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## Making modernism Soviet: the Russian avant-garde in the early Soviet era, 1918–1928

Annie Gérin

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especially relevant given the prevailing international atmosphere between Russia and the West over crises such as Ukraine. With many analysts and diplomats often ascribing Russian actions as motivated by a desire to restore a type of Soviet domestic polity and international hegemony, Gill's observations concerning the attempted construction of a modern narrative of Russian history are revealing. The demonstrated inability or unwillingness of the Russian elite to impose such a vision on the country, or to bind the public to a narrative concerning wars in Chechnia or Georgia (210), raises serious questions about their motivation and ultimate strategy in Ukraine. A better understanding of Russia's self-perceived place in the world and ultimate societal goals would likely encourage more rapid international reconciliation.

The only weakness of this work is Gill's occasional forgetfulness concerning his audience; as an English-language publication one must assume it was intended for Western readers. When discussing the failure to construct a coherent narrative, even accomplished academics in the field of Russian studies would have benefitted from a familiar yardstick against which to compare the Russian elite's attempt. While on occasion he does note how in Western democracies we rally around themes and civilizational goals during elections (219) and makes reference to the source of the metanarratives in racially structured Nazi Germany or theological Iran (27), these are vague and in passing. Too often the reader is forced to spend time reflecting on other societies' symbols and values, in order to contrast them with modern Russia's.

The ambitious scope of Gill's study, covering the Soviet and post-Soviet era, the elite, the common citizen, and impersonal forces such as architecture and city planning, provide undeniable credibility to his conclusions. Modern Russia's polity cannot be seen as united with a common vision for how to move forward, or a homogenous view of its Soviet past. While we in the West often attempt to hold Russia to high moral standards, demanding Russians address issues as politically charged as Stalin's repressions or the shrinking of the democratic space, this work hints at what should be a patient and tentative approach.

The emphasis on time and memory impresses on the reader that modern Russia remains a very young entity searching for its place in the world and not yet prepared to debate issues which threaten societal stability. One comes away with the impression that the development of our own relatively coherent societies cannot always be held up as the model. While this work leaves open the question of how Russia can begin building a coherent narrative, it will doubtless eventually be seen as a seminal work for understanding the limits of modern Russia's political trajectory.

Alexander Frost

*Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, Carleton University*

[alexander.frost@hotmail.com](mailto:alexander.frost@hotmail.com)

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**Making modernism Soviet: the Russian avant-garde in the early Soviet era, 1918–1928**, by Pamela Kachurin, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2013, xxiii + 145 pp., US\$45.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-810-12928-3

Much scholarship on the Russian avant-garde describes modernist artists as idealistic innocents and victims of history, who at worse were caught in political processes they could not understand or control, or at best managed to keep their hands clean by

remaining on the margins. Building upon critiques of this approach (by Paul Wood, Katerina Clark, Michael David-Fox, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Stuart Finkel in particular), Pamela Kachurin takes a close look at the development of Soviet cultural institutions, and analyses the active engagement of avant-garde artists within them.

Focusing on the relationships established between like-minded artists, and with cultural institutions under conditions of state patronage, Kachurin steers the conversation away from the myth of the imposition of dogma from above upon a victimized artistic community. The commitments and social bonds artists wove with one another, she argues, is what allowed them to produce some of their most important works of art and extend their influence to those who became their students and followers. But they also contributed to the standardization of the art world and its centralization in a few hands. This “Sovietization” of culture, which also took place in the areas of literature, theatre, film, and sports, is paradoxically what caused their exclusion in the late 1920s, as competing networks of artists entrenched themselves within the expanding Soviet arts bureaucracy.

*Making Modernism Soviet* draws on extensive archival research and provides accounts of processes that are barely known, even to specialists in the field. Chapter 1, for example, is the first comprehensive study of the Moscow Museum of Painterly Culture. This unique museum institution was intended to collect the works of Russian living artists. Under the stewardship of the avant-garde (Vasilii Kandinskii, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Petr Vil’iams), it became the flagship of experimental trends in art and museology. The chapter describes a series of organizational and ideological adaptations that were implemented by the successive directors in order to reshape the museum, support its development, and make it increasingly suitable to the taste of “proletarian” publics, in particular during the New Economic Policy period.

Chapter 2 focuses on the activities of the suprematist network, built around the charismatic figure of Kazimir Malevich in the provincial town of Vitebsk. It discusses how the Vitebsk art school, its administration, and the local cultural apparatus interpreted and implemented decrees issued from Moscow and managed to sustain a climate sympathetic to the kind of artistic experimentation that interested Malevich and his students. It also describes how Malevich and El Lissitzky rebranded suprematism with the formation of the Supporters of the New Art (UNOVIS) as a production-oriented program compatible with the goals of socialist edification. The importance of the network is underscored in the last section of the chapter, as all but one member of the group relocated to Petrograd and established themselves as functionaries working in its newly formed Museum of Artistic Culture.

The last chapter examines the establishment of that museum as well as of its successor, the State Institute of Artistic Culture, which thrived throughout the 1920s as a haven for artistic and theoretical innovation. As in previous chapters, Kachurin demonstrates how the artistic community’s power brokers managed to adapt their language to Soviet discourse, carved out an independent identity for the organization, and established a close-knit circle that maintained a united front against governmental interference and rival groups, evicting, when necessary, artists whose interests and behaviour threatened the institution’s integrity.

For Kachurin, the evolution of Soviet modernism cannot be seen as independent from the “Sovietization” of artistic organizations and state patronage. The art scene, she argues, was actually composed of interlocking networks of individuals who together shaped institutions and actively engaged with Marxist ideology in an ever-evolving political, ideological, and economic context.

*Making Modernism Soviet* is a short, precise and well-thought-out book. It provides a clear and insightful picture of “behind the scenes” struggles that were waged in (and for) Soviet art institutions, while refraining from delving into aesthetic debates or basic descriptions of artistic movements such as futurism, suprematism, constructivism, concretism, or socialist realism. In this sense, it is aimed at a readership that is already versed in the general history of early Soviet art.

Annie Gérin

Université du Québec à Montréal

[gerin.annie@uqam.ca](mailto:gerin.annie@uqam.ca)

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**The long life and swift death of Jewish Rechitsa: a community in Belarus 1625–2000**, by Albert Kaganovitch, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013, xiii + 402 pp., US\$29.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-299-28984-3

The self-explanatory and extended title of Albert Kaganovitch’s monograph envelops this well-researched and well-written academic study. His investigation adds considerably to a healthy body of literature of micro-historical examinations of Belarusian Jewry habitats (*shtetls*, *miastečka*) that includes the following works: Arkadii Zel’tser’s *Evrei v sovetskoi provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki, 1917–1941* (Rosspen, 2006); Mordechai Nadav’s *The Jews of Pinsk 1506 to 1880* (Stanford University Press, 2008); Leonid Smilovitskii’s *Evrei v Turove: istoriia mestechka mozyrskogo poles’ia* (Tsur-Ot Press, 2008); Rebecca Kobrin’s *Jewish Bialystok and its Diaspora* (Indiana University Press, 2010); and Ina Sorkina’s study, elegantly written in Belarusian, *Miastečki Belarusi ŭ kancy XVIII–peršaj palovie XIX st* (Evropeiskii humanitarnyi universitet, 2010). The history of Belarusian Yiddishland was recently crowned by three other excellent academic volumes that were published in 2013: Andrei Zamoiskii, *Transformatsiia mestechek Sovetskoi Belorussii 1918–1939* (I. P. Logvinov); Elissa Bemporad’s *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Indiana University Press); and Azriel Shochet’s monograph *The Jews of Pinsk 1881–1941* (Stanford University Press).

All of these works mushroomed owing to a recent and timely return of academic memory to the following facts: most of this Jewish population lived in peace with the other local residents of historic Belarus for over seven centuries; Belarusian Jews formed a little over 10 percent of that country’s entire population before WWI; and Belarus was the only country in the world where Yiddish was one of the four official languages (1919–1938).

Kaganovitch’s superb bibliography includes and utilizes most of the works listed above. Indeed, typical and distinctive characteristics of a Belarusian *shtetl*, shown by historians interested in the local lore, are comparable to a common and individual characteristic of any human being. Against a backdrop of both the unexceptional and rare characteristics of Rechitsa’s way of life, Kaganovitch explains that the unprecedented rates of Jewish survival of the Holocaust here (with close to 82 percent of the community surviving) can be traced to several factors. For instance, Rechitsa was one of the last occupied and first liberated Belarusian territories. Rechitsa’s Soviet administration not only warned the Jews about the Germans’ atrocities but assisted in their evacuation, with those who were able to do so immediately joining the Red Army. The scholar also gives a sober account of injustices with relation to Jewish dwellings and household items which