

The avant-gardist Ivan Aksionov. A life marked by ruptures and paradoxes

Vid
avantgardets
korsvägar:
Om Ivan
Aksionov och
den ryska
modernismen
[At the cross
roads of the
avant-garde:
On Ivan
Aksionov
and Russian
modernism

Lars Kleberg,
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248 pages.

This book by Lars Kleberg, professor emeritus of Russian at Södertörn University, is a well-written, pioneering, biography of the – until recently – little-known avant-gardist Ivan Aksionov (1884–1935). Through Aksionov, Kleberg explores the ups and downs of the Russian avant-garde in the 1910s and '20s. Even if Aksionov was not a leading cultural figure, Kleberg shows him to be a fascinating and versatile person; a poet, critic of art and literature, theater expert, and translator, acquainted with many cultural celebrities of his time. Kleberg's background also has some similarities with Aksionov's.

In Kleberg's words, the study of Aksionov unveils new aspects and unrealized potentials of the avant-garde. He sees the avant-garde – cubism, futurism, and non-figurative art – as a reaction to symbolism, which in turn was a reaction to 19th century realism, and both as subcategories of modernism. The Russian avant-garde aimed to undermine all hierarchies, to transgress genres and national boundaries.

The book also gives a picture of the political upheavals in Russia at the time as seen from inside and below, a useful complement to all top-down analyses of the Russian revolution and its aftermath that have appeared in recent years. The book has good illustrations, chronologies, and references.

Kleberg first became interested in Aksionov through conversations, in the 1970s and later, with the famous art collector Nikolai Khardzhiev, who had known Aksionov and to whom the book is dedicated. The book builds on notes from these conversations and material collected for many years: Aksionov's published and unpublished works, letters, scattered information in newspapers, memoirs, and research. Kleberg also builds on papers from the first international symposium on Aksionov, which he organized near Uppsala in 2008, and an edition of Aksionov's collected works that came out in Russia in the same year. Kleberg focuses on ruptures and paradoxes in Aksionov's life, stressing that Aksionov was secretive and that much remains to be found out.

AS A SON OF a Russian nobleman and officer, Aksionov grew up on an estate in eastern Ukraine, but Kleberg apparently found little information on relations with his family. Aksionov was trained as an officer in the engineering troops. When the Tsar dissolved the Duma in 1907, he participated in an army revolt in Kiev, was arrested, and was sent to a post in Siberia for two years. Aksionov spent his time there studying languages and literature, and on his return to Kiev started to mingle in its prominent cultural circles. He was noted for his immaculate dress, always in white shirt and a monocle, and for his arrogant and aggressive behavior. In 1911, Aksionov made his debut as a translator with French poetry, and the year after as an art critic with an insightful analysis of the symbolist artist Mikhail Vrubel. He became a name in Moscow in 1913 where, speaking after Vladimir Mayakovsky at a spectacular debate, he provided a provocative assessment of contemporary Russian art and its future. Kleberg

here surmises inspiration from philosopher Lev Shestov, also from Kiev, who – inspired by Nietzsche – allegedly wanted to undermine strong faith in all its forms. Most of all, however, Shestov rejected the belief in reason.¹

In 1914 Aksionov, like many others, went to Paris, the world's cultural capital at the time, and became acquainted with cubism and Pablo Picasso, about whom he started to write a book in polemics with the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyayev. He admired the Eiffel Tower and discovered the French 19th century poet Comte de Lautréamont, whose *Les chants de Maldoror* are well used by Kleberg as openings to each chapter.

When the war broke out, Aksionov – unlike most cultural figures – was called up as an officer to serve behind the Western front, but he spent much time writing and corresponding with the poet Sergei Bobrov, who had a futurist publishing house called Tsentrifuga. He supported its activities with money from his estate and in 1916–1917 published *The Elizabethans*, an anthology of English 17th century poetry in his own close “rhythmic” translation, a collection of poems called *Invalid Foundations*, in a “cubistic” style, including the Eiffel suite, the Picasso book, and other things, mostly without getting reviews.

After the February 1917 revolution, Aksionov engaged in politics by organizing a Bolshevik party cell in the army and editing a soldiers' council paper. In October he criticized Prime Minister Kerensky and hailed the Bolshevik takeover. In December he was captured by the Romanian troops for four months, but was then exchanged and joined the civil war. He became deputy head of the Cheka commission for combating desertion and partly responsible for signing death sentences against fleeing peasants, amounting to tens or hundreds of thousands. However, in captivity Aksionov wrote a picaresque novel (only published in 2008) called *The Pillars of Hercules* about a Russian student fleeing to Paraguay, which in style reminds Kleberg of Andrei Belyi and Boris Pasternak.

In 1920, and during the NEP period after the civil war, Aksionov was deeply involved in cultural events as a speaker and critic. In the state journal *The Press and the Revolution*, initiated by Commissar of Culture Lunacharsky, Aksionov wrote sharp reviews and in an essay,



Still Life with Compote and Glass, 1914, by Pablo Picasso.

“On the Liquidation of Futurism”, argued that its victory in 1917 with poets like Velimir Khlebnikov and Vladimir Mayakovsky also presaged its decline. However, Kleberg shows that Aksionov was not really a Marxist. In another essay, “On the Disorder of the Day”, Aksionov attacked Osip Brik, spokesman for an alliance between the avant-garde and socialist society, by dismissing utilitarian art and its union with industrial production. He emphasized that the mission of art is to satisfy aesthetic needs, and that aesthetics is a science.

As a former playwright, Kleberg then devotes a chapter to Aksionov’s association with Vsevolod Meyerhold’s famous theater, especially the production of Fernand Crommelynck’s tragic farce *The Magnificent Cuckold* in 1922, which, according to Kleberg, became a milestone in theater history with its biomechanical acting and constructivist scenography by Liubov Popova. Aksionov provided the translation and engaged Popova; he became the director of Meyerhold’s theater school, dramaturg and translator of plays such as Alfred Jarry’s *King Ubu*. He was also chairman of the Union of Poets and headed its popular café Domino. Instead of joining the Moscow center for avant-garde art (LEF) led by Mayakovsky and Brik, in 1924 he joined a group of constructivist young poets, publishing a long treatise on the frequency of consonants in Russian poetry in its first anthology.

IN THE MID-1920S, when the avant-garde lost its cultural influence to proletarian authors who wanted to use 19th-century art forms to spread Communist ideology to the masses, Aksionov stood without friends, positions, or money from his estate. He earned his living as a lecturer and wrote a history of Meyerhold’s theater, which was not published. He criticized the new photo-realist art and in a rightist journal attacked Mayakovsky for adopting the style of capitalist advertisement, an act which his avant-garde colleagues viewed as treachery. In 1930 he suddenly left Moscow to teach physics to engineers at a hydropower station in Ukraine. On his return he was invited by the philosopher

Gustav Shpet, deputy head of the Arts Sciences Academy, to publish a book on Hamlet and Shakespeare, notable for its non-ideological analysis. Apparently in need of money, he also translated Anatole France and wrote about the future of Soviet bakeries.

In 1932, when the five-year-plans had started and Stalinist repression was intensifying, the separate arts unions were dissolved and socialist realism became the order of the day, combining realism with utopian visions. Aksionov was

affiliated with the Academia publishing house, which specialized in translations of Western classics, and edited a collection of plays by Ben Jonson with a long historical introduction, still the most comprehensive in any language according to Kleberg. During the Shakespeare boom from 1933 on, he wrote several essays on the playwright, but a translation for a big collection of Shakespeare’s works was not included, apparently because Shpet was arrested and then killed. In his last years Aksionov authored a book on three prominent contemporaries whom he knew well, namely the artist Petr Konchalovskiy, the Meyerhold actress Maria Babanova, and the film director Sergei Eisenstein, a book which mirrors the history of the avant-garde. After Aksionov’s natural death in 1936, his former wife, the poet Susanna Marr, in her turn had some of Aksionov’s works published.

Kleberg has now also done a great deal to increase our knowledge of Aksionov and his time. Deservedly, an English translation of this book is planned. ❌

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reference

- 1 Shestov and his view of Nietzsche and Shakespeare are also analysed in a 2017 dissertation by Lars Douglas Eriksson at Stockholm University, “Crisis, Alienation and Authenticity in Lev Shestov’s Philosophy”.