

No Future for the Futurists?

***Art of the Commune* and the Quest for a New Art in Post-Revolutionary Russia**

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Abstract: This essay draws on research conducted in the course of writing the first biography of Nikolay Punin (1888-1953), a central figure in the turbulent but exciting post-revolutionary art scene in Russia. After the October Revolution of 1917, Nikolay Punin emerged as the most prominent art-critic and promoter of Russia's unique avant-garde art. He was also the Commissar of the Hermitage and the Russian Museums, sponsoring and promoting many of the artists who, like him, would eventually find themselves in conflict with the State's new definition of the rôle and style of art. In 1918-19, Punin was editing a new weekly newspaper, *Iskusstvo Kommuny* (Art of the Commune), which became the voice of the left artists. It was a weekly journal aimed at reducing the gap between the Futurists and the average Soviet citizen. This essay examines the rôle of *Art of the Commune* in the creation of new artistic values in post-revolutionary Russia, as well as Punin's influence on the establishment of the new proletarian art. I also examine the fate of Futurism in Bolshevik Russia in the first years after the October 1917 Revolution, using the newspaper *Iskusstvo kommuny* as a case study. It raises the question of how effective Futurist artists could be in the political education of a largely illiterate people. The main focus will be on the years 1918-19, the first two years after the October Revolution, when both Proletkult and Narkompros (The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) gained a national following and became major players in cultural debates. Following 1922, as a result of funding cutbacks and a cultural re-organization of Soviet society, the Futurists rapidly declined and soon lost their influential position in the new State of Workers and Peasants.

Keywords: *Iskusstvo kommuny*, Proletkult, Narkompros, Art and revolution, Art in Soviet Russia, Nikolay Punin, Anatoly Lunacharky, Osip Brik

Introduction: Art and Socialist culture in the new Soviet State

The October Revolution of 1917 demanded a new order of almost all aspects of Russian life: in marriage, housing, family, but above all, in the social hierarchy. As the new proletarian society was being formed and disciplined by law and by organization, it was recognized that culture, in all its manifestations, had to play an important part in achieving at once solidarity and advancement, not to mention comprehension of its aims.

Lenin based his theory of socialism on the writings of Marx and Engels. Although these could conveniently be used as a 'blueprint' for the development of his own political and economic theory, the lack of a well-defined rôle of art and culture in Marx and Engels' theoretical discourses left this subject open to a rather wide interpretation. For Marx, art was yet another form of ideology, associated primarily with religious oppression. He wrote: "In a communist society there are no painters, but at most men who, among other things, paint."¹ However, with establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat (first suggested by Marx), the

¹ "In einer kommunistischen Gesellschaft gibt es keine Maler, sondern höchstens Menschen, die unter anderem auch malen." Marx and Engels: *Die deutsche Ideologie*, p. 379. Quoted in Werckmeister: "Marx on Ideology and Art", p. 507.

need for a new proletarian art and culture became essential for shaping the new mythology and the new Communist religion of the new Russia. Building a new society and a new proletarian culture without any historical precedent could not be easy or straight-forward, although in Soviet literature, Lenin's plan for the development of Socialism in Russia was always considered as original and effective. This sacred plan included three major directions: industrialization, collectivization and cultural revolution.

Already in 1924, right after Lenin's death, the idea of the cultural revolution was attributed to him. However, long before Lenin used the term 'cultural revolution' in his article "O Kooperatsii" (On Cooperation, 1923), Alexander Bogdanov had been preaching "the importance of the cultural revolution for the proletariat", as "its internal Socialist revolution".² And if in Lenin's plan for the development of Socialism the importance of cultural transformation of Russia was secondary to the economic transformation, for Bogdanov proletarian culture was the cornerstone in building the new country with workers occupying a vanguard position in society.

For Alexander Bogdanov,³ the creation of a new mentality and a new type of worker was of utmost importance. He believed that in order to become true leaders of a new nation, the proletariat had to develop by means of a "cultural programme", in which art and visual culture were of utmost importance. One of the most distinctive features of the new post-revolutionary proletarian art was that its new expressions had to appear to be collective ones, given that working-class identity was rooted in the collective experience of labour. Thus, new forms of artistic practice would give expression to Socialist life as a collective activity, and they had to be developed from scratch and replace the individualistic artistic practices in both traditional and modern bourgeois art. A resolution passed at the First All-Russian Conference of Proletkult⁴ declared: "The proletariat must have its own class art to organize its own forces in social labour, struggle and construction. The spirit of this art is that of labour collectivism."⁵

Festivals, which traditionally celebrated a sense of community, were organized in a manner that they could reinforce group identity, internal cohesion and solidarity. These events became an ideal vehicle for the transmission of the collective spirit of the Russian proletariat and its new art. Colourful and striking decorations of magnificent Petrograd – a city which in 1918 experienced post-revolutionary gloom and starvation – became the most vivid expression of proletarian art and came to symbolize to many contemporaries a whole era in Russian history.⁶

The festive transformation of buildings, streets and squares offered an opportunity to popularize art and make it more accessible for the masses. Yet, despite the fact that these celebrations offered new perspectives on a scale never seen before, they did not interest all

² Bogdanov: *Nauka ob obschestvennom soznanii*, p. 229.

³ Alexander Aleksandrovich Bogdanov (1873-1928) was a Russian philosopher, writer and Bolshevik revolutionary. In 1918-1920, he co-founded the Proletkult and was its leading theoretician.

⁴ Proletkult (Russian: **Пролеткульт**; short for Proletarskie kul'turno-prosvetitel'nye organizatsii; Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organization) was an experimental Soviet artistic institution founded shortly before the October Revolution of 1917. More on the organization see below.

⁵ Quoted in Roberts: *The Art of Interruption*, p. 17.

⁶ "The democratic language spawned by the February Revolution was discredited by hunger, disorder, and continuing war; the Marxist idiom remained incomprehensible and alien to most of the population. Mass festivals helped fill the vacuum of public debate that ensued." Von Geldern: *Bolshevik Festivals*, p. 3.

artists, but primarily those belonging to far-left groups who, in the first years after the revolution, were often called 'Futurists'. The argument about the definition of a 'proper' proletarian art was more than just a debate about aesthetics, because, depending on its outcome, they could be the deciding factor in determining whose art would be commissioned and paid for, and whose not. At a time when the State was the only commissioning body, and its leading representatives were calling for the establishment of a 'proletarian art', the eternal wrangles between 'left' and 'right' artists' organizations took on a new dimension.



Fig. 1. May Day, 1918. Futurist decorations on the façade of the National Library in Petrograd.

Lunacharsky, Proletkult and Futurism

By 1917, the cultural arena in Russia was shaped and determined by 72 artists' organization. On the 'right' side of the political spectrum, there was the all-mighty Imperial Academy of Arts (Imperatorskaia Akademiia khudozhestv, founded in 1757 in Saint-Peterburg), which took little interest in the life of workers and peasants and was totally subservient to the royal family. The *Peredvizhniki* (Association of Travelling Art Exhibitions) held a leading position at the Academy and strove to show the life and suffering of simple people, but neglected the life of the proletariat. The *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) group, along with the Symbolists, tried to ignore reality around them altogether.

On the 'left' side, there were the Futurists, who already well before the Revolution had rejected old-fashioned 'bourgeois' art and who claimed to be the main ambassadors of the new art of Bolshevik Russia. Following the October Revolution, the government decided that art would be of utmost importance for the education of the proletariat, and entrusted the Futurists with the task of developing a new culture.

In-between 'left' and 'right'. the Narkompros (Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia; The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) was confronted with an art world both amorphous and hostile. Almost all artists and writers were determined to boycott the new government. Their typical tactic was to ignore Narkompros on an official level, while at the same time attacking it in the non-Bolshevik press. The Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933), had only recently returned from abroad and, after a decade of emigration, was only poorly acquainted with the Petrograd art world.

Anatoly Lunacharsky had started writing about proletarian art back in 1907, when he explained for the first time that such art would be Realist in style, would be created by proletarian artists and would be positive, optimistic and comprehensible to the masses. On 16 October 1917, as president of the cultural-educational commission of the Petrograd Party Committee, Lunacharsky called the First All-Russia Conference of Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organizations. 208 voting delegates representing the Petrograd Party Committee, Soviets, trade unions, factory committees, youth, army and peasant organizations, as well as city and regional Dumas, gathered at this historic conference, held in Moscow from 15-20 September 1918. Here, the Association of Proletarian Cultural Organizations was founded. Eden and Cedar Paul, two English Fabian Socialists, declared in their book, *Proletcult*, which was published in London in 1921: "Now Proletcult is the lamp whereby all the roads of advance are lighted",⁷ and explained further:

Proletcult is a compact term, a 'portmanteau word', for proletarian culture. [...] Proletarians who are alive to their class interest (which is the true interest of civilization) will insist upon doing their own thinking; they will insist upon Independent Working-Class Education, upon proletarian culture, upon Proletcult.⁸



Fig. 2. Presidium of Petrograd Proletkult, October 1917.

The only cultural organization to which Lunacharsky could turn after the October Revolution was the newly-formed Petrograd Proletkult. However, the Proletkultists had no influence or standing among the Petrograd intelligentsia, and as their aesthetic outlook was thoroughly retrograde, it did not fit with the requirements of the new society. On 29 October

⁷ Eden and Cedar Paul: *Proletcult*, p. 18.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 19.

1917 (old calendar), i.e. four days after the establishment of the new political régime, Lunacharsky made his first announcement as Commissar for Education and declared that Soviet governmental institutions would do their utmost to fight mass illiteracy and cultural ignorance but only intervene minimally in artistic matters.

In Petrograd, Proletkult was distinct from Narkompros, and even though it was sponsored and subsidized by it, it chose to remain an independent body. In her book, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, Sheila Fitzpatrick observed: "In dealing with the arts, Narkompros confronted a world which was both hostile and amorphous. There were few institutional channels by which it could be approached, and almost all its members – writers, actors, artists and musicians – were determined to boycott the new government."⁹ In October 1917, the majority of the artistic institutions, which had formerly been controlled by the Palace Ministry,¹⁰ had come under the jurisdiction of Narkompros, but most artists and writers ignored Narkompros' leadership, treating it with hostility and suspicion as a Bolshevik Government organ.

It was soon suggested that a separate Commissariat for the Arts should be established outside the Commissariat for Education, with Lunacharsky at the head of both, Pavel Malinovsky (1869-1943) as his deputy for the arts and Mikhail Pokrovsky (1868-1932) as the deputy for education. But Lunacharsky, together with the other key figures of Narkompros, opposed this suggestion, arguing that a Ministry of the Arts were an old-fashioned idea belonging to the time when all artistic affairs were under the control of the Palace. The head of the theatre section of Narkompros, Olga Kameneva (1883-1941) announced: "While art is in the Commissariat for Education, the government has one aim – an educative one, to demonstrate and explain. Russia is in the stage of development when it has to be educated in art."¹¹ The Union of Art Workers (SoRabIs; Soiuz rabotnikov iskusstv), which spent most of its time arguing about minor issues and possessed little influence in art circles, refused to cooperate with the government. This inspired Lunacharsky to organize an alternative body which would replace the old-fashioned Union and would deal more efficiently with artistic matters.

A new society could hardly be represented by means of old-fashioned art. The definition and organization of a deliberately modern and politically left-wing art was taken up by Nikolay Punin (1888-1953). This writer and art critic was the son of an army officer, had grown up in the genteel surroundings of Tsarskoe Selo, where he had attended a prestigious gymnasium, and was an unlikely person to feel so passionate about a new proletarian society or an avant-garde art, but in the course of time he dedicated himself energetically to both. After graduating from St. Petersburg State University, he was writing erudite articles for the prestigious *Apollon* magazine. At the beginning of 1917, he assumed an increasingly radical view point and stopped writing for this elegant journal, proclaiming it to be the voice of the *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) movement and to be élitist in a way that he could no longer tolerate.

After the October Revolution, Punin set about cajoling the new Bolshevik government to support avant-garde artists. Punin was so successful in his undertaking that the avant-garde

⁹ Fitzpatrick: *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, p. 110.

¹⁰ Kabinet Ego Imperatorskogo Velichestva. The Cabinet of His Imperial Majesty was the institutions in charge of the Russian imperial family's personal property and other affairs in the years 1704-1917.

¹¹ Quoted in Fitzpatrick: *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, p. 113.

not only managed to survive, but was able to promote radical view points in the newly emerging mass media, and even publish books at a time of catastrophic paper shortage. Punin's alliance with the new government started in December 1917, when he and his friend, the Futurist composer Arthur Lourie (1892-1966), had come to see Lunacharsky in his small office in the Winter Palace. Their conversation quickly moved from the question of the Commissar's permission to use the Hermitage Theatre for the production of *Oshibka Smerti* (*Death's Mistake*, written by Velimir Khlebnikov and staged by Vladimir Tatlin with music by Arthur Lourie), to that of the creation of a new proletarian culture, and the participation of the intelligentsia in it. In his memoirs, "In the Days of Red October", Punin recalled this meeting:

Lunacharsky willingly and at length talked to us about art, of the tasks of the Communist Party and the position of the intelligentsia. Soon our little project of staging in the Hermitage theatre was left far behind. The question under discussion was of organization of a new administrative apparatus in all fields of art.¹²

This conversation was followed by a string of meetings between Lunacharsky and Punin. In January 1918, IZO (Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv), the Department of Visual Arts of Narkompros, was established in Petrograd and given Myatlev house on St. Isaac's Square as its main headquarters. Representatives of the radical, 'leftist' artistic groups gathered around IZO. Not all of them were Futurists, but "from the time when Futurism first emerged in Russia, this concept had quite a wide meaning, and incorporated aesthetics of the left art instead of some specific artistic principles."¹³



Fig. 3. Members of the Narkompros Collegium. Left to right: Alexei Karev, an unknown lady, Josif Shkol'nik, Sergei Chekhonin, **Mikhail Il'in**, David Shterenberg, Nikolay Punin, Petr Vaulin, **Kirik Levin**, and Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, 1918.

¹² Punin: "V dni Krasnogo Oktiabria: Otryvki vospominanii", p. 1.

¹³ Goriacheva: " 'Tsarstvo dukha' i 'Tsarstvo Kesaria' ", p. 286.

In May 1918, Narkompros drew up the principles of new art and published them in the newspaper of the leftist Socialists, *Znamya truda* (Banner of Labour). Its eleven main points were:

1. Art and creativity are free.
2. Art is public and political.
3. Socialist art is the art of the proletarian masses.
4. The forms of Socialist art should not be predetermined.
5. Revolution in art has started. Its development opens new forms in art, which mature in the process of social rebirth.
6. Proletarian dilettantism is not proletarian art.
7. Subject matter and themes do not determine anything in art.
8. The choice of form in Socialist art is up to the artist himself.
9. The distinctive quality of Socialist art is its popular character.
10. The popular nature of Socialist art demands changes in the principles of material expression in art.
11. The popular character of Socialist art demands the organization of artistic forces.¹⁴

Futurists or not, after the October Revolution, left-wing artists moved to the forefront of the new Soviet Russia. They supported the Revolution because it promised to incorporate them into a new cultural system. In effect, they created the first official Communist art – a merit which probably saved them from repression later on in Stalinist times. Ten years after the October Revolution, Lunacharsky would explain that this alliance between Party and left-wing artists was never desirable nor ideal: "Even though proletarian revolution was brewing for a long time in the bowels of the old Russia, it had not been prepared for its cultural expression, especially in art."¹⁵ The Bolsheviks, reflecting Lenin's conservative tastes in art, would have preferred to work with academic artists of more traditional leaning rather than with radical, left-wing innovators. However, established academicians were not ready to step down from their pedestal and start talking to the masses. Lunacharsky's views on art were much more broad-minded than Lenin's, but even he considered Kandinsky back in 1911 to be a man "in the final stage of psychic degeneration", who "scrawls some lines with the first paints that come to hand and signs them, the wretch – 'Moscow', 'Winter' and even 'St. George'."¹⁶

In November 1919, the Commissar for Education announced that "the journeys of Futurism and proletarian art do not coincide – the proletariat has to be careful of such revolutionary individualists, which does not mean that they should be kept away from the proletariat; using its class instinct, the proletariat will be able to sort them out."¹⁷ But how workers and peasants could be expected to have strong enough instincts to distinguish good from bad art, if even Lenin, when asked to express an opinion about a work of art, could only reply: "I don't understand anything here, ask Lunacharsky."¹⁸ The Commissar for Education was not an incompetent person to be asked. He had received a doctorate from Zurich University and as a young man had worked part-time at the Louvre as a guide for Russian tourists. Between 1905 and 1922, Lunacharsky published 122 books, including two volumes on fine art, called *Ob izobrazitel'nom iskusstve* (About Visual Art). He would probably have preferred to put more established and professional artists at the head of the new Soviet culture

¹⁴ Kushner: "Sotsializatsiia iskusstva", p. 2.

¹⁵ Lunacharskii, *Ob izobrazitel'nom iskusstve*, vol. 2, p. 340.

¹⁶ Quoted Volkov: *The Magical Chorus*, p. 56.

¹⁷ Lunacharskii: "Speech at the Dispute in Moscow Proletcult on 23 November 1919", quoted in Dedinkin: *'Tovarishestvo Proletarskogo Iskusstva' Fridriha Brassa*, p. 35.

¹⁸ Lunacharskii: *Vospominaniia i vpechatleniia*, p. 192.

but, as he admitted in 1927, "many of them fled abroad and the others felt like fish out of water for quite some time."¹⁹

Lunacharsky, by then, had realized that an alliance of left-wing artists with the new political régime was a pragmatic cohabitation rather than a 'natural' union. But as the Leftists were keen and democratic, they were welcomed in this 'marriage of convenience'. In 1920, Lunacharsky told VtsIK (Vserossiiskii Tsentral'nyi Iсполnitel'nyi Komitet; All-Russian Central Executive Committee), the highest legislative, administrative, and revising body of the Soviet State: "I never was a Futurist, am not a Futurist, and will not be a Futurist."²⁰ However, back in 1918, he felt that the future belonged to 'left' artists, since "they are young, and youth is revolutionary."²¹ In 1919, Lunacharsky wrote: "Although we cannot consider Futurism as a whole to be proletarian art, we can talk of individual artists of Futurist persuasion as being artists close to the proletariat. And we can already see that this young art is establishing a place for itself in proletarian artistic ideology."²²

The main reason for Lunacharsky becoming a patron of the Futurists was that they were the first group to join Narkompros in its efforts to create a new art suitable for a new society. The well-known writer, Evgeny Zamyatin, wrote in his article, "Ia boius" (I Am afraid, 1920):

The Futurists turned out to be the most nimble of them all. Without wasting a minute, they announced that the official school of painting was – of course – them. And for more than a year we heard nothing but their yellow, green and crimson triumphant cries. However, the combination of the red sansculotte cap with the yellow jacket and a blue flower on the cheek, still remaining from yesterday, was too blasphemously hurting the eyes of even the most unpretentious citizens. The Futurists were shown the doors by those, in whose name these false heralds were galloping.²³

The Proletkult leaders never accepted Futurism as the official art of the new Russia. On the contrary, from the very beginning they lined up in opposition to Lunacharsky's Narkompros. A study of anti-intellectualism among workers in the 1917 revealed that workers were antagonistic to 'pure' intellectuals and artists, whom they considered to be removed from 'life'. A key target for them were the Futurists, because they were seen to "place the ego above everything else."²⁴ Intellectuals were accused of trying "to latch onto the proletariat" by infiltrating and trying to control Proletkult, and thus poisoning the movement's class purity. Proletkult as an organization strove to build a culture for the masses. Their members were outraged by Punin's adage that "Realists and the ungifted are synonymous", or Osip Brik's view that if a work of art could be understood easily, it was boring.²⁵ One of the major issues discussed within Proletkult was the question of whether workers could detach themselves from their factory lives, become 'artists', and still retain their working-class identity. Richard Stites remarked:

Proletcult fought Futurism on almost every issue: on style, content, vocabulary, method. Futurism was after all another new wave in art – a brilliant one – but one of a cycle of avant-gardes and Bohemias that arise almost every generation or two. Though they fought tradition, they were in fact part of a tradition. Proletcult was a genuinely novel experiment designed to arm and teach an entire class in

¹⁹ Quoted in Volkov: *The Magical Chorus*, p. 56.

²⁰ Quoted in Fitzpatrick: *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, p. 124.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Lunacharskii: "Lenin i iskusstvo: Vospominaniia", pp. 301-302.

²³ Zamyatin: "Ia boius", p. 15.

²⁴ Stites: *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 71.

²⁵ Ibid.

quick time to construct wholly new culture in a still very much illiterate society and to do so with minimum guidance from the past.²⁶

In Moscow, the Proletkult leader Alexander Bogdanov demanded in his lectures and articles the total destruction of 'old bourgeois culture' and its replacement with 'pure proletarian culture'. Proletkult was formed as a loose coalition of clubs, factory committees, theatre groups and educational societies devoted to the cultural needs of the working class. But by 1918 it had expanded into a national movement with a much more ambitious purpose: to define a unique proletarian culture that would inform and inspire a new society.

Proletkult participants believed that rapid and radical cultural transformation was crucial for the survival of the Revolution. The organization's national leaders, and many of its local followers, demanded that culture, however defined, be given the same weight as politics and economics. Despite the military weakness of the new régime, its political instability and the rapid economic disintegration caused by the revolution and Civil War, the Proletkult leaders wanted the State to place considerable resources at their disposal. Without due attention to culture, they warned, the State's political and economic accomplishments would stand on very shaky ground.²⁷

The Bolshevik leaders accepted that culture, in all its manifestations, should play a critical part in achieving solidarity and advancement in the new society, but what that culture should comprise of, was still under debate.

Nikolay Punin and *Iskusstvo kommuny*

During the first years after the October Revolution, all branches of the arts flourished in Russia. In his book, "Artists in Revolution", Robert Williams judged: "Revolution bred innovation. For a time all barriers were down, all ways open, anything possible. The breaking of rules became legitimate."²⁸ If art was to play its rôle in the definition and advancement of this new society, what type of art would that be? The thorny subject of defining what the new proletarian art might look like and how it could be organized, was taken up by the art critic Nikolay Punin, who in the period after the 1917 February Revolution became actively involved in the first efforts to revive cultural life in Russia. Two years after the October Revolution, he wrote in his diary: "The revolution is most wonderful for its lack of logic."²⁹

Futurist artists claimed for themselves the right to develop a new art for the newly-formed Communist State. The first substantial State commission after the October Revolution was to decorate Petrograd for May Day 1918. It was indeed awarded to left-wing avant-garde artists, who gathered around IZO Narkompros: Nathan Altman, Ivan Puni, Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, Konstantin Boguslavsky, Vladimir Lebedev and others. The leading art-critic and the main propagator of the 'left art' was Nikolay Punin, who explained in his article "Iskusstvo i proletariat" (Art and the Proletariat, 1919):

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 71-72.

²⁷ See Mally: *Culture of the Future*, p. xix.

²⁸ Williams: *Artists in Revolution*, p. 32.

²⁹ *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin*, entry of 14 November 1919, p. 61.

The wide-spread opinion that only art that illustrates the life and temperament of the proletariat can be called proletarian art, is seriously wrong. [...] Since art is rooted in an understanding of the material used to create it, rather than in using a particular form of art in the class war, it does not contain an obligatory condition to show anything. [...] Art of the proletariat [...] is not only in opposition to church icons and noble portraits; it is also against all forms of illustration or representation.³⁰

The radical nature of Soviet society could hardly be represented by means of traditionalist art. The new art had to be deliberately political from the very beginning, thus exposing the heart of the debate about what the new proletarian art should look like. To make a statement of their new art, the Futurists covered the façades of most historic buildings in the centre of Petrograd with bright, Cubist posters and Futurist slogans. It was a true victory of new art over classical architecture.



Fig. 4. May Day, 1918. Decorations of the former Mariinsky Palace, where the main painted panel proclaims 'Build the Red Army!'

In his book, *Visual Art in Mass Festivals and Demonstrations*, Alexander Gushchin wrote about the participation of left-wing artists in the early festival decorations:

All these artists brought to this new task what each of them thought was most appropriate for revealing, in artistically generalised form, the ideas of the proletarian revolution, which each artist understood in their own way. But soon it was revealed that all the 'left' and 'right' decorations of the revolutionary festivals were far from what proletariat needed from its public art. As the workers finished their long fight with the enemies of the Soviet Union and got some free time on their hands, they started to protest against most of these artistic movements and participate more actively in the artistic decoration of their festivals. At the same time, most "old" artists were losing interest in public festivals due to the criticism and denial of their work.³¹

From his position as the Head of the Petrograd branch of the Department of Visual Arts (following David Shterenberg's move to Moscow), Punin set about cajoling the new Bolshevik government to support avant-garde artists. His arguments were so persuasive that avant-garde artists could not only survive, but promote their radical views in the newly emerging media, and even publish books at a time of catastrophic paper shortage. Thus, for example, at the time of the so-called 'café period' in Russian literature, when writers and poets were unable to publish their works and were obliged to give readings in semi-

³⁰ Punin: "Iskusstvo i proletariat", p. 24.

³¹ Gushchin: *Visual Art in Mass Festivals and Demonstrations*, pp. 6-7.

underground establishments, Kandinsky was able to print his monograph, *Tekst khudozhnika: Stupeni* (Text by the Artist: Steps, 1919).

However, a key question remained: how could the new society be represented in artistic terms? Punin was convinced that he knew the answer. In 1918, he launched a new weekly newspaper, which mainly expressed the views of left-wing artists, *Iskusstvo kommuny* (Art of the Commune, 1918-19).³² Financed by the Visual Arts Section of Narkompros, this journal aimed at reducing the gap between the Futurists and the average Soviet citizen, but soon, according to Robert Williams, "it functioned more as a haven for the avant-garde rather than as a service to the revolution."³³



Fig. 5. Front page of *Iskusstvo Kommuny* (Art of the Commune), 5 January 1919.

The newspaper published nineteen issues during the short period of 7 December 1918 to 13 April 1919. Despite its short life, *Art of the Commune* became a valuable document in the history of Russian Futurism. The Soviet writer Kornel Zelinsky judged: "Its format was small, its contents astonishing."³⁴ Being part of the Department of Visual Arts (IZO) of Narkompros, *Art of the Commune* mainly focussed on visual arts and propagated primarily a Futurist aesthetics. Due to the involvement of Mayakovsky, the newspaper also had a section on literature, which was dominated by Futurist contributions as well. And when Mayakovsky proclaimed in one of the issues of the journal that "the streets are our brushes, the squares our palettes",³⁵ by "our" he meant nobody else but the Futurists. Mark Chagall, Osip Brik, Kazimir Malevich and Ivan Puni would publish their articles alongside the official statements from Anatoly Lunacharsky, David Shterenberg (head of IZO in Moscow at the time) and the agendas for meetings of the Department of Visual Arts.

³² It probably drew its name from the politically engaged artist society, *Commune des Arts*, which arose during the French Revolution. At its first meeting on 27 September 1790, the society demanded the dissolution of the ancient French Academy and the opening up of the official Salon to artists of all directions.

³³ Williams: *Artists in Revolution*, p. 139.

³⁴ Maiakovskii: "Prikaz po armii iskusstva", p. 1.

³⁵ Quoted in Woroszylski: *The Life of Mayakovsky*, p. 246.

When the Committee for Visual Arts gathered on 5 December 1918, Punin stated that the first issue of this journal had been prepared in the course of the last week, and 10,000 copies had already been printed, which should now be distributed "as a matter of urgency".³⁶ On 7 December 1918, the first issue appeared and contained articles by Osip Brik, Nikolay Punin, Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Mayakovsky. In the following months, it turned out to be the best medium for writers, artists and art critics to express their views and observations on new art and to announce the exhibitions of new artists. Articles by Nikolay Punin, often signed 'N.P.', appeared in *Iskusstvo kommuny*, which many years later came to be seen as important documents of the artistic debates in post-revolutionary Russia. In its first issue, Punin published his article "K itogam Oktiabr'skikh torzhestv" (On the Outcome of the October Celebrations), in which he proclaimed: "Our paper is for everyone who is interested in the creation of the coming art. [...] In our times, there is nothing that is not important – even the smallest movement and the least significant word has historical significance. Now it is unacceptable to do things only half-way."³⁷ He expressed the view that instead of decorating old buildings, the new proletarian artists should build new ones; instead of producing mediocre old-fashioned posters, they ought to make avant-garde placards. He remarked that "in our time, when we do not have enough trousers or skirts, producing such posters is the same as hanging up bread on the streets just for fun". He felt that all the fabric spent on the street decorations would have been much better used if it had been divided among workers. For him, it was just "a reflection of the old world."³⁸

In words later echoed by the German Bauhaus, Punin stated that creative work should be functional rather than decorative, that it should produce objects for living and working, rather than art for the sake of pure enjoyment: "Autonomous proletarian art [...] is not a matter of decoration but of the creation of new artistic objects. [...] Art for the proletariat is not a sacred temple for lazy contemplation but work – a factory, producing artistic objects for everyone."³⁹ In particular, he felt that Vladimir Tatlin – whom he admired more than any other Russian artist – and his use of materials provided "the only creative force free enough to lead art out of the trenches of its old positions."⁴⁰ In the article, "Popytki restovratsii" (Attempts at Restoration), published in the same issue of the *Art of the Commune*, Punin proclaimed: "Revolution does not just break old forms of public and social structure – but it also destroys outmoded culture, old outlook, old ideology. Since art is the expression of this culture and spiritual values – there is revolution and reaction in it as well."⁴¹ He added that "for us, the social revolution coincided with the revolution in art" and would anticipate a time "when the masses get used to the new art [...] and accept the new political theories."

In addition, *Iskusstvo kommuny* contained the full report of discussions held at the Palace of Arts (the former Winter Palace), dealing with the nature of the new art and its rôle in the new proletarian society. The fourth meeting on 24 November 1918, on the theme "Temple or Factory", was opened by Nikolay Punin, who remarked in his speech: "Bourgeois art is for those who can observe it calmly and passively." He said that since the bourgeoisie started treating art as a temple, the artistic activity became "a sacred act". He concluded that the proletariat shares the same point of view: "Being hungry, it can not just contemplate art."⁴²

³⁶ Ibid, p. 245.

³⁷ Punin: "K itogam oktiabr'skikh torzhestv", p. 2.

³⁸ Punin: "Vstrecha ob iskusstve", p. 4.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See Gassner: "The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization", pp. 305-306.

⁴¹ Punin: "Popytki restovratsii", p. 3.

⁴² Punin: "Vstrecha ob iskusstve", p. 4.

Punin admitted that proletarian art did not yet exist, but would soon be created by the proletariat, which produces material things every day and understands the very essence of its products. He finished his speech by saying that: "Art for the proletariat is not a temple, where everyone contemplates lazily, but labour, the factory, which produces artistic works for everyone."⁴³



Fig. 6. Nikolay Punin (1888-1953) in 1918.

Punin's passionate speech was followed in *Iskusstvo kommuny* by Osip Brik's article, "**Drenazh iskusstvu**", in which he urged the proletariat to take over posts currently occupied by members of the bourgeoisie.⁴⁴ He suggested that workers should take over middle-class residences and fill them up with the spirit of revolution. The final word in this discussion was given to Mayakovsky, who proclaimed that "art should not be displayed in dead temple-museums, but everywhere – on the streets, in trams, factories, workshops and workers' apartments."⁴⁵ It is hard to see from the report published in *Art of the Commune* whether members of the general public were also given a chance to express their opinion. But as the numerous articles on proletarian art in all the subsequent issues of the newspaper show, the topic was of prime importance and led to protracted debates.

Another issue discussed on the pages of the *Art of the Commune* was the conflict between the leaders of Petrosovet (Petrograd Union) – Grigory Zinoviev, Ilia Ionov and others – and the Visual Art Department of Narkompros. In the second issue of the newspaper, published on 15 December 1918, Osip Brik' article, "Khudozhnik-Proletarii" (Artist-Proletariat), once

⁴³ Punin N.: "Vstrecha ob iskusstve": *Iskusstvo kommuny*, No 1, 7.12.18, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Brik: "Drenazh iskusstvu": *Iskusstvo kommuny*, No 1, 7.12.18, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Maiakovskii: "Vstrecha ob iskusstve": *Iskusstvo kommuny*, No 1, 7.12.18, p. 4.

again asserted that old art was dead and that the "art of the future is proletarian art. Art will be proletarian or it won't exist at all."⁴⁶ Following this bold statement, Brik explained that such organizations as Proletkult wrongly believed that new art should be constructed by members of the proletariat itself, assuming that everything that is produced by workers automatically becomes proletarian art, since talent is universal and is given to everyone:

Proletarian art – is the art created by proletarian artists. The proletarian artist – is the person, who combines both creative gift and proletarian consciousness. [...] His talent belongs to the collective. He creates in order to fulfil his public duty. He does not care about his own benefit, he does not try to ingratiate himself with the crowd; instead he fights with its indolence and leads it along continuously moving path towards art. He always creates new art, fulfilling his public duty.⁴⁷

On the front page of the second issue of *Art of the Commune*, Mayakovsky published his poem "Radovat'sia rano" (Too Early to Rejoice), in which he criticized people for holding on to old values in the name of art. This poem was followed by Lunacharsky's comments, which aimed at mellowing Mayakovsky's Futurist rejection of Pushkin's poetry, Raphael's paintings and Rastrelli's architecture. However, the Futurists refused to compromise and Punin became their loyal ambassador. In the second issue of *Art of the Commune*, he stated that "in terms of the healthy and mature "Futurists", in their world view the destruction of the past is merely a method of fighting for existence."⁴⁸ In the same article, he stressed that 'artistic terror' should not be the only method employed in the fighting for new art. Perhaps in contradiction of his Futurist stance, Punin wrote that new artists should reorganize traditional forms and values, rather than abolish them completely.⁴⁹

The second issue of the newspaper also contained an article by the party bureaucrat, A. Mushtakov, who tried to inspire workers to participate in the disputes about new art and to support 'left' artists: "The proletariat needs art that is born out of the noise of factories, industrial plants, streets; which in its spirit should be the thunderous art of struggle. Such art already exists. It is called Futurism."⁵⁰ According to Mushtakov, only the working class could connect Futurism with everyday life, and prove to "the rotten intelligentsia" that Futurism has every right to exist.

In the third issue, of 22 December 1918, Nikolay Punin published his article "Pravye-Levye" (Right-Left; see Appendix), in which he called for the establishment of an artistic dictatorship of a creative minority – the "artists-Bolsheviks" – over the old-fashioned artists. He proclaimed: "Only those artists whose creative forces equal the strength of the working class can remain with the proletariat [...] The ones who create – live, others can die."⁵¹ In another article in the same issue of the newspaper, "Nashi zadachi i professional'nye soiuzy khudozhnikov" (Our Aims and the Professional Unions of Artists), Punin described the artist of the new world as a maker of useful objects and concluded that the new Communist State should provide such artists with everything they need.

As the conflict between the left wing of the Department of the Visual Arts and the Petrograd Bolshevik Party reached its peak, Osip Brik had to admit that both, workers and

⁴⁶ Brik: "Khudozhnik-Proletarii", p. 2.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Punin: "Bombometanie I organizatsiia", pp. 3-4.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Mushtakov: "Oktiabr' v iskusstve", pp. 1-2.

⁵¹ Punin: "Pravye-Levye", p. 1. For a full translation see Appendix.

their proletarian leaders, were aesthetically retarded and unable to relate to 'left' art.⁵² Brik sounded negative, but Vladimir Mayakovsky went even a step further when he proclaimed that the Futurists were ready to set fire to all old art and use it for street illumination.⁵³ In the same issue of the newspaper, Punin denied that Futurism was trying to take over the reigns of artistic leadership in Russia and that "Futurism has not become the art of the State, but the hour of the triumph of the new ideas has come."⁵⁴

Punin's claim that Futurism was "the only right way" for the development of new art was soon criticized in the Proletkult newspaper *Griaduschee* (The Future, 1918-21), which castigated the Futurists for being members of the intelligentsia and not of working-class extraction. The article concluded that, even on their own terms, the Futurist were unable to build the art of the new Russia: "We should not allow Futurists to dress up the body of working culture into the Futurists' clothing."⁵⁵

Lunacharsky, who had initially been supportive of *Art of the Commune*, was now criticizing the paper for speaking in the name of a particular school (Futurism) and at the same time in the name of the State. He also censured the paper's "destructive tendencies in relation to the past."⁵⁶ Nikolay Punin, however, remained convinced that their fight for a new culture would ultimately extend beyond class restrictions. At a meeting dedicated to new and old art, reported on in the fifth issue of *Art of the Commune*, Punin explained that "young artists are fighting against old art not because it is bad or cannot be used as historic material, but because it is still trying to impose its influence on new art."⁵⁷ He exhorted all those who wanted to create a new proletarian culture that they should "renounce the favoured attitude to the monuments of the past and give young artists the chance to create, together with the proletariat, the great artistic culture of the future." He continued: "We want new life and new culture We are the polar opposite of the whole old world. We came in order not to renew it, but to destroy it, in order to create our new world."⁵⁸

Disputes about the new art continued at the meetings in the Palace of Arts. When, on 22 and 29 December 1918, two more debates were held on the question "Proletariat and Art", *Art of the Commune* reported extensively on them. It also addressed the issue of food rationing, which was often a matter of life and death for artists, who were considered to be members of the bourgeoisie and were hence given only a reduced amount of daily bread.⁵⁹ In issue four of *Art of the Commune*, Osip Brik voiced his indignation that they were classified as "Artists of the 3rd Category". He called upon artists to start working for the State, to become members of the proletariat and thereby increase their bread rations.

⁵² Brik: "Vy pravy, tovarish Mushtakov!", p. 2.

⁵³ Maiakovskii: "Po tu storonu", p. 3.

⁵⁴ Punin: "Futurizm: Gosudarstvennoe iskusstvo", p. 2.

⁵⁵ Bessal'ko: "Futurizm i proletarskaia kul'tura", pp. 10-12.

⁵⁶ Punin: "Staroe i novoe iskusstvo", p. 2.

⁵⁷ Lunacharskii: "Lozhka protivoiadiia", p. 1.

⁵⁸ Punin: "Staroe i novoe iskusstvo", p. 2.

⁵⁹ On 21 November 1918, Sovnarkom (Soviet narodnykh kommissarov, the Council of People's Commissars) had forbidden all private food trade and had put into operation a food rationing system according to which people's social position determined the amount of victuals received. The first category consisted of workers and officials, who were allowed half a pound of bread per day; the second category – public servants – received a quarterpound of bread; the third – the bourgeoisie – an eighth of a pound of bread; and lastly, the fourth category of dependents received a sixteenth of a pound of daily bread. As artists were trading with their works, they were considered to be small businessmen and only qualified for the third category of 'bourgeoisie'.

By January 1919, the conflict between the leftist artists acting under the banner of Futurism and the Bolshevik authorities was gathering pace. In issue six of *Iskusstvo kommyny*, Punin published an article full of despair, in which he proclaimed: "We know that everything that is said at these meetings, conferences, in these books, articles and words – is so incompetent, so creatively weak. Enough doubts and politicizing! As long as the revolution is not dead, we won't be dead either – we, its children. And if it dies, we as well may die with it!"⁶⁰ Feeling that the ground was rapidly shifting under their feet, Punin and Brik continued to promote Futurism despite the growing opposition from the government. In issue 16 of *Art of the Commune*, Punin proclaimed: "To destroy means to create, since we overcome our past by destroying it."

When *Art of the Commune* lost one of its most influential supporters, Commissar Anatoly Lunacharsky, the voice of Futurism ceased publication in April 1919. Despite the fact that it had enjoyed great popularity and that "one had to hunt for every issue"⁶¹ of it, the mouthpiece of the avant-garde in post-revolutionary Russia was silenced. The main reason for this was that the right-wing circles in the government and in the Proletkult movement feared that "Futurism wants to conquer the country"⁶² and that *Art of the Commune* was an effective promotor of modern art. O. Oleniev's article "Nakonets-to!: Proletkul't i futuristy" (At Last: Proletkult and Futurists), published in January 1919 in the weekly *Gudki* (Factory Siren), was a clear sign of this and marked the dawn of left art in Soviet Russia:

We are convinced that the Great Revolution, while destroying the foundations of the bourgeois system, would have eliminated Futurism, which is an act of the ultimate decomposition of that system, but for the fact that the People's Commissar for Education [A. Lunacharsky] gathered the rotten straws of Futurist imposition in the first days of the October Revolution and tried to weave from them a life belt of revolutionary art. [...] The Futurists, with the practical sense characteristic of them, used that false step of the Commissar to their advantage and flocked to occupy all responsible positions in the art departments [...] Directing the Department for the Visual Arts as Punin and Tatlin did, defining the line of literary tastes as Mayakovsky, Ivniev, and Mariengof, heading the literary publishing department of the Red Army like the 'excellent' Vasily Kamensky, swelling their ranks with obviously talentless people and less obvious cheats, Messrs Futurists exploit the organs of Soviet authority to recommend their rotten bourgeois art as proletarian art. There is no room here for ideological discussion. The Futurists, who are mechanically attached to the proletarian revolution, must just as mechanically be driven away from the warm places they now occupy.⁶³

But Punin would not give up. The last issue of the *Art of the Commune* coincided with the opening of the First State Free Exhibition of Works of Art, organized (not surprisingly) by Nikolay Punin as the Commissar of the Hermitage Museum, in the beautiful rooms of the Palace of Arts. The gigantic exhibition included 1,826 works of art from 359 contributors, and was a summation of Punin's efforts to educate the workers in matters of art. Less than six months later, the former Winter Palace was taken over by another new entity, the Museum of the Revolution. On 14 June 1919 – the day after First State Free Exhibition closed – Punin announced his resignation from the Hermitage. He explained that he did not have any more spare time to re-organize this vast museum. He wanted to lay the foundations for the art of a new society and elaborate its new ethics.

⁶⁰ Punin: "Revolutsionnaia mudrost' ", p. 2.

⁶¹ Williams: *Artists in Revolution*, p. 139.

⁶² Worozylski: *The Life of Mayakovsky*, p. 247.

⁶³ Oleniev: "Nakonets-to!: Proletkul't i futuristy", quoted in Worozylski: *The Life of Mayakovsky*, p. 259.

The suppression of Futurism and of Proletkult

Punin wrote several articles and books about the Futurist tendencies in proletarian art. But in May 1920, the executive committee of the Communist Party ordered the Department of Visual Arts in Narkompros to be cleared of all Futurists. Punin as head of the Petrograd division feared for his position, but could keep it for a while until it was abolished in 1921. In July 1920, Glavpolitprosvet (Glavnyi politico-prosvetitel'nyi komitet, Central Committee of the People's Commissariat for Political Education) was formed and became the highest authority in the organization of the arts. However, with the exception of Petr Voevodin of Foto-Kino, none of the former heads of the Narkompros arts departments moved to Glavpolitprosvet. So it appointed Petr Kiselis, a relatively uninspiring 'revolutionary' artist, as head of its own arts section. From now on, the main purpose of art was supposed to be agitation and education of workers. And not surprisingly, Glavpolitprosvet had the full support of the Central Committee of the Party. Even Lunacharsky took the view now that "the Party should be everywhere, like the Biblical spirit of God."⁶⁴ In November 1920, he announced at the meeting of political-education departments that "as long as the proletariat of Russia trusts the Communist Party, only the Party will direct education."⁶⁵

On 5 October 1920, the first All-Russian Congress of Proletkult opened in Moscow. According to Lunacharsky's later recollection, the necessary measures were taken to pull Proletkult closer to the Party. He was instructed by Lenin "to go to the congress and confirm that Proletkult must be under the control of Narkompros [and] must regard itself as an organ of Narkompros."⁶⁶ Later, Lunacharsky would comment that "Vladimir Ilyich was evidently rather afraid that some sort of political heresy was nesting in Proletkult."⁶⁷ The resolution, drafted by Lenin on 8 October 1920, stated that "the All-Russian Congress of Proletkult most definitely rejects as theoretically incorrect and practically harmful all attempts to think up its own special culture, to shut itself up in its own isolated organizations, to draw boundaries between the spheres of work of Narkompros and Proletkult inside the institutions of Narkompros."⁶⁸

The government's attack on leftist art reached its peak on 1 December 1920, when *Pravda* published a letter from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, "O Proletkul'takh" (About Proletkults), in which the organization was denounced as being "petit bourgeois" offering a haven for all sorts of "socially-alien elements". The attack had been prompted by an article, "K voprosu o Proletkul'te" (On the Question of Proletkult), which had been published in *Pravda* in May 1919. It had been written by a worker who at the time attended the drama studio of Basmanskii District in Moscow, V. Boiarchenkov, who observed: "Not so long ago, comrade Antonov wrote in *Pravda* that Narkompros is serving the petty bourgeoisie. Unfortunately the same can be said about Proletkult, since it is serving the same classes as Narkompros."⁶⁹ Boiarchenkov complained that his drama classes were attended mainly by members of the petty bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia, "with whom one cannot create proletarian culture."

⁶⁴ Fitzpatrick: *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, p. 183.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ See *ibid*, p. 177.

⁶⁷ Lunacharskii: "Lenin i iskusstvo: Vospominaniia", p. 405.

⁶⁸ Fitzpatrick: *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, p. 179.

⁶⁹ Boiarchenkov: "K voprosu o Proletkul'te", p. 1.

For the first two years after the October Revolution, Proletkult received financial support from the Bolshevik government, but in 1919-20, the Bolshevik leadership grew increasingly hostile to it. Following the publication of the letter from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the president of Proletkult was removed and Alexander Bogdanov lost his seat on its Central Committee. In 1921, he withdrew from Proletkult, was arrested in 1923 and only released five weeks later.

In the same letter of 1 December 1920, the Futurist influence in the Proletkult studios was condemned and Narkompros was criticized for supporting leftist artists. The Central Committee called the Futurists "decadents, supportive of the idealistic philosophy hostile to Marxism", and stated that "in the field of visual arts, workers were instilled with absurd, corrupt taste (Futurism)."⁷⁰ The letter was followed by an article – probably written by the head of Petrograd City and Regional Government, Grigory Zinoviev – that ended with rather harsh criticism: "Those members of the intelligentsia, who tried to smuggle their reactionary views under the cover of proletarian culture, are now staging a noisy campaign against the orders of the Central Committee."⁷¹ Soon after, all publishing activities of Narkompros were taken over by the State Publishing Company (Gosizdat) and placed under strict control.

It can be argued that, during the first few years after the Revolution, the Bolsheviks proved quite apt at 'keeping up appearances'. But their liberal and democratic façade was shattered when Lenin shut down the newspaper *Novaia zhizn'* (New Life, 1917-18), following the publication of **Maxim Gorky's collection of essays critical of the Bolsheviks called *Untimely Thoughts***, in which the famous writer described the father of the October Revolution as "a talented man, who has all the qualities of a 'leader', as well as the lack of morals necessary for this rôle, and a pure landowner's ruthless attitude towards the lives of the masses."⁷² A few years later, such criticism would have resulted in imprisonment and execution; in 1918, Lenin felt that closing down the newspaper would be strong enough a measure.

At the end of 1922, a new Futurist journal, *Lef* (Left Front of the Arts), which aimed at shaping revolutionary art, was approved for publication. For a while, *Lef* sought to justify literary experimentation as an essential feature of a Communist society, but as a periodical edited and controlled by Gosizdat it soon lost its room for manoeuvre and had its freedom of expression severely curtailed.

After completing four books and more than forty articles in the three years after the Revolution, Nikolay Punin, like many others, began to feel frustrated by the limitations imposed on him by the new system. Already in February 1920, despite his excitement about the new possibilities brought about by political change, he had predicted in his diary: "One quality of the revolution – life gets to be a risk."⁷³ After 1923, he mainly concentrated on lecturing, writing and curating exhibitions. Until 1926, he retained his post as deputy director of the Museum of Artistic Culture. When this institution was also closed in 1926, he transferred the avant-garde paintings to the Department of the Newest Movements at the Russian Museum, which was directed by him until this was also shut down in 1932. Punin continued to exhibit avant-garde art even after Stalin's infamous decree "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations" (April 1932). It took the Soviet authorities

⁷⁰ TsK RKP(b) [Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)]: "O Proletkul'takh", p. 358.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Gorky: *Nesvoevremennye mysli*, p. 151.

⁷³ *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin*, p. 62.

another thirty years after the closure of the *Art of the Commune* to bring Nikolay Punin to silence. In 1949, he was sent to a forced labor camp (GULAG), where he died in 1953.

It was perhaps the supreme irony of Punin's life that the proletarian society, for which he strove to be an artistic impresario, eventually rejected everything he worked for and stood for, and which ultimately swallowed him up. The new proletarian society needed a new, non-bourgeois and preferably Russian art, but was unable to produce it. The creative activity of Futurists and related movements were not understood or appreciated by the proletariat, nor by their State mentors. Culture, in all its forms, became a tool of control and, eventually, Socialist Realism was imposed as the only acceptable aesthetics of State-funded art.

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Appendix

Left-Right

Nikolay Punin

Until recently, when one talked about modern art, most people would use the terms "left" and "right". Some time ago, we also used this terminology, not because we wanted to divide art into left and right, but only because we had to make some sort of distinction between inventor-artists and all those who are mere acquirers (term used by V.Khlebnikov). For us it was clear, and always will be clear, that art cannot be divided into left and right; rather, there are artists in art – masters, creators of new values, inventors of new methods and new ways, and there are craftsmen, imitators, expropriators, exploiters and so on and so forth – the army of slackers, who use art only as their means of existence.

Since the October Revolution gave us the opportunity to select true creators out of the artistic masses, we do not any longer need this old-fashioned terminology. Furthermore, the very division into left and right gives one the impression that there exists some sort of Constituent Assembly. No, we do not want it and we won't allow it to come into being.

Dealing with the question of the relationship between the Proletariat and the new culture and forms of art, which are currently being created, one should not use the terms left and right, since it will make everything too confusing. If we decide that the Proletariat is the new class, called to revolutionize life and to build new social and cultural forms, and if we therefore see in it a truly gigantic creative potential, we should assume that only those artists, whose creative power is as strong as the workers' force, will be with the proletariat. It is clear that only a limited number of true inventor-artists can qualify for participation in the construction of the new life, and that the whole bulk of exploiter-imitators, whether they consider themselves to be left or right in art, are actually neither, and we simply do not have any space for them in our life. We want to see our October actualized, we want to authorize the dictatorship of this minority, since only this minority has enough creative force and sufficiently strong muscles to keep pace with the working class.

Down with the right and left! Down with the artistic Constituent Assembly! The one who creates is alive, others can perish.

Iskusstvo Kommuny, No 3 (22 December 1918)

Bomb-throwing and Organization Nikolay Punin

When, a few years ago, several young artists, poets and musicians here and in the West united under a rather confusing but catchy and meaningful nickname of "Futurists", their status was very **complex**. On one hand, these early "Futurists" were professional innovators, and this alone was enough for them to be disliked by the older generation of artists. On the other hand, they turned out to be heralds of a new era, of a completely different social order, which placed them in opposition to the whole world of the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia, who were not looking forward to this new era. The latter fact was never comprehended well enough by the older "Futurists", but both sides instinctively sensed it, and if someone tried then to find serious grounds for the answer to the question of the nature in class terms of the "Futurist" movement, they would be able to find it in that spontaneous hatred which "Futurists" felt towards the old world and together with it, old art.

Early "Futurism" – was a revolt on a great scale and of exceptional depth that had never been seen before – a revolt of the new against the old (the Renaissance was a sort of rebellion, but on a smaller scale).

As heralds of the new culture and as professional innovators, the young artists placed themselves outside the old world and outside the law. This is probably the only explanation for the previously "unheard of" fighting methods used by the "Futurists", from the first day of their activities. The affectation, ostentation, bold experiments in advertising, with all their famous "costumes" and tattoos, staged scandals etc., were all the consequence of the creative isolation of young artists. Driven underground, the younger generation was forced to turn to terrorism, and it is only surprising how few "impingements" these artists committed.

Out of all the ghosts who in those days challenged the scared civilized bourgeoisie about its understanding of art, the scariest was the ghost of the new artists' rebellion against old art. The old art world could bear anything, but it could not stand the calls for the destruction of the art of the past. And now, when the possibility of such destruction had become absolutely real, one had to see how perplexedly and painfully the heart of the good old "cultured" **carrier** of the great artistic traditions sank ... A false fear – the fear of someone who had exhausted his creative power!

In terms of the healthy and mature "Futurists", in their world view the destruction of the past is merely a method of fighting for existence. It only wants to destroy old art because it is still claiming to influence the emergence of new artistic forms. In reality, it is absurd to kill something which is already dead. And those who value the debris of the past must renounce the present for the sake of preserving the debris; thus, they can save their past. Here everything is clear and simple.

It is much harder to deal with the psychological temptation of bomb-throwing. If in the past young people had some excuse for throwing their harmless bombs here and there, after most of Europe had managed to move on for several decades, there are now no serious grounds for these old tactics. **There must still remain occasional failures of the "Futurist" movement**, otherwise it won't be "Futurist", but, in general, this movement has now entered the path of organized cultural development.

To insist now on artistic terrorism as the only means of struggle – means to confirm the stagnant deadliness of your consciousness, and thus leave the path of truly creative youth. New times give rise to new life, new consciousness and new methods. Bomb throwing is old-fashioned and mouldy, we do not need it: we are looking for more organized methods.

Iskusstvo Kommuny, No. 2 (15 December 1918)