

FEAST IN A TIME OF THE MAY DAY CELEBRATIONS

by **Natalia Murray**

The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution aimed to destroy the old bourgeois society and to build the new homogenous socialist state, which was unprecedented and needed a new founding myth. When the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, their party numbered no more than 350,000 people in a country of 140 million. Turned into the ruling party overnight, the Bolsheviks sought to use the power of mass propaganda to establish their founding mythology and to disseminate their ideas to an overwhelmingly rural and illiterate population.

The leader of the new Bolshevik state, Vladimir Lenin, proclaimed that culture should serve political needs, which meant in effect that all culture was now viewed as propaganda. In his memoirs, the first Minister of Education in Bolshevik Russia, Anatoly Lunacharsky, wrote that Lenin had told him in 1918, "It is necessary to advance art as the means of agitation."

With the establishment of the concept of a dictatorship of the proletariat, the need for new proletarian art and culture became essential, and street festivals and performances became cornerstones of the new mythology of the new Russia. The new myths and images were aimed at redefining life, reinventing social relations, and rejuvenating cults and traditions.

THE PEOPLE'S COMMISSARIAT for Enlightenment (Narkompros) invited artists to leave their studios and to participate in decorating streets, squares, and public buildings for the two annual celebrations that served as landmarks in the construction of a Soviet identity: the anniversary of the October Revolution, and May Day.

These festivals were first celebrated at a time when the

whole country, especially Petrograd, was threatened by internal counterrevolution and external intervention. In March 1918, the threat of an occupation of Petrograd by the German forces compelled the Bolshevik government to transfer the party headquarters, and the Russian capital, to Moscow.

In the middle of this difficult political situation, which was complicated even further by famine, the Soviet government announced a May Day celebration throughout the country.

In Russia, the first May Day demonstration took place in 1897. The demonstrations of 1901 to 1903 united thousands of workers, calling for political struggle. Under the tsars, festivals were a prerogative of the church and the government. Demonstrations were illegal, and May Day processions were often dispersed and outlawed. The only legal processions were funerals, which consequently served as pretexts for political manifestation.

May Day was legalized and made an official festival by the Provisional Government after the February Revolution of 1917. Unlike Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Kerensky and the Provisional Government did not pay much attention to art policy or mass spectacles. The Arts Commission (*Komissiya po delam iskusstva*) was established on March 4, 1917. It included the renowned author Maxim Gorki and famous *World of Art* artists Alexandre Benois, Nikolai Roerich, and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky. They focused on the pressing need to save palaces and works of art from the threats of war and revolution.

At the same time, other artists in Petrograd – representing 182 artistic movements, from futurists to traditional realists – formed the All-Arts Union (*Soiuz deiatelei vsekhn iskusstv*). The Provisional Government called on the union to help create a special mass festival on May Day.

In Petrograd, Lev Rudnev,¹ the architect of the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, was in charge of the city decorations. On May 18, 1917, Rudnev also won the first prize in the competition for the *Monument to the Victims of the Revolution* at the Field of Mars. His monument, called *Ready-made Stones*, looked like a stepped pyramid, and was made of granite stones left over from the rebuilding of the Neva embankment.

THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE turned out for the 1917 May Day parade. They carried allegorical banners and posters, which became the main elements of the decorations in Petrograd. These banners marked the birth of a popular image, repeated many times in posters and city decorations: the figure of a strong worker in front of an anvil with a plowing peasant and the rising sun in the background. Later, an image of a worker in a Russian shirt, leather apron, and boots became one of the most popular symbols used by the Bolsheviks. He was usually depicted with a moustache (since a beard was an attribute of the Orthodox peasants), holding a hammer poised to strike an anvil. These banners introduced a new allegorical language.

In his book *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920*, James von Geldern writes,

Festivals test a symbol more rigorously than other environments do. An emblem sewn on a shirt or decorating a pamphlet lies in a congenial context that supports and complements its message. Symbols displayed in a public festival must compete for attention, and they must drive home their message through a stew of competing symbols and

The futurists were not able to portray the future of the people.



PLAGUE OF 1917–1918

hostile interpretations. The cultural heritage was particularly formidable during festivals, when it was embodied by the city itself. The language and medium of a festival is the city, its people, streets, and buildings.²

Initially, the major source of inspiration for allegorical figures was the neoclassical tradition transmitted by the French Revolution. While the Bolsheviks still struggled with the ideas of the French Revolution and the Paris Commune due to their bourgeois nature, Kerensky's government adopted them wholeheartedly. They used the *Marseillaise* as their anthem, and in August 1917 they even proposed a "grandiose carnival-spectacle honoring the epoch of the French Revolution to be organized in the Summer Garden to aid Russian prisoners of war. . . . A prop city will be built depicting the Paris of that time. Actors will portray the artistic and theatrical bohemia of the late eighteenth century."³ The Provisional Government proposed that Evreinov direct it and Yury Annenkov make all the stage designs. Although this rather mad idea never materialized, Evreinov and Annenkov worked together on the most imposing mass spectacles of the 1920s.⁴

On May Day 1917, the procession in Petrograd included reenactments of the February Revolution, the 1905 uprising, the tsar's family, and a woman portraying Freedom. She stood on Nevsky Prospekt in front of the State Duma building, dressed in a Classical tunic and holding a broken chain in her hands. A banner was created by professional artists for the workers of the famous Putilov Factory, and featured a woman in a white tunic standing on a globe holding a palm branch – a Christian symbol of triumph, victory, and sacrifice – in one

Russian sketches

Professor Magnus Ljunggren prefers to cultivate a miniature format in his Russian sketches. He speaks of unusual lives from the modern cultural history of Russia. He writes about authors, creators of art, scientists. He seeks, with small slices and sharply etched images, to reveal something greater, to offer shards of the Russian drama.

Lidia Chukovskaya

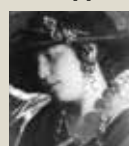
Lidia Chukovskaya's novel *The Deserted House* was published in Swedish translation in 1969. With quiet intensity, it tells the semi-autobiographical story of a woman who loses first her husband and then her son during Stalin's Terror.

Chukovskaya had written down her text secretly in 1939 in a copybook she left with a friend. But the friend starved to death soon after during the Leningrad blockade. She then believed the novel was lost. It turned out, however, that just before she died, her friend had given the copybook to a sister, who had survived. It remained in her possession.

The sister died in 1957, during the thaw. Chukovskaya traveled in from Moscow and dug through her papers. The sister's relatives did not hold out much hope.

And then suddenly she found the copybook, at the bottom of a wastepaper basket. Books have their destinies.

Ida Nappelbaum and Nina Berberova



Ida Nappelbaum (left) was born in 1900 and Nina Berberova in 1901. I happened to know them both, and think of them

often. Their shared history begins in Petrograd in the spring of 1921. Artistic freedom had not yet been wholly throttled in the Soviet state. They were nurtured as poets by Nikolai Gumilyov. They heard – in his studio – that the word must be chiseled out in a labor of great patience. The craft was almost everything.

Gumilyov was suddenly arrested in August 1921, accused of conspiring against the Bolshevik government. Nappelbaum and Berberova soon stood hand in hand on Nevsky Prospekt and read the announcement of his execution. They felt that an epoch had come to an end. After a time of reflection, Berberova chose to emigrate.

Nappelbaum remained and her voice was stilled. Thirty years later, she was arrested in connection with Stalin's "anti-cosmopolitan" actions and was

thrown into a camp. While Nappelbaum was chopping down trees in Taishet, Siberia, Berberova was beginning a new career in the United States as a Slavist on the strength of her successful career as an émigré writer. She ended up a professor at Princeton.

Her memoirs, called *The Italics Are Mine* in English, were published in 1972. Nappelbaum read them in secret: they circulated in the intellectual underground of Leningrad and astonished everyone with their remarkably vivid Russian.

Glasnost came, and perestroika. Nappelbaum was able to publish her harrowing memories of imprisonment. At the same moment, Berberova decided she must set off for Russia. She arrived in 1989, almost 90 years old – but still fully active, now with her memoirs published in various countries. After 67 years of separation, the two were reunited. Leningrad TV recorded the meeting for posterity.

Two unique women's experiences in a divided world. They stood there and held hands once again. There was something palpably indestructible in their friendship. Two years later, the Soviet Union collapsed. Three years later, Nappelbaum died. Another year passed, and Berberova was gone.

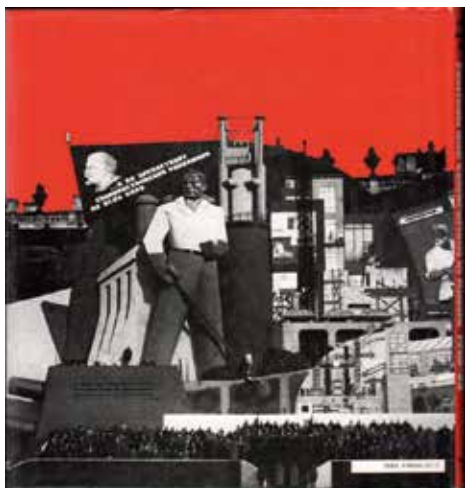
A tale of the 20th century.

Aleksandr Tarkovsky

Much is said about Andrei Tarkovsky's father in his sister Marina's memoir, *Shards of a Mirror*. Arseny Tarkovsky was one of the great 20th-century Russian poets. In various incarnations, he is always present in his son's films.

But there is an argument to be made that Tarkovsky's artistic output is ultimately traceable to his grandfather, Arseny's father – whom Marina unfortunately does not linger on for any appreciable length of time. This Aleksandr Tarkovsky was a penitent nobleman who in the 19th century dedicated his life to the Revolution, based on his reading of radical literature. The socialist utopia of Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* became his life's project.

Like other young people, Aleksandr was prepared to make great sacrifices. He spent many long years in exile in Siberia in the 1880s and 1890s. He belonged to "The People's Liberation", a group that engaged in terrorism, although he personally refrained. He was never able to have a government career and had to settle for obscure clerical duties. Secretly, he cultivated his rebellious ideas and he wrote and wrote – without managing to publish



hand, and a torch in the other. The slogan proclaimed, “Long live the International!”

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS WERE widely used, including angels and St. George. As Victoria Bonnell observed, “the most central image, which provided a ‘cultural frame’ for organizing political narratives under the old regime, was that of St. George.”⁵

The tsarist government had repeatedly employed the image of St. George for political propaganda during the First World War. For May Day, 1917, workers from the Petrograd tannery produced a banner with the image of St. George killing the dragon. The dragon was also depicted on a banner painted by an amateur artist, carried by the piping workshop of the Izhorskii factory. Here a young woman with broken chains reached toward the sun, while the dead dragon was painted with a crown and scepter, symbolizing the tsar’s defeated autocracy. The slogan on the banner proclaimed, “Long live the democratic revolution and the 8-hour workday!”

Although Russian workers and peasants could relate to religious images, they were less likely to be able to “read” neoclassical images. The important literary critic and historian Viacheslav Polonski wrote in the 1920s that the prevalence of allegories and symbols was a consequence of the “bourgeois consciousness of those artists who came from the bourgeois class, bringing with them, together with technical skills, an alien approach to the interpretation of agitational lithography.”⁶

In 1917–1919, most festival decorations and banners were still painted by professional artists. Thus a famous soviet artist, Alexander Samokhvalov, who in 1917 was a student at the Academy of Arts in Petrograd, wrote about May Day,

The Revolution demanded slogans, symbols and posters. They were necessary for those who felt that the Socialist Revolution was inevitable. Workers from factories would bring texts for the slogans and red fabric to us at the Academy. We would write their slogans, trying to illustrate them with industrial symbols: anvils, hammers, sickles and so on.⁷

But could professional artists or academic students create a new proletarian art that was comprehensible to the masses? In his article “Art and the Street”, the leader of the *World of Art* movement, Alexander Benois, remarked, “When high art

stayed away from the street, the street still had a vibrant artistic life. But now high art has come out onto the street – and everything has become rather confusing.”⁸

Apart from the contradiction between the visual language of workers and that of the intelligentsia, the desire of festival planners to celebrate the Revolution in a harmonious style was often frustrated by the cities themselves, particularly by Petrograd, the former imperial capital. Petrograd’s ceremonial center was dominated by the classicism of the tsar’s palaces. For the celebrations of the First of May, 1917, all the buildings on the Palace Square, including the Winter Palace, were decorated for the first time with white drapes with red edgings and revolutionary slogans. As one of the journalists present, Mikhail Levidov, remarked in his article “On the Day of the Red Festival”, “These decorations were the only bright spots on the dull yellow background.”⁹

The idea of decorating the Classical facades of the old palaces was developed even further after the October Revolution of 1917. Under the Bolsheviks, avant-garde artists assumed the right to develop art for the newly formed communist state, and the commission to decorate Petrograd for May Day 1918, was awarded to futurists.¹⁰ It was the first big state commission after the October Revolution, and it was entrusted to the “leftist artists” who gathered around the Visual Arts Department of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (IZO Narkompros): Natan Altman, Ivan Puni, Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, Konstantin Boguslavskii, Vladimir Lebedev, and others.

As a statement of their new art, the futurists covered the facades of most of the historic buildings in the center of Petrograd with bright cubist posters featuring futurist slogans. These unique city decorations and their reception by the hungry, impoverished townspeople, recorded in the press of 1918, became the true expression of the first steps towards new art in Bolshevik Russia.

One of the leading artists of the *World of Art* movement, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, wrote,

Well, you must admit we have witnessed the birth of a new era: on the First of May we artists finally took our revolutionary banners out onto the streets, and just look how delightfully the creations of new art adorned the city. At last, we have declared war on the despotism of architectural lines, which have imprisoned the artist’s free eye long enough!¹¹

However, most reactions to these ultra-modern city decorations were not so positive. The newspaper *Vechernie Ognii* [Evening lights] presented a rather sarcastic description of the May Day decorations of Petrograd:

On the façade of the hotel Astoria is a poster depicting a knight on a green horse, striking someone’s light brown leg with a spear. The slogan says, “Let Us Defend Petrograd” [Zashchitim Petrograd]. / On the Mariinsky Palace there are three posters: (1) a man and a woman are loading guns; between them are two lonely buds; the inscription reads “Build the Red Army” [Stroite Krasnuiu Armiuu]. (2) Cubes, triangles and scrolls of all the colors of the rainbow alternately scattered around. The letters “Fial ...” and “ki” are mixed among the cubes [fialki is Russian for violets]. Underneath is written, for those who did not understand, “flowers”. (3) The same cubes, triangles and scrolls with the words “First of May” [Pervoe Maia]. / The General Staff Building was adorned with several mysterious pictures. . . . Participants in the demonstrations especially enjoyed seeing on one of the posters a blacksmith with one right hand and four left hands; his right eye was flying somewhere in the clouds. / By the Alexander Column, facing Konnogvardeiski Boulevard, was a large painted panel showing dancing peasants – a woman and two men – one in a red and other in a green shirt; it is inscribed “First of May” [Pervoe Maia]. / On the façade of the Winter Palace is a canvas with two figures shaking hands in the middle of a green field; between them is a tree without any leaves but with two red cones; a sign says, “Power to the Soviets” [Vlast’ Sovetam].¹²

The Soviet Festivals were seen by the Bolsheviks as the most effective tool in agitation and in the education of the proletariat. Essential funds and manpower were diverted to them in the midst of famine and economic disaster. Often on the day of the festival restaurants and cafes offered cheap meals to the starving population. The new state had to explain its newly invented founding myth to the populace: during the challenging time of economic disaster and civil war, they allocated special funds to the festivals, but struggled to develop a visual language understandable to the proletariat.



The leading art critic of twentieth-century Russia, Nikolay Punin, proclaimed in the futurist newspaper *Iskusstvo Kommuny* [Art of the Commune],

To blow up the old artistic forms, demolish them, wipe them off the face of the earth: that's the dream of the new artist, the proletarian artist, the new man. . . . If you can't destroy, build stage props, pretend to demolish – but do not decorate. Do not decorate, since nobody needs these decorations. Not just me, but everyone who has eyes and some common sense was sorry to see such a huge amount of fabric spoiled by often very low quality posters; in our time when we all lack trousers or skirts, it is the same as hanging bread on the streets just for fun. . . . We did not need these painted cloths, wet, faded and torn; life was not merry in those days.¹³

For the first time in Russia, new futurist art claimed to be the artistic vanguard, but proved unable to communicate with the proletariat – now the most important class, after the Bolshevik revolution – and soon had to surrender to more self-explanatory realism. As early as 1919, the May Day decorations were fairly self-explanatory: “Everything was clear and easy to understand, there were no mysterious paintings on pieces of fabric on the streets, no caricatures.”¹⁴

But futurist or not, the people's impressions of the festive decorations and spectacles were often so strong that the recollections of even those who witnessed the historical events were overridden by the dramatized performances. Memory can be very selective, and tends to remember joyful and cheerful occasions. The Bolsheviks banked on this, and probably won. ✕

references

- 1 Rudnev became one of the most popular architects under Stalin, and designed the Moscow State University building in 1949, followed by the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw in 1952-1955.
- 2 James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920*, Berkeley 1993, p. 73.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 4 Their most famous mass spectacle, *Storming of the Winter Palace*, was performed on November 7, 1920 in Petrograd.
- 5 Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, Berkeley 1999, p. 70.
- 6 Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 74.
- 7 Quoted in Lapshin, V. P., *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn' Moskvy i Petrograda v 1917 godu* [Artistic Life of Moscow and Petrograd in 1917], Moscow 1983, p. 122.
- 8 Alexandre Benois, “Iskusstvo i ulitsa” [Art and the street], in *Teatral'naiia gazeta* [Theater Newspaper] 1917, no. 24 (1917-06-11), p. 8.
- 9 Mikhail Levidov, *V den' Krasnogo Prazdnika* [On the day of Red Festival], in *Novaia Zhizn'* [New Life], no. 2 (1917-04-20).
- 10 They were not all futurists, but from the time when futurism first emerged in Russia, the term had quite a broad meaning, and incorporated aesthetics of “leftist” art rather than specific artistic principles.
- 11 Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, “Bomba ili khlopushka: Razgovor mezhdu dvumia khudozhnikami” [A bomb or a firecracker: a conversation between two artists], in *Novaia Zhizn'* no. 83 (1918-05-04).
- 12 “Torzhestva 1 maia: Plakaty” [Festivals of the 1 May: Posters], in *Vechernie Ogni* [Evening lights] no. 35 (1918-05-02), p. 3.
- 13 Nikolay Punin, “K itogam oktyabr'skikh torzhestv” [To the outcomes of the celebrations of the Anniversary of October Revolution], in *Iskusstvo Kommuny* [Art of the Commune] no. 1 (1918-12-07), p. 2.
- 14 “Pervoe maia v Petrograde” [First of May in Petrograd], in *Petrogradskaia Pravda* [Petrograd truth] no. 96 (1919-05-03), p. 2.

much. He sent a gushing letter to Victor Hugo, yet another of his idols. We do not know whether the missive was ever received.

In 1918, Aleksandr Tarkovsky compiled a family history for his offspring in which he likened himself to a tree that was almost barren but now wanted to produce its last fruit. One cannot help but think of the final scene in Tarkovsky's last film, *The Sacrifice*, filmed in Sweden shortly before his death: the heavily symbolic image of the tree that the little son is taught to water and sustain.

The materialist and the metaphysicist united in their overwhelming faith in art. A typical Russian paradox.

Aleksandr Pushkin



Bob Dylan and Aleksandr Pushkin have something important in common. Young revolutionary poets who interpret the experience of a generation and then test new waters – and are accused by old friends of having betrayed their radical ideals. It sometimes seems as if the two poets have a thousand identities, their art refusing to permit them to become fixed in one. In his memoirs, Dylan tells of reading Pushkin in English translation when he was young – works written when Pushkin was about the same age he was then. Perhaps he also thought about his own Jewish roots in the Odessa that the young Pushkin felt so deeply during his time in exile.

Chekhov and Meyerhold

Vsevolod Meyerhold was arrested in 1939. Soon afterward, his wife was stabbed to death and in short order he was executed. The NKVD confiscated the family apartment and his wife's two children from a previous marriage to Sergei Yesenin were thrown out on the street. In that distressing situation, his stepdaughter Tatiana Yesenina had the presence of mind to rescue important parts of Meyerhold's archives. The papers she took to the family's dacha in her father's old valise included Meyerhold's correspondence with Anton Chekhov. The war came. The area where the dacha lay was pounded by German fire. In the greatest secrecy, Meyerhold's former pupil Sergei Eisenstein carried the valise back to Moscow. Today, its contents are preserved at the Russian Archives of Literature and Art.

Risking his own life, the great film director saves the great theatrical luminary's correspondence with the great playwright in the great poet's