*, highlighting the artists' striving for a transition from the national to an international outlook in the early post-war period.

The book's essays are complemented by an appendix, consisting of a selection of original documents, a list of abbreviations and acronyms, a list of archives, a selected bibliography, a contributors' list, image credits, and an index of names. The documentation includes important correspondence related to the organization of the exhibition, comprehensive lists of works included in the show, and the introduction from the original exhibition catalogue. The selected bibliography provides an essential overview for further reading on the subject of the First Russian Art Exhibition.

In this volume, we have followed American spelling and punctuation and the Chicago Manual of Style. Titles of art works, books, catalogues, journals, and newspapers are italicized; titles of articles, manuscripts, and conferences appear in quotation marks; names of societies and institutions are not specifically rendered. For the most part, the transliteration of Russian names of people and places, titles of works of art, publications, exhibitions, and other terms, follows a modified version of the US Library of Congress system.

For the names of people, however, we tend to use the form most commonly known to English speakers, e.g., Alexander Archipenko, David Burliuk, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, or the form commonly used by authors of a particular nationality. In cases

where the name of an artist or intellectual has its own long-established spelling, it has been kept, for example, Alexandre Benois, not Aleksandr Benua; Wassily Kandinsky, not Vasily Kandinsky; Marc Chagall, not Mark Shagal. Names are provided in full (first name, surname) at first mention; subsequent references to an individual within the same essay generally carry only the surname. In the case of Japanese names, we follow the convention of family name followed by first name.

Names of organizations, institutions, and the like are spelled out in full on first appearance; subsequent use is with the acronym. The list of abbreviations only includes abbreviations and acronyms that appear in more than one essay. For the Russian titles of publications and other references in the footnotes and the bibliography, we follow the approved transliteration scheme of the Library of Congress. In cases, in which the author's name is only given by initials, the publication is listed under the first initial in the bibliography. The index of names includes all persons appearing in the main text of the book, but not those of artists who only appear in customs documents, shipping lists, or similar lists of original documents. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Russian or other languages into English are by the respective author.



## Acknowledgements

This book is the result of intense discussions and lively exchanges between colleagues at the international conference “100 Years of German-Russian Cultural Exchange,” held at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin in October 2021. The event would not have been possible without the generous support of numerous individuals and institutions.

We wish to particularly thank the conference speakers for providing the inspiration and basis for our discussions. Special thanks goes to the leadership and event management of the Staatsbibliothek Berlin, Gudrun Nelson-Busch and Alexander Schwarz, for hosting and supporting our event as well as to Ludmila Piters-Hofmann, Oskar Manhart, and Karl Wünsche for their assistance in organizing the conference. We are grateful to the Russian Art & Culture Group and Jacobs University Bremen for their institutional support. We would also like to thank the curators of the Berlin State Museums, Irina Hiebert Grun and Kyllikki Zacharias, for presenting to the conference participants the re-installation of the permanent collection of the Neue Nationalgalerie.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, we felt it necessary to carefully evaluate our research and publication project. We are grateful to Myroslava Mudrak, Monica Rüthers, and Ulrich Schmid, who have helped us to broaden the perspective on “Russian art” and contributed essays on previously unconsidered aspects of the scholarly discourse.

The conference as well as the publication of the papers would not have been possible without the generous funding of the Kroll Family Trust, Switzerland; Kuhn & Bülow Insurance Broker Group; and the German Science Foundation (DFG). We wish to particularly thank Daniel Kroll and Michael Kuhn for their interest in the subject matter and generous support of the conference and book publication. We are pleased to now be able to make our research findings accessible to the greater scholarly community and interested public in an English-language publication in print and as an eBook.

Research for the book was conducted at various museums, archives, and libraries in Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Hungary, the Netherlands,

Finland, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan. We are grateful to the curators and staff of these institutions for their expertise and for making accessible their collections. For assistance with photographic material, image files, and reproduction permissions, we wish to thank the staff of Staatliche Museen zu Berlin und Staatsbibliothek, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz; Berlinische Galerie; Brücke Museum, Berlin; Landesarchiv Berlin, Bundesarchiv; the Russian State Archives of Literature and Art, Moscow; the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg; Krasnodar Regional Art Museum F.A. Kovalenko; Ivanovo Regional Art Museum; Volsk Museum of Local Lore; Samara Regional Art Museum; Tomsk Regional Art Museum; Azerbaijan National Museum of Art, Baku; City Archive Amsterdam; Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague; Petőfi Literary Museum–Kassák Museum, Budapest; Library of Congress; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura and Hayama, Japan, as well as the private collections that have provided support. We are particularly grateful to Graham and Nina Williams, Alexander Lavrentiev, and the Mary Ryan Gallery, New York for copyright permissions. Every attempt has been made to obtain permission to reproduce copyrighted material. If proper acknowledgment has not been made, copyright holders are invited to inform the editors of the oversight.

We are grateful to Kevin Pfeiffer for his translations of German-language texts and proofreading of the contributions of colleagues from Germany, Switzerland, Russia, Ukraine, the Netherlands, France, Finland, Hungary, and Japan. We furthermore thank Ludmila Piters-Hofmann for her Russian translations and careful proofreading of the manuscript and Kai-Jen Tsung for her assistance with the index. Last but not least, we wish to thank Kristi Doepner for her interest in the subject matter and shepherding of its publication by Böhlau and Bettina Waringer for her graceful book design.

Berlin, May 2022

Isabel Wünsche & Miriam Leimer

# 1 Prologue: Berlin 1922 and Ukraine 2022

On the centenary of the so-called “First Russian Art Exhibition,” it is worth taking a reflective moment not only to celebrate the anniversary of this landmark event, but to let it serve as an instructive paradigm that lays bare the complex, often contradictory strategies that continue to underlie Russia’s desire to shape a narrative about itself for western consumption. Indeed, the Berlin exhibition was, in every way, a publicity event. Though couched in the altruistic goal of raising funds for famine relief, the motives of the organizers were far more self-serving. In fact, little money was actually raised; the artists received little, if any, remuneration; and long after the event, many remained separated from the paintings they had contributed.

Notwithstanding, the First Russian Art Exhibition was meant also to satisfy the West’s curiosity (or more specifically a left-leaning, German curiosity) about Russia’s contemporary art. Already familiar with the Russian avant-garde and its break with academic conventions before the First World War, the liberal Germans were hoping to see how the ideological underpinnings of Bolshevism were beginning to also shape and influence a new, potentially revolutionary, artistic culture. Indeed, the revolution was bringing significant changes to the art scene in Russia. Mobilized to serve the state, artists of the recent avant-garde were attempting to translate their formalist pursuits into revolutionary tropes by employing experimental functionalism as an aesthetic that would support the new state.

The People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) managed the cultural processes by which the public would be systematically initiated into proletarian ideology through “education.” The concept of education in the Soviet context, however, was strongly politicized and nuanced, as intended by the word “*prosveshcheniya*.” Rather than suggesting an achieved end, the word implies a controlled process of public “enlightening” in accordance with a sole and unique aim: to bring about a communist consciousness in its subjects. Essentially, *prosveshcheniya* can be treated as a euphemism for what, in harsher, but truer, terms, we would today call propaganda. For that reason, it was Narkompros that took charge of managing cultural messaging of every kind—an important means of regulating and legitimizing Russia’s image, both at



home and abroad. The staging of Russia's self-perception externally, as the Berlin exhibition demonstrated, was intended to mirror the image propagated at home. A century later, we have become witnesses to this very process as Russia pushes forth its stance on Ukraine.

With the rising curiosity of western audiences, both then and now, it is easy to overlook the subtle manipulations of historical facts that inflect the image being projected. What is often deliberately omitted and therefore “invisible” in narratives about “Great Russia” in modern times is the blatant appropriation of non-Russian entities to build up the myth while denying recognition of the “other” players. Russia's staging of its self-image leaves us with a distorted sense of what the descriptor “Russian” means. In the context of modernist art, the bolstering of Russia's image at the expense of expunging the contributions of non-Russian populations, renders the term suspect.

When, in 1920, art aficionado and emissary Konstantin Umansky published on “New Art in Russia,” his book served as a stimulus for organizing the Berlin exhibition in 1922. Under the German title, *Neue Kunst in Russland 1914–1919*, the book launched a more widespread interest in contemporary art from Soviet Russia, and, in a sense, codified the progressive “eastern” avant-garde which had been presented sporadically at Herwarth Walden's Sturm gallery in Berlin since the 1910s. Notwithstanding his own background, Umansky's “marketing” of Russian art was a significant step toward the western adoption of the umbrella term “Russian avant-garde.” Born in Mykolaiv (Ukraine), the Jewish Umansky was a polyglot who, after joining the Communist Party in 1919, moved to Germany and later worked for the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA) in Vienna. A worldly man and art lover, he was perfectly positioned to tout Russian revolutionary modernism in the West. As he built a career on promoting the Soviet Union, Umansky continued to shape western perceptions about Russia. In May 1939, Stalin appointed him Ambassador of the Soviet Union to the United States, and later, Mexico. Having introduced the mostly German intellectual élite to Russian modernism abroad, Umansky laid the ground for what would amount to a subsequent wave of exposure to the art of a consolidated USSR, but now through the prism of an openly politicized era that took no accounting of national origin.

Anatoly Lunacharsky, the newly appointed People's

Commissar of Enlightenment, served as the official negotiator for the Berlin show. The son of a local government official, Lunacharsky, like Umansky, was born in Ukraine, in Poltava. As a young man he was attuned to the restrictions on freedoms imposed on the population and, at the age of 15, joined an illegal Marxist study circle in Kyiv. He decided thereafter to pursue his studies in Western Europe. Settling in Moscow after the revolution, he was appointed chief spokesman and manager of all cultural affairs on behalf of the Soviet government. Together with the Ukrainian-born artist, David Shterenberg, the two became the main players in setting up the Berlin exhibition. Shterenberg was born into a Jewish family in Zhitomir (Ukraine). He first studied art in Odessa, before basing himself in Paris. Making Moscow his home in 1917, he was appointed head of the Department of Fine Arts (IZO) of Narkompros. Banding together with other Jewish artists, among them others hailing from Ukraine—Natan Altman (from Vinnytsia) and Vladimir Baranov-Rossine (from Kherson)—Shterenberg organized an exhibition of Jewish artists in Moscow. He was also an influential teacher at the Higher Artistic and Technical Studios (VKhUTEMAS) and involved in setting up the Moscow-based Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK)—a convenient access point from which to select works for the First Russian Art Exhibition.

A substantial part of Europe's Jewish population lived in Ukraine for several centuries, sharing the lot of the native population, who were condescendingly referred to as “Little Russians.” They endured the same misery of czarist subjugation and frequent unrest (often initiated from without to sow discord among the local populations). Their situation improved with the revolution when Ukraine proclaimed itself an independent state. Under the new republican government, from 1918 to 1920, the short-lived policy granted Jews national and personal autonomy in Ukraine. Jewish ministers were appointed to the Ukrainian government, and Yiddish, Polish, and Ukrainian languages were used on the official currency designed by the head of the first Ukrainian Academy of Art, Heorhii Narbut. Equally significant was the founding of the Jewish cultural organization Kultur-Lige, established in Kyiv in 1918. In their manifesto, published in November 1919, Kultur-Lige members expressed their commitment to creating a Yiddish secular culture and using abstract art to reach the people. With chapters in

Kyiv and Odessa, the Kultur-Lige promoted Jewish art and culture among their people. In the years leading up to the Berlin exhibition, Ukraine would prove to be a spawning ground for a thriving modern artistic culture. Central to this development were the artists Oleksandra Ekster (Aleksandra Ekster) and David Burliuk, both well represented in the 1922 exhibition. The same was true for the founder of Suprematism, Kyiv-born Kazimir Malevich, active at the Art School in Vitebsk from 1917 to 1922, at the State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK) and the State Institute of Art History (GIII) in Petrograd/Leningrad from 1923 to 1929, and at the Kyiv Art Institute from 1929 to 1930. Other Ukrainian artists included in the Berlin exhibition had already established themselves in Europe as innovative leaders of modernist expression, for example, native Kyivan Oleksandr Arkhipenko (Alexander Archipenko), who had just moved to Berlin in 1921 and remained there until 1923, before setting out for America.

That so many of the key players in what came to be known as the “Russian avant-garde” came from Ukraine, or were associated with modernism’s development there, might not be significant in terms of projecting a homogeneous, united “Russian” artistic front. Discounting these origins, however, has led us to a naïve ignorance of the powerful mechanisms at work here; what gets ignored in the propagation of the Russian myth is the vital role Ukraine played in the development of modernism. From this vantage point, the novelty of the 1922 Berlin exhibition, was that it was, in fact, the “first” instance of a true, full-fledged Soviet Russian propaganda campaign in the West. Subsequent efforts at Soviet cultural one-upmanship in Europe would soon follow.

Paradoxically, Russia’s shaping of a new proletarian consciousness took as its foundation the colonizing tactics of the defunct Czarist Empire. Through the prism of entrenched imperial attitudes and the longstanding homogenization of the population through the mechanisms of a single language that plays into the diluting effects of an integrated, hybridized culture, the term “Russian” had come to embrace it all—at home and abroad. As an instrument of influence, the visual arts were employed to support the rhetoric about brotherly “oneness” churned out in official Soviet bombast. Given the long perspective of history and the current obfuscating tactics regarding the war on Ukraine in

2022, the relevance and significance of the First Russian Art Exhibition for historic modernism takes on heightened importance.

Complex historical omissions and contradictory arguments espoused in Vladimir Putin’s own rewriting of history before launching the war on Ukraine, serve only to feed the Russian propaganda machine. His infamous text, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” released on July 12, 2021, presents a peculiar pseudo-historical account that endorses the kind of mythical history of Russia that most of the world had been willing to accept for a long time. Using an unexamined and unquestioned narrative, Putin utilizes tired conventions that insist on popular notions rather than historical accountability. His contrived narrative is echoed in Russo-centric versions of art history. Russia’s war in Ukraine calls for a complete overhaul of museum classification systems as it relates to Russian art.

And what about the famine? Once again, we are led to believe that the Berlin exhibition, as indicated by the inscription in the exhibition catalogue, was planned to assist in famine relief that was ravaging southern Russia, particularly the Volga region. In fact, the bloodiest instances of the Civil War, which led to famine, were taking place in Ukraine. Had not the Bolsheviks commanded the export of grain and other foodstuffs from Ukraine to the Volga area, Ukrainians would have been able to survive this human-made tragedy. Keeping in mind the Holodomor of 1930 to 1932, a “genocide by starvation” caused by the ruthless politics of Stalin, history seems to repeat itself on a global scale. Today, as Russia devastates the longstanding agricultural potential of Ukraine, the blockade on the transport of grain out of Ukrainian ports cannot bode well for a global community dependent on the countries’ grain exports either. It only leaves us wondering whether the noble goals of the 1922 First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin have left us with any legacy at all.

Political cultures, like cultures in general, take time to change, and they change radically only when they experience a serious trauma, such as the current Russian invasion of Ukraine. Now is not the time for complacency in watching these processes unfold, or complicity in the perpetuation of half-truths, stereotypes, or misguided perceptions. Perhaps that, indeed, is the lesson to be learned from the First Russian Art Exhibition in the West a hundred years ago.





Political Map of Europe 1922

# The Multiethnic Dimension of Russian Art and Culture in the Early Twentieth Century





## 2 What did “Russian” mean in the Early Twentieth Century?

The tragedy of the Russian people consists in the fact that they never had a nation-state project of their own. The state was either bigger or smaller than the nation. In the Middle Ages, the Russian principalities such as Novgorod or Yaroslavl were city states without national aspirations. Eventually, the Grand Duchy of Moscow came to dominate the other principalities, with Ivan III assuming the title of “Czar of all Rus.” In 1547, Ivan IV proclaimed the “Czardom of Russia,” which, under Peter the Great was elevated to the level of Empire. In the eighteenth century, the aristocratic culture in Russia bore a strong French imprint. It was only after the Napoleonic wars that the French cultural role model turned into a political and military enemy. The Russian establishment reacted to the Napoleonic aggression with the construction of a fully-fledged national culture. *A History of the Russian State* was commissioned, Russian operas were composed and staged, the myth of a national poet emerged. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Russia became the leading political power in Europe. In an impressive demonstration of geopolitical self-assertion, the Russian army paraded the streets of Paris in 1814 and acted as the “gendarme of Europe” until the bitter defeat in the Crimean War in 1855.

One of the leading concepts in the establishment of a Russian culture was “nationality” (*narodnost'*). This neologism had been coined by Pyotr Vyazemsky in 1819 and quickly became a political slogan. In 1832, Sergei Uvarov formulated the doctrine of “official nationality” which built upon autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality. These three pillars allegedly formed the fundament of the Russian state. Uvarov's doctrine was so successful that it would earn him the post of the minister of education. Soon, the writer Nikolai Nadezhdin heralded a new national literature that by virtue of its distinct Russianness would be autocratic and orthodox at the same time. The official understanding of the terms “*narodnost'*” and “*narod*” oscillated between the two French concepts of “nation” and “people.” However, this ambiguity proved to be productive for the Russian ideologists: The Russian nation was based on the autocratic rule of the orthodox people (“people”).<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the unity of the Russian nation was questioned more and more. In 1910, the former prime minister Sergei Witte lamented in his diary: “The mistake we have been making for many decades is that we have still not admitted to ourselves that since the time of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great there has been no such thing as Russia: there has been only the Russian Empire.”<sup>2</sup> Witte went on to note that one third of the population were ethnic minorities and that the Russians themselves were divided into Great Russians, Little Russians, and Belorussians. The czarist government ignored “this historical fact of capital importance” and thus made an effective politics impossible.<sup>3</sup>

The ideology of “official nationality” dominated the late imperial period as an anachronistic and frail source of power. Nicholas II firmly believed in the combination of autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality. Until his abdication, he hedged the illusion that he could rule Russia as an absolutist monarch in the twentieth century. An anecdote from 1917 aptly illustrates his illusion: At a reception, Nicholas II replied to the British ambassador who had pointed to his growing unpopularity: “You tell me, my dear Ambassador, that I ought to earn my people’s trust. But isn’t it rather my people who ought to earn my trust?”<sup>4</sup>

After the October Revolution, the czarist doctrine of “official nationality” survived in the White movement, which aptly chose the slogan “For a great, united and indivisible Russia.” Interestingly, the notion “great” has a double meaning in this context: On the one hand, it refers to the greatness of the nation and has no ethnic implications. On the other hand, it points to the ethnic term of “Great Russia” which the Whites imagined to be “united and indivisible.” In fact, such a “Great Russia” would not accept the political existence of a “Little Russia” or “White Russia.”

Even before the revolution, Lenin had devised the future socialist state as the complete opposite of the Czarist Empire. He aimed to abolish the class society that was dominated by the Russian aristocracy and assimilated noblemen of German, Armenian, Georgian, or Ukrainian descent. Lenin wanted to tear down the “prison of peoples” and free the “oppressed nations.” In his programmatic article “On the national pride of the Great Russians,” which appeared in 1914 in an

émigré journal in Geneva, the leader of the Bolsheviks put forward his idea of a future “democratic” Russian state. Lenin called this new state “Great Russia” as opposed to “Little Russia” (Ukraine) or “White Russia” (Belarus). He acknowledged Ukraine’s right to exist as an autonomous state on the basis of its status as a historical victim of Russian oppression. Lenin dreamt about a “proletarian brotherhood of all the nations of Russia” that would eventually bring about socialism.<sup>5</sup>

Lenin was himself a Great Russian patriot and based this sentiment on the tradition of liberation in Great Russian culture. His heroes were Aleksandr Radishchev, the Decembrists, the freedom fighters of the 1870s, and the revolutionaries from 1905. This leftist and radically anti-czarist tradition within Great Russian history was the only acceptable national commitment for Lenin. At the same time, he was fully conscious of the prospect that national revolutions would mobilize a greater part of the population in the Czarist Empire than a socialist revolution. He went so far as to correct Marx, proposing an alteration to the famous ending of the communist manifesto: “Proletarians of all countries and oppressed peoples, unite!”<sup>6</sup>

Lenin decided to play the national card to win over the smaller nations in the Russian Empire for the socialist cause. This trick seemed to work in Ukraine: Volodymyr Vynnychenko, the first prime minister of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, was convinced that only a leftist government could guarantee the national interests of Ukraine. Even after the demise of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, Vynnychenko traveled to Moscow and Kharkiv to negotiate his participation in a Ukrainian Red Government. He even talked to Leon Trotsky personally; however, nothing came of this, and Vynnychenko preferred then to emigrate for good in 1920.<sup>7</sup> The official pragmatic approach towards the smaller Slavic nations went so far that the Bolsheviks allowed the first president of an independent Ukraine, Mykhailo Hrushevsky, to enter the Soviet Union in 1924. Of course, Hrushevsky had to focus on his historical work and was eventually marginalized and repressed.

Stalin contradicted Lenin’s national policies. Already before the revolution, Stalin feared the national dismemberment of the socialist movement and condescendingly spoke about “social nationalism.” In 1920, he

advanced the idea that all future Soviet republics be integrated into the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). In 1922, he revived this plan and suggested that Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, and other republics become part of RSFSR.<sup>8</sup> Lenin's conception, however, prevailed: On December 30, 1922, the Soviet Union was founded. It soon became clear that Soviet Russia was the leading republic within the Union, dominating the other republics.<sup>9</sup>

Before the Ukrainian and the Belarusian Soviet Republics were established, representatives from these territories could be subsumed under the notion of "All-Russian." A case in point is the All-Russian Central Executive Committee that was founded immediately after the October Revolution. Until the foundation of the Soviet Union, it also included Ukrainian and Belarusian delegates. The Bolshevik leadership considered a national focus as a temporary solution anyway. In 1920, an All-Russian Proletkult Convention was organized. There were, however, strong disagreements as to the role of the proletarian culture in the new Russian state. The proletarian artists wanted to engage immediately in the creation of a modernist and revolutionary culture whereas Lenin insisted on the continuity and development of the existing forms of art. "All-Russian" in 1920 meant the territory of the RSFSR. Interestingly enough, after 1922 the activities of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment were not extended to the territory of the Soviet Union but remained confined to the RSFSR. A ministry of culture for the entire Soviet Union was established only after Stalin's death in 1953.<sup>10</sup>

Both from a Russian and a Western European perspective, there was nothing conspicuous about the word "Russian" in the title of the First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin in 1922. It did not matter that not only Russians but also artists from Ukraine, Poland, Georgia, Armenia, Latvia, or even Mongolia, were represented. "Russian" was perceived not in ethnic or cultural terms but as referring to the territory of the fallen Russian Empire. The blurring of national allegiances was not only typical for the exposition as such, but also for some of the participating artists. Kazimir Malevich was born in Kyiv to Polish parents and wrote in Russian. He alternately identified himself as Ukrainian or Polish; towards the end of his life, he denied any national allegiance.<sup>11</sup> Marc Chagall grew up in Belarus,

received a Jewish education, and was perceived in Paris as a Russian artist. He called himself "half French" and significantly refrained from determining the other half. His relation to Russia was very ambiguous: he confessed to "love Russia," but at the same time felt like a "fifth wheel" in Russia. His native Vitebsk was for him by no means a Belarussian, but rather a Jewish Russian town.<sup>12</sup>

Ukraine and Belarus were at best marginally present as independent nations in the mindset of interwar Berlin. In 1920, Joseph Roth, a Germanophone Austrian native from Brody, poked fun at "Berlin's newest fashion," which he called "Ukrainomania."<sup>13</sup> Like many writers in Germany, Roth went on talking about "Russia" when he described the new Soviet state. Even among German sympathizers with the Bolsheviks, denominations like "the new Russia" prevailed.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes, the term "Soviet Russia" would appear in the title of a German publication in the 1920s, but more often the country was simply called "Russia."<sup>15</sup> Even in the official language, "Russian" could refer either to Soviet Russia or even the Soviet Union. The treaties of Rapallo (1922) and Berlin (1926) were presented within the Weimar administration as "German-Russian" conventions.

After the October Revolution, the word "Russian" served a catch-all strategy both in Soviet Russia and in Germany. It could denominate the ethnic Russianness, or the mixed identities that emerged from entangled family biographies. It could refer to the RSFSR, or the territory of the vanished Czarist Empire. Most of the time, all of these connotations were evoked. When the First Russian Art Exhibition opened its doors in Berlin, Germans entered a complex semantic space ripe with cultural and political exoticism.



## Notes

- 1 Ulrich Schmid, "Von der literarischen Konstruktion einer nationalen Vergangenheit zur Literarisierung der Geschichte: Historiographische Darstellungen und historische Romane" [From the literary construction of a national past to the literarization of history: Historiographical representations and historical novels], in *Das "Ende der Kunstperiode": Kulturelle Veränderungen des "literarischen Feldes" in Russland zwischen 1825 und 1842*, ed. — and Jochen-Ulrich Peters (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 278–83.
- 2 Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire 1552–1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 497.
- 3 Roman Szporluk, "Lenin, 'Great Russia,' and Ukraine," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 28 (2006): 612.
- 4 Victor Alexandrov, *The End of the Romanovs* (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), 121.
- 5 Vladimir Lenin, "On the National Pride of the Great Russians," in eadem, *Collected Works XXI* (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1974), 102–06.
- 6 Martin Aust, *Die russische Revolution: Vom Zarenreich zur Sowjetunion* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2017), 222.
- 7 Ulrich Schmid, "Volodymyr Vynnyčenko as Diarist, Historian and Writer: Literary narratives of the Ukrainian Revolution," *Studi Slavistici* 15 (2018): 111–24.
- 8 Szporluk, "Lenin," 619.
- 9 Alfred Dennis, "Soviet Russia and Federated Russia," *Political Science Quarterly* 38 (1923): 543.
- 10 Hans-Jürgen Drengenberg, "Politik gegenüber den bildenden Künsten" [Policy toward the visual arts], in *Kulturpolitik der Sowjetunion*, ed. Oskar Anweiler and Karl-Heinz Ruffmann (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1973), 267–77, 273.
- 11 Myroslav Shkandrij, "Reinterpreting Malevich: Biography, Autobiography, Art," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 36 (2002): 405–20.
- 12 Jackie Wullschläger, *Chagall: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 144.
- 13 Joseph Roth, *Reisen in die Ukraine und nach Russland* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2015), 5.
- 14 Jürgen Lehmann, *Russische Literatur in Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2015), 140.
- 15 See, e.g., Arthur Holitscher, *Drei Monate in Sowjet-Russland* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1921); René Fülöp-Miller, *Geist und Gesicht des Bolschewismus: Darstellung und Kritik des kulturellen Lebens in Sowjet-Russland* (Zurich: Amalthea 1926); Franz Jung: *Reise in Russland* (Berlin: Verlag der KAPD, 1921); Heinrich Vogeler: *Reise durch Russland* (Dresden: Carl Reissner, 1925); Ludwig Renn: *Russlandfahrten* (Berlin: Lasso, 1932).