

100 Years On Revisiting the First Russian Art Exhibition of 1922

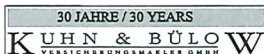
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2 What did “Russian” mean in the Early Twentieth Century?

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 *narodnost* (народность), and 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 “peuple.” However, this ambiguity proved to be productive for the Russian ideologists: The Russian nation was based on the autocratic rule of the orthodox people (“peuple”).¹

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."² 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.³

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?"⁴

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.⁵

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!"⁶

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 1920.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

Before the Ukrainian and the Belarussian 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 Belarussian 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 1953.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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."¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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."¹⁵ 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 name of the territory that remained connected to the RSFSR. A ministry of culture for the entire Soviet Union was established only after Stalin's death in 1953.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ Marc Chagall grew up in Belarus,

- 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 Vynnychenko as Diarist, Historian and Writer: Literary narratives of the Ukrainian Revolution," *Studi Slavistici* 15 (2018): 111–24.
- 8 Szporluk, "Lenin," 619.
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- 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* (Zürich: 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).

3 On Jewish Cultural Identities within the Russian Empire and Soviet Russia

The First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin was intended to provide an overview of the artistic culture of the young Soviet Russian Federation. In doing so, it united artists of different generations and backgrounds. The prominent role of Jewish artists, especially as organizers, is striking. But what did it mean to be "Jewish" or of Jewish origin in Russia around 1922? Jewish identity has been experienced and practiced in very different ways: it has been shaped and influenced by the evolution of the Halakha (Jewish religious law) and various historical calamities and revolutions; by changing self-perceptions, external attributions, and imposed legal conditions; by intra-Jewish religious and spiritual movements; and by political ideologies. Origin, family, education, and mobility all play a role and, in the course of life, individuals have positioned themselves differently in different situations. This corresponds to a differentiating perspective on identity as proposed by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, with two categories of conceptual pairs that are oriented, on the one hand, to the internal perspective of the subjects (identification, self-understanding, social location) and, on the other, to their social relations (commonalities, connectedness, sense of groupness).¹ A "group" should not be understood as a closed entity, but as a social process: group formations

dynamic, and cognitive influences.² Compared to the seemingly static concept of identity, the concept of identification refers more strongly to the processual nature of the positioning of subject and agency.

Revolutionary Russia and Ukraine were societies in upheaval; group affiliations, self-understandings, and loyalties were accordingly in limbo—a liminal state in which Jewish individuals and groups were able to reinvent themselves time and again. The Jewish Renaissance was on everyone's lips. The year 1922 was a turning point for Jewish cultural activists and artists: at issue were the "post-revolutionary" dilemmas about whether to stay in the young Soviet Union or go abroad. Should they pursue personal goals and careers, participate in the development of national political currents in Jewry, or help build a Soviet Russia? Their decision was made under the influence of their initial