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**THE EVOLUTION OF SOVIET ARCHITECTURAL  
CULTURE IN THE FIRST DECADE OF STALIN'S  
'PERESTROIKA'**

January 2009

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Image on cover: Side Walls of the Western Wing of the Kislodovsk Sanatorium by Moisej Ginzburg (Photo: Danilo Udovicki-Selb)

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**The Evolution of Soviet Architectural Culture  
in the First Decade of Stalin's 'Perestroika'**

by

**Danilo Udovički-Selb**

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January 2009

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### *Transliteration*

I opted for an increasingly accepted transliteration, the closest to Slavic languages that use both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabet. To avoid ambiguity, however, I made an exception for well-known names that have an established spelling in English such as Malevich rather than Malevič or Khrushchev rather than Hruščëv. All quotes in the text are translated by the author, unless otherwise specified.



## The Evolution of Soviet Architectural Culture in the First Decade of Stalin's Perestroika<sup>1</sup>

Viktor Šklovskij, the leading Russian linguist of the OPOJAZ<sup>2</sup> (also known as the School of the Formal Method), wrote in 1923 that Tatlin's Tower was a monument made out of "steel, glass, and Revolution." It could be said that this short sentence expressed the drama of the Soviet architectural discourse of the 1920-30's. The statement points to the persistent tension between, on the one hand, a "Revolution" accepted only in so far as it gained sufficient "distance" from itself and became, in the way of glass and steel, a mere linguistic material; and on the other hand, a "Revolution" where the work of the artist was to resemble a type of laboratory research conducted by "workers responding to a social demand."

Accordingly, the new Soviet architecture oscillated since its inception between a creation that tended to distance itself from "everyday life" (such as Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist experiments) and a production that tended to establish a positive dialogue with it (as was the work of Moisej Ginzburg, Vladimir Tatlin or the brothers Vesnin, Leonid, Viktor and Aleksandr). The fatal compromise reached between the two conceptions – resulting eventually in the eradication of both – was contained in the belief that, as Manfredo Tafuri claimed, "the analysis of the morphological development of language pertained to the science of the structure of signs, while the decision about their function was to be

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<sup>1</sup> The term *perestroika*, or reconstruction, was first introduced by Stalin in reference to the radical reforms of the Soviet system that he undertook after 1927 supplanting Lenin's NEP. The term, interchangeable euphemistically with "Cultural Revolution," was used ubiquitously in all the Soviet media, including the architectural press. Based on the novel idea of "socialism in one country," this reconstruction meant in essence the introduction of a centrally planned economy guided by five-year plans, forced collectivization of agriculture, urbanization, the high priority given to the development of heavy industries, and the waves of purges and terror disciplining Party membership as well as the rest of Soviet society.

<sup>2</sup> OPOJAZ: Obščestvo Poetičeskogo Jazika (The Society of the Poetic Language) founded before the Revolution.

left to the Party.” The death-sentence to the debate was emblematically pronounced, with Frank Lloyd Wright in attendance, at the delirious First Congress of the Union of Soviet Architects in 1937, in the shadow of the "Great Stalin."

Yet, in the course of these two decades, the Soviet Union was not just a place where young protagonists of modern architecture carried on, with much intelligence and enthusiasm, a parochial, peripheral debate on the "New Architecture." In many ways the Soviet Union was the mirror in which the unfolding of the entire Modern Movement was reflected.<sup>3</sup> Theorized and tested by the critical work of the Formalists, the Soviet avant-garde enjoyed, until the early 1930s, a unique situation in Europe.

What appeared as decisive in broader European terms was the unrestrained willingness of the Soviets to endorse the entire doctrinal package developed by the Modern Movement in the course of the 1920's, while making unprecedented, and far more diverse inroads into avant-garde trends that included the “Rationalism” of Nikolaj Ladovskij, advocating a form of Gestalt psychology that explained the role architectural space could have in revolutionizing the mentality of its users; the Constructivism of Moisej Ginzburg who was, along with the brothers Vesnin, the closest to the Western Modern Movement, Le Corbusier in particular; Kazimir Malevič with his trans-rational “Suprematist” experiments visualizing what he

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<sup>3</sup> The first generation of leading protagonists of the Soviet avant-garde included in architecture Aleksej Gan (1893-1942) the inventor in 1922, of Constructivism along with Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958), her husband Aleksandr Rodčenko (1891-1956) and Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953), all members of the Inhuk (Institut Hudožestvennoj Kultury – Institute for the Artistic Culture) that evolved into Productivism (application of art to industrial production). Gan was the author of the movement’s manifesto Konstruktivizm (Moscow: Tver’), 1922; the Rationalists Vladimir Krinskij (1890-1971) and Nikolaj Ladovskij (1881-1941), founders of the architectural group ASNOVA (Associacija Novyh Arhitektorov: Association of New Architects); Moisej Ginzburg (1892-1946) founder in 1926 of the group OSA (Obščestvo Sovremenyh Arhitektorov -- Society of Contemporary Architects), a splinter group from ASNOVA; Nikolaj Kolli (1892-1946), the only Soviet member of the CIAM; Kazimir Malevič (1878-1935), the inventor of Suprematism; El Lissitzky (1890-1941) and Nikolaj Suetin (1897-1954); Konstantin Mel’nikov (1890-1974); and Il’ja Golosov (1883-1945).

called the *Zaum*, that is, the realm dwelling behind what is graspable by reason, a trend El Lissitzky, the inventor of the famous PROUNs, continued into the post-Revolutionary era with his “horizontal Skyscrapers,” while he exhibited in Germany in 1922 and 1929, and lectured at the Bauhaus, to finally create in the 1930s the graphic presentation of USSR Builds, featuring boldly innovative photo-montages, and Nikolaj Suetin with his witty Suprematist ceramics; and finally the circle of ‘independents’ such as the expressionist Konstantin Mel’nikov who dazzled Paris and the world with his radically innovative “explosive” forms of his Soviet Pavilion at the 1925 “Art-Deco” exhibition, while Il’ja Golosov translated 17<sup>th</sup> century Classicist typology into radically modern abstract forms.

Fully aware of the force of the architectural movement lasting well into the mid 1930s, the American Albert Kahn opened his private office in Moscow, where the Swiss Hannes Meyer established himself as the senior technical consultant after he quit the directorship of the Bauhaus. Towards the end of the 1920s, Mart Stam joined Ladovskij’s group ASNOVA (Association for the New Architecture), while Le Corbusier inaugurated in 1934 his Centrosojuz (Central Trade Union administration) in the heart of Moscow; the work of Russian Formalists and Constructivists was exhibited throughout Europe; Mendelssohn was entrusted the design of sawing mills in Moscow; Bruno Taut lectured in Leningrad; Max Taut and Peter Behrens took part in the competition for the Centrosojuz (won by Le Corbusier) while Fred Forbat was asked to design apartment buildings for foreign technicians. This cooperation culminated in the leading role given in the 1930s to Ernst May and some protagonists of the Frankfurt and Brussels CIAM<sup>4</sup> (such as

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<sup>4</sup> The CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne), founded in 1928 at la Sarraz, Switzerland, was the main institution of the so-called “Modern Movement,” and met regularly through the 1930s until its virtual dissolution in 1956 in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia.

Eugen Kaufman, Hans Schmidt and Mart Stam) in developing Soviet urbanization plans.

Unlike in art, where an avant-garde approach had started early in the century with Kandinsky's invention of abstraction around 1910, evolving further through other autochthonous movements such as Cubo-Futurism and Suprematism, until the end of the Civil War modern architecture never went beyond pale reflections of fashionable currents such as Art Nouveau and the Jugendstil, if exception is made for Tatlin's constructivist interventions in the Moscow Kafe Pitoresk in 1917. The Soviet architectural avant-garde proper began, in complete independence from European models at the time of total isolation of the country, with the Third Prize the brother Vesnins won in the 1921 competition for the "Palace of Labor," as a literal "deconstruction" of classical forms. The saga of the Palace was extended, ten years later, into a revised program calling for a "Palace of the Soviets" instead through gradual transformations that reflected both the history of the demise of the architectural avant-garde and its inner resilience in the face of adversity.

The gradual marginalization of the avant-garde after 1930 in architecture was not, contrary to entrenched beliefs, achieved by the dictate of a Party decree at the turn of the decade. No "official" style was ever imposed, and efforts by the ruling party to put under control the architectural discourse sparked intense debates among the architects. Moreover, public resistance to abandon modern architecture as conceived by the avant-garde in the 1920s was felt as late as 1937. This was the harshest year of the Terror, when Aleksandr Vesnin was provoked into defending Constructivism at the first congress of the monolithic Stalinist All-Union of Soviet Architects founded in 1933 to replace the multiple modernist architectural groups.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> RGALI (Rossijskij Gosudarstvenij Arhiv Literaturi i Iskustv) archives, Moscow. All-Union Association of Architects, Congress papers. Also partially reported by a US delegate to the Moscow Congress, the New York architect Simon Breines, winner of a prize for the Palace of

The repeated postponement of that Congress (initially scheduled for 1934 in the wake of the writers' own assembly) was caused by the difficulties the Communist core of the Union experienced in controlling the decision making process within the Union. Actually, this was the reason why the Soviets asked the CIAM to postpone their Moscow meeting scheduled for 1933, contrary to the enduring myth according to which the CIAM cancelled the meeting in protest against the outcome of the Palace of Soviets competition to be revisited in this paper. The sustained desire of the Politburo for such a Congress to be held in Moscow in the following years, while being dismissive of Modernism at home, corroborates the complex nature of the architectural discourse started by the "Cultural Revolution."<sup>6</sup>

The difficulty in agreeing what "socialist realism" ought to mean in architecture was compounded by the divergences in stylistic preferences among members of the Party's top leadership. The unintended result of the conundrum was a lingering architectural diversity that allowed even a degree of official tolerance for Constructivist architecture persisting through the end of the 1930s. Two most notable examples of such diversity in design strategies, resulting in important modernist achievements, were the Moscow Palace of Culture by the brothers Vesnin, inaugurated in 1937, and the now all but forgotten 1938 Sanatorium by Moisej Ginzburg, its signature modernism hidden in the forbidding mountain range of the Northern Caucasus.<sup>7</sup>

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Soviets, in "First Congress of Soviet Architects", Architectural Record, October 1937, pp. 63-65. Stalin faced a serious resistance to his new policies at the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1930 and did not achieve full control over system before the 1934 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, "the Congress of the victors," as he called it.

<sup>6</sup> The fact that the Party operated in strict secrecy complicated the maneuvering. RGALI, All-Union of Soviet Architects. First Congress, 1937: The Party cell papers.

<sup>7</sup> The sanatorium I visited in January 2005, bears to this day the name of Stalin's Politburo member Sergo Ordžonikidze.



Fig. 1 The palace of Culture by the Brothers Vesnin. Cover page Stroitel'stvo Moskvy (Photo Udovički)



Fig. 2 General view of the East Wing of the “Ordžonikidze” Sanatorium in Kislovodsk, Caucasus, by M. Ginzburg, with Monumental Stairs by I. Leonidov in 1938. (Photo MuAr)

The present article is a contribution to substantially complement and modify the views expressed, among others, in the only, albeit important pioneering book available on the issue published in 1994<sup>8</sup>. It is based on new material from the Soviet Government archives, the archives of the Moscow Party organization, the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee and Politburo, the Kaganovič papers, documents held by the Moscow Architectural Museum, the Lenin Library, and the Russian archives for the arts and literature. The essay examines some of the significant aspects of Modernism's survival under Stalin, in concept and in realized buildings, over the decade preceding the Second World War. It includes a discussion of the dramatic events that surrounded the 1928 competition for the Lenin Library, when the Modernists appealed to the Party to intervene in the defense of modern architecture. The Party's response was to create an architectural organization, the VOPRA that, far from being the expression of a spontaneous movement as has been regarded thus far, was secretly sponsored and instructed by the Party's leadership, and, more than endorsing a principled position, was aimed at monopolizing architectural debate. A reassessment of the last version of the Palace of the Soviets, conventionally known as a hyper-Stalinist project with its oppressive monumentality, furnishes a surprising illustration of the essay's larger point regarding the surviving spirit of both Modernity (related to industrialization) and Modernism (related to avant-garde movements) in the Soviet Union under Joseph Visarionovič Stalin.

Considering this survival, the essay highlights the Palace of Culture (1930-1937) by the brothers Vesnin, a neglected masterpiece that paralleled Alvar Aalto's search for a new modernist direction during the same decade, notably at the 1939 New York's Fair Finnish pavilion. Finally, the essay discusses two sanatoria in

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<sup>8</sup> Hugh D. Hudson Jr., Blueprints and Blood: The Stalinization of Soviet Architecture, 1917-1937 (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1994.



particular, one at Barviha near Moscow, and the other at Kislovodsk in the Caucasus, inaugurated in 1933 and 1938 respectively, to show the informing principles of Modernism built into their concept and realization.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Lenin Library Competition***

Having replaced in 1928 Lenin's NEP with central planning, Stalin proceeded with efforts to bring the modernist movements of the previous decade under control.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the intention was not so much to impose a particular style, as it was to replace spontaneous architectural expression by the effective control of the field. Preexisting structures were to be gradually infiltrated and reined in. By 1930, without renouncing modernity and modernization *per se* – a declared ideological premise of the Revolution – Stalin's ruling party was taking in its own hands what, until then, had been primarily the realm of professionals. Instead of independent initiative, direct and indirect dictates from the centers of power defined everyday reality, draining the intellectual discourse of all substance.<sup>11</sup>

Towards the end of the 1920s, the "nouveaux riches" of the NEP (the so-called "Nepmen") had been gaining influence on architecture in proportion with their growing economic power. A telling example of the trend at the end of the

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<sup>9</sup> The important campaign for the Moscow Metro and its significance for modern architecture is not discussed here, as this has already been done in other studies, and in particular in Christian Borngräber, "Constructivistes et académistes dans le Métro de Moscou au milieu au milieu des années trente," in J. L. Cohen, M. De Michelis, M. Tafuri, eds., URSS, 1917-1978: La ville, l'architecture (Paris/Roma: L'Equerre; Officina edizioni, 1979), pp. 300-16. See also Josette Bouvard, Le Métro de Moscou, la construction d'un mythe soviétique (Paris: Edition du sextant, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Lenin introduced the New Economic Policies (NEP) at the end of the Civil War (1918-1921) in an effort to revive production and consumption through a limited market economy.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh D. Hudson Jr., Blueprints and Blood: The Stalinization of Soviet Architecture, 1917-1937 (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1994.

NEP was Ivan Žoltovskij's (1867-1959) GosBank in Moscow built in 1927. Žoltovskij enjoyed the reputation of exceptional connoisseurship of the Italian Renaissance: he implemented Andrea Palladio's architecture in his own work.

By the early 1930s, however, the Nepmen's place was taken over by a new type of parvenus: the "professional revolutionaries," meritorious apparatchiks and decorated citizens populating the heights of Stalin's 'meritocratic' world. Not surprisingly, they were opting for conservative choices in architecture, analogous to the Nepmen's. As a result, at the turn of the decade, Soviet avant-garde architects found themselves caught up between the "nouveau riches" NEP elite they resisted since the mid 1920s and a rising new state-socialist middle class favoring conservatism. What space, if any, was left to the Modernists?

In the Spring 1928, coinciding with the national competition for the Lenin Library in Moscow, the avant-garde SA (Sovremenaja Arhitektura), the official journal of the OSA, published a letter by a group of young architects from the Ukrainian city of Harkov calling for help and support from the Moscow Modernists.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The journal SA (Sovremenaja Arhitektura: "Contemporary Architecture"), was founded in 1926 by Ginzburg. He brought to SA's editorial board some of the most important figures of the architectural Avant-Garde, including the young Ivan Leonidov (1904-1957). Aleksej Gan, staunchly dedicated to the new society, revolutionized typesetting and book layout with his designs for SA.

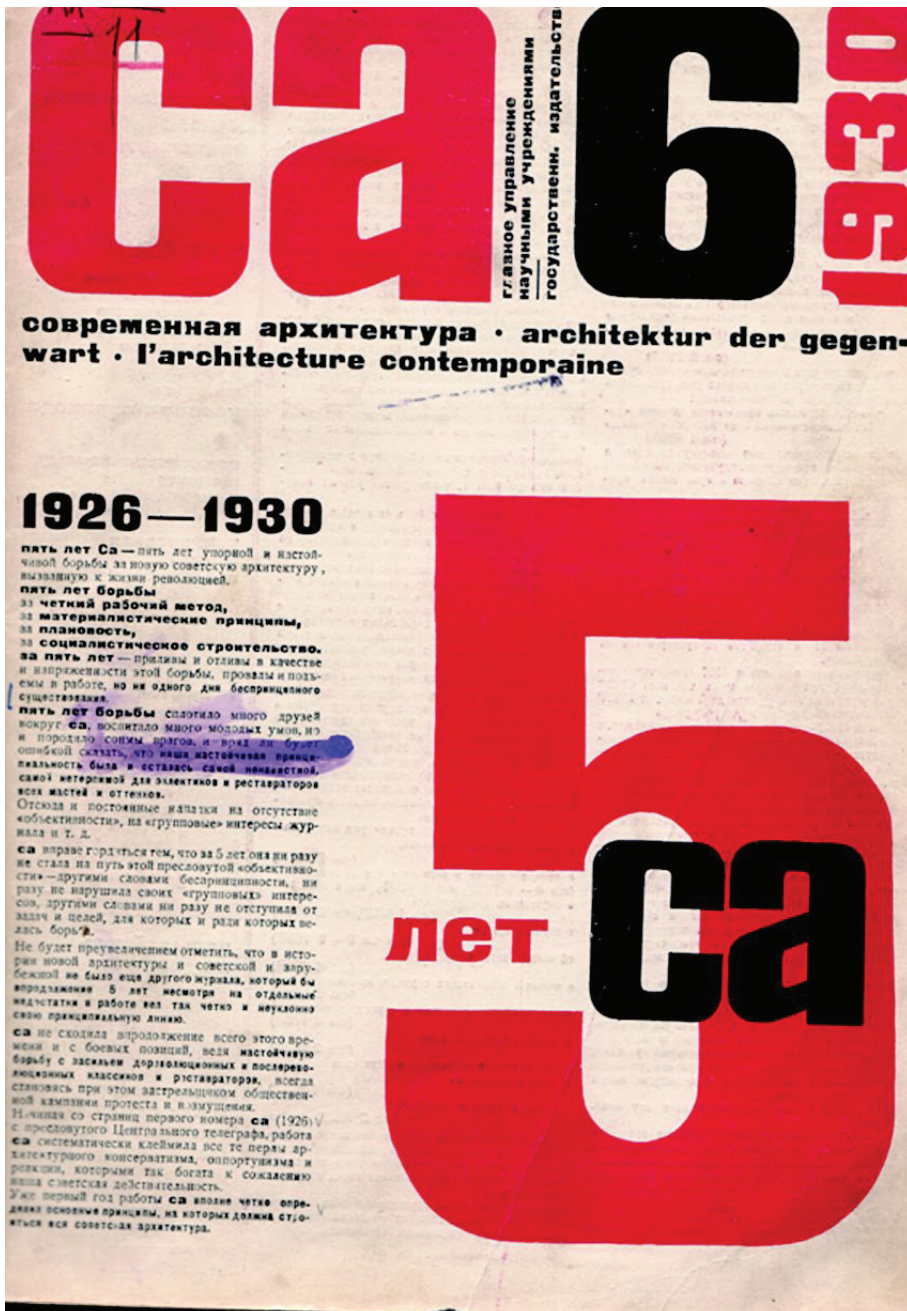


Fig. 3 Front Page of SA M. Ginzburg, Editor. Design by Gan. Fifth Anniversary. (Lenin Library)

The group was fervently devoted to modern architecture, and was distressed at what they perceived as mounting conservatism in their town, increasingly dominated by pre-revolutionary architects who kept at bay the younger ones. In a desperate attempt at breaking the grip of academic architecture that threatened to monopolize the profession, they formed a group, the “Iniciativnaja Gruppya,” to launch an organized resistance to the trend.

Their appeal fell on fertile ground. The group’s concerns were not only shared by the leaders of Soviet modern architecture, but were dramatically highlighted by the turbulent events related to the competition for the Lenin Library, one of the most prestigious projects of the decade planned in the heart of Moscow, across from the Kremlin walls.

The competition was juried by the MAO (Moskovskoe Arhitekturnoe Obščestvo), a pre-revolutionary Moscow architectural society reinstated in 1923. It was organized in two parts. The first part was open to the entire profession, the other only to “invited” architects. Because of its conservative jury, the open contest for the library attracted no more than ten entries. At the same time, the invited architects, including the Vesnin brothers Aleksandr (1883-1959), Viktor (1882-1950) and Leonid (1880-1933), who introduced Constructivism in architecture in 1922 with their Third Prize entry to the competition for the Palace of Labor, were academic figures already well established under the Tsar. Out of four invited teams, only one, the Vesnin team, had radically renounced their conservative pre-1914 architecture. Besides the Vesnins, the invited teams were the conservative engineer Il’ja Rerberg, already active in the previous century, and recently derided in SA for his Post Office on Tverskaja Street (Maksim Gorkij after the writer’s death, today again Tverskaja), two blocks from the Kremlin walls; the Ukrainian Vladimir Ščuko (1879-1939); and the designer of the permanent Lenin mausoleum Aleksej Ščusev (1873-1949), an architectural chameleon who was accused later in

the decade by the Secretary of the Union of architects, Karo Alabjan (1897-1959), of having “an anti-Soviet way of looking at you.”<sup>13</sup>

The new generation of young architects who grew out of the 1917 upheavals, were trained at the VHUTEMAS, one of the most innovative schools of art and architecture in Europe that offered the students the possibility to choose between the “masterskie” directed by artists and architects adhering to different modernist orientations or to follow a traditional academic curriculum run by established Classicists.<sup>14</sup> The young Harkov architects, some probably trained at the school, were outraged that the list of invited architects for the Lenin Library competition failed to reflect the new forces in the field.<sup>15</sup> To resist countrywide “reactionary” trends of this sort, the VHUTEIN’s “Scientific and Technical Architectural Club” called for a public debate on its premises on Miasnitickaja Street, in the vicinity of the designated building site for Le Corbusier’s Centrosojuz, and, ironically, of a monumental post office building designed by the Vesnin brothers before the revolution in a Byzantine style.

The public response to the call was overwhelming. Huge crowds of Moscow students, professors and architects attended the meeting, turning it into a plebiscite against the influence of “architects who were active before the revolution and who belonged to aristocratic and bourgeois circles.” The speakers pointed out sardonically that Soviet architecture seemed to be undergoing its own “Renaissance” with projects and buildings flashing Palladian revivals.

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<sup>13</sup> Moscow RGALI archives: Party organization of the SSA – Sojuz Sovetskyh Arhitektorov: All-Union of Soviet Architects.

<sup>14</sup> The VHUTEMAS (Vyšie Hudožestveno -Tehničeskije Masterskie – Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops, was founded in 1919 by the People’s Commissariat for the Enlightenment (NARKOMPROS) under the Commissar Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933). By 1924 it trained as many as 1500 students. The School was renamed VHUTEIN (Vyššij Hudožestveno-Tehničeskij Institut – Higher Artistic and Technical Institute) towards the end of the 1920s.

<sup>15</sup> SA 2/1928

The debates ended with a unanimous resolution emphasizing the need for a “systematic and relentless struggle” against what the assembly regarded as “the indifference of the profession” to the actual conditions of the country. The resolution stated emphatically:

“[We are]  
AGAINST ignoring the new social and existential phenomena in  
architecture,  
AGAINST ignoring contemporary materials and constructive systems,  
AGAINST going back to old forms of “national” architecture  
AGAINST building in the “styles”  
AGAINST an orientation towards “reactionary artistic old formulae  
AGAINST the hegemony of the most reactionary architects in the provincial  
cities and the republics of the union, i.e., where a struggle against the danger  
from the right in architecture is indispensable.”<sup>16</sup>

What worried the signatories of the document most was a “tendency, increasingly evident in the whole country, towards a revival of the old forms of ‘national’ architecture, and toward the reintroduction of the ‘styles.’ Most strikingly, the resolution of the assembly “[called] on the Party and other organizations leading the Cultural Revolution to take an interest in the problems of architecture, and to organize discussions on the contentious issue with a broad participation of the party membership and the Soviet public opinion.” The Resolution concluded that only one thing could solve the crisis according to the protesters: to attract “young architectural forces that have grown and learned their trade in a new revolutionary society.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “A Necessary Struggle: Protest Resolution on the VHUTEIN Dispute” published in Sovremenaja Arhitektura (SA), 3, 1928.

<sup>17</sup> See “Against ‘unprincipled eclecticism,’ in SA 3, 1928, p. 92



The call for a Party intervention indicates how little aware many were, at that point, and probably for a number of years ahead, about the actual nature of the “Revolution from above.” The Bolshevik Party, and especially its Moscow branch, a center of later resistance to Stalin, was still perceived in 1928 as inherently progressive, ready to support the avant-garde. The “revolutionary” disguise of Stalin’s pronouncements was able to electrify many, and even bring a sense of vindication after years of perceived corruption by the despised “Nepmen.”

The resolution was published in the press. New protests flooded the editorial board of the SA. “The immense majority of the architectural community had already decried earlier the erection of the Central Telegraph by the engineer I. I. Rerberg – just two blocks from the Kremlin,” the journal reported.

Fig. 4 I Rerberg’s Post Office in SA, 2, 1928,  
Caption: “How not to build” (Lenin Library)

Other critics chastised the Moscow Gosbank, designed by Žoltovskij, and his passeistic Palace of Friendship in Mahač-Kala. Yet others attacked the Palace of the People, built in a Byzantine style in Erevan, Armenia, as well as the Moresque style of the Baku train station in Azerbaijan.

When the second part of the Library contest was completed, deaf to the protests, the jury published its final verdict. The scandal was now complete. Not only had the jury turned down the first prize winners of the previous round, the architectural team of Daniil Fridman, Vladimir Fidman and Dmitriy Markov, with their elegant





modernist solution rendered in a striking blue monochrome,<sup>18</sup> but out of the two slightly modernized academic buildings it awarded the weaker one, designed by Ščuko, a pre-revolutionary academic architect who belonged to the oldest of the three generations that were competing for commissions at the end of the 1920s.



Fig. 5 Ščuko. Lenin Library, Entrance Hall. Competition Entry, 1928 (MuAr)

In the midst of the tumult filling the pages of the magazines, the Party daily Pravda, the government daily Izvestija, and the communist youth paper Komsomolskaja Pravda (none yet fully under Stalin's control) assailed the jury for selecting Ščuko. The criticism of the jury was now bolder than ever. Obviously reflecting the Moscow Party Committee's anti-Stalinist orientation, Stroitel'stvo

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<sup>18</sup> Stroitel'stvo Moskvy Nr. 6, 1928 p. 3

Moskvy, the official city magazine, published a formal protest by the three leading modernist architectural societies: OSA, ASNOVA and ARU.<sup>19</sup>

The temperature escalated as the editorial board of Stroitel'stvo published an open letter to the competition jury and to its president in person, the People's Commissar for the Enlightenment, Anatolij Lunacharsky, saying: "Lunacharsky has to tell us why was Ščuko selected, and to explain to us why no young architects were invited. We will publish the answer in the next issue of our journal."<sup>20</sup>

Lunacharsky never responded. It is entirely plausible that the jury retracted its original decision under pressure from the strongman Lazar Kaganovič (1893-1991), whose predilection for classical architecture was later to become common knowledge. Soon to rise to the top of the Politburo, only second to Stalin, Kaganovič would be entrusted with the supervision of Moscow's urban reconstruction. A Georgian of Jewish descent, the son of a shoemaker, he was one of the new "professional revolutionaries" Stalin was quietly bringing to Moscow from the far flung Republics in order to gradually replace the 'old Bolsheviks' in strategic positions of power. Gifted with extraordinary organizational skills, he held simultaneously several key positions in the apparatus. He was equally brutal and arbitrary in his decisions.<sup>21</sup> The uncharacteristic failure to respond of a man as highly cultivated and open-minded as Lunacharsky, suggests that the change from

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<sup>19</sup> ARU – [Associacija] Arhitektorov-Urbanistov ([Union of] Architects-Urbanists) – was founded by Ladovskij in 1928 after he left ASNOVA in response to the Five-Year Plan's huge program of urbanization.

<sup>20</sup> Stroitel'stvo Moskvy, July, 1929.

<sup>21</sup> In the margins of documents he was preparing for the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1930, at the start of the great purges he orchestrated, he jolted down in a casual hand-written note that 25% of the members should be expelled from the Party. His brutality earned him the nickname "Iron Kaganovič." RGASPI (Rossijskij Gosudarstvenij Arhiv Sotsialnyh i Političeskyh Institutov), Moscow, Kaganovič papers.

Fridman's to Ščuko's project was, indeed, most likely imposed on Lunacharsky from higher up, that is, by Kaganovič.

Be this as it may, the call for a Party intervention on behalf of Modernist architects, the challenge sent to the People's Commissar for the Enlightenment, and the media's readiness to support it, all speak to the depth of the attachment to Modernism amongst the young and the enlightened public opinion no matter how small, that is, to the widespread readiness to fight for it at a time when the country was inexorably sliding towards totalitarianism.<sup>22</sup>

### *The VOPRA*

The response to the appeals and protests, actually, came two months later, in the form of a parallel architectural society, a puppet organization, christened the "All-Union of Proletarian Architects" (Vsesojuznoe Obščestvo Proletarskyh Arhitektorov, VOPRA) sponsored behind the scenes by the top Party leadership. VOPRA is often associated with the RAPP (Revolutionary Association of Proletarian Writers) created spontaneously in 1925. Yet, even though both invoke a "proletarian" ascendancy, the essential difference lays in the fact that the former was an independent movement, while VOPRA was created as an instrument of the "Revolution from above."

The establishment of this new Association represented, indeed, primarily an effort to regain the initiative in the debate. Because they had the Party apparatus

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<sup>22</sup> SA No. 4, 1928 pp. 109-110. The official Soviet "history" about the demise of the Modernists at the VHUTEIN, and of the School itself – uncritically accepted to this day by some Russian scholars – is that at the end of the 1920s the young generation of students allegedly rejected the Modernists' "lack of experience." According to this official Soviet claim, the young were fed up with "box-like" architecture, and demanded a "serious education," that is a change in favor of Classicism, and the learning of the classical orders. What the promoters of this interpretation seem not to know is that the VHUTEMAS encompassed different schools of thought, including the possibility to study with the classicists.

behind them, as opposed to the authentic avant-garde architectural societies, VOPRA spread and consolidated itself almost instantaneously throughout the key Republics and centers of the Soviet Union (Armenia, Ukraine, Georgia, Leningrad and Tomsk). This was a feat that the 40 Moscow members could not have achieved on their own in such a short time.

The controversy about the Lenin Library remained inconclusive. Stalin had more immediate political crises to deal with, and he was probably not even particularly interested in Ščuko's project, leaving it to Kaganovič. Like many other major competitions (such as the 1934 Commissariat of Heavy Industry building to be located on the Red Square across from Lenin's mausoleum, on the site of the turn-of-the-century department store "GUM"), the Lenin Library remained on paper for several years. With Kaganovič fully in charge of the reconstruction of Moscow by the mid-1930s, Ščuko's Library was finally completed in 1938, probably by political detainees of the GuLag.



Fig. 6 Ščuko, Lenin Library, Moscow, completed 1938 (Photo Udovički)

Across from the Library, the Kremlin's towers were topped with red stars made of ruby glass tinted with gold. They sealed symbolically the victorious totalitarian system, as Stalin finally explicitly associated his regime to the Kremlin of the Tsars.

Back in 1929, inspired in all likelihood by Kaganovič himself who, as secretary of the Central Committee since 1928, was preparing to take over the city of Moscow on Stalin's behalf, VOPRA was led by a number of young communist architects from Armenia and Russia, including Karo Alabjan (1907-1959), Arkady Mordvinov (1896-1964), and Gevorg Kočar (1901-1973), who later participated as a team in the competition for the Palace of the Soviet with a frankly Modernist project. They were all former students of Aleksandr Vesnin's "masterskaja" at the VHUTEMAS, and all were still practicing Modernist architecture. Mordvinov had even been briefly on SA's editorial board, later to be replaced by Ivan Leonidov – something Mordvinov never forgave his successor. He coined the derogatory term "Leonidovščina," to indicate alleged vacuous, "formalist" architecture. The term was adopted in the lexicon of architectural criticism under Stalin as a scarecrow.

In what was only an apparent paradox, VOPRA immediately joined the protests against the results of the Lenin Library competition. The reasons were complex. Between 1929 and 1933, when the second round of competitions for the Palace of the Soviets was held, it was still difficult to assert in a public debate that "Proletarian architecture" could be anything but modern, that is, rational and functional. At that juncture, the opposite would have sounded "counter-revolutionary." Therefore, even though created as an instrument of the "revolution from above," at this early stage VOPRA could not but affirm, rhetorically at least, the modernist cause, Kaganovič's personal conservative taste notwithstanding. Like in other circumstances, Kaganovič knew how to put the "raison d'état" before his own predilections.

Since VOPRA was charged by the Party not so much with attacking or defending a particular architectural position, as with becoming an institution that would monopolize the debate irrespective of the cause of the day, by the time the Lenin Library was completed, the VOPRA members, who had vehemently

protested against Ščuko's classicizing winning project in 1929, had been themselves adorning their buildings with Classical orders.<sup>23</sup>

Most of the VOPRA members had been in the Bolshevik Party since 1917. By 1929, however, their Party cell was fully instrumentalized, first for the subversive work against independent architectural movements, then against the VHUTEIN, and finally against the journal SA itself. Acting within an evident strategic scheme defined at the top of the Party, VOPRA first (in April 1930) promoted the creation of a confederated Union of all existing architectural societies, the VANO (Vsesojuznoe Arhitekturnoe Naučnoe Obščestvo – All-Soviet Architectural Scientific Society, with its Moscow branch MOVANO) [Fig. 7].

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<sup>23</sup> Kočar's zeal resulted in his arrest in 1938, whereupon he was sentenced to 15 years of prison. In the prison he continued working as an architect. Due to his "dedicated work" and "devotion to the USSR," he was released after ten years into internal exile. Alabjan himself was warned about a possible arrest, and was advised by his Armenian countryman and former classmate, Politburo member Anastas Mikojan, to return to Armenia and be "forgotten" for some time. After the war, Alabjan helped Kočar's release from exile, and shared with him his dwelling place in Moscow, a corner of the Architectural Union's headquarters. In 1950, on Stalin's order, he was expelled with his wife and two year old son from their dwelling and demoted from his job. According to his wife Celikovskaja, the renown Eisenstein actress, he had expressed his disagreement, in the presence of NKVD Commissar Beria, with Stalin's plans to build high-rise dwellings. He apparently repeated his objections at a meeting of the SSA, explaining that the country had no technical capabilities for such an endeavor.



Декларация

Всесоюзного  
**В А Н О**  
Архитектурного  
Научного  
Общества

при профсоюзном строительстве

В эпоху строящегося социализма и наиболее обостренной классовой борьбы пролетариат с остатками капиталистических элементов у нас в стране и с капитализмом во всем мире не должно быть места нейтральности, аполитичности, кастовой замкнутости, организационной раздробленности. Все силы должны быть объединены и направлены на дело окончательной победы пролетариата. Кто не с рабочим классом, тот против него. Только так может стоять вопрос перед архитекторами в период великой стройки. Но, наряду с назревшей необходимостью объединить все силы для активного участия в строительстве социализма, продолжают существовать старые кастовые формы архитектурных объединений, не имеющие общей целевой установки, содействующей успешной борьбе рабочего класса.

Между тем только массовая организация архитекторов, при широком участии пролетариата в ее работе и творчестве, с подчинением всех течений в архитектуре одной цели — победе социализма, способна обеспечить материальный и идейно-политический эффект в реконструкции народного хозяйства и, в частности, в архитектурном оформлении нового быта. Для максимального использования творческих сил Советского Союза в создании методом диалектического материализма новой архитектуры эпохи диктатуры пролетариата — создается Всесоюзное Архитектурно-Научное Общество (ВАНО) с его местными (республиканскими, областными и краевыми) отделениями, а также ячейками при учреждениях, стройорганизациях и т. д.

Всесоюзное Архитектурно-Научное Общество и его Московское Областное Отделение (МОВАНО) считают, что архитектура есть один из видов пространственного искусства, определяющегося экономикой и техникой соответствующей эпохи, поэтому она должна быть использована, как и все виды искусства, для организации и оформления нового социалистического быта.

Архитектура как искусство и как утилитарный комплекс отражала на протяжении всей истории классовой борьбы идеологию господствующих классов и всемерно способствовала в капиталистических условиях порабощению трудящихся.

В наше время архитектура должна воодушевлять пролетариат на дальнейшие героические подвиги в процессе практического строительства социализма, оставаться в то же время лучшим вещественным показателем неиссякаемой мощи пролетариата и его непоколебимой воли к окончательной победе в борьбе за освобождение трудящихся всего мира.

Эта задача может быть успешно решена только в том случае, если архитектор свою теоретическую и практическую деятельность будет строить на экономическом, техническом и идеологическом анализе, выполняя задания рабочего класса.

Диалектический метод — метод марксизма — единственно обеспечивает возможность всестороннего охвата архитектурной задачей, наиболее рационального ее разрешения при широком учете разнороднейших факторов экономического, социологического и эмоционального порядка.

Всякий другой метод разрешает архитектурную задачу лишь односторонне.

Только в процессе коллективной работы над практическими задачами, выдвигаемыми социалистическим строительством, объединив различные течения в архитектуре целевой установкой, используя критически культурное наследство прошлого и при безусловном и активном участии широчайших масс рабочего класса, можно создать архитектуру диктатуры пролетариата.

В целях широкого охвата всех существующих архитектурных организаций в ВАНО и МОВАНО могут создаваться секции по отдельным направлениям в архитектуре, вполне автономные, строящие свою работу на основе данной декларации.

**Основные моменты своей практической деятельности ВАНО и МОВАНО считают:**

- 1 Изыскание путей и разрешения проблем новой архитектуры, архитектуры эпохи диктатуры пролетариата.
- 2 Постановку проблем о формах новой архитектуры.
- 3 Изучение марксистско-ленинской теории социологии архитектуры и социологии искусства.
- 4 Объединение всех сил, желающих работать в области архитектуры на почве теоретической, практической и научно-технической жилищном, общественно-коммунальном, промышленном и сельскохозяйственном строительстве.
- 5 Изучение архитектуры как совокупности инженерно-технических знаний и художественного творчества.
- 6 Научную проработку вопросов применения новых конструкций и новых материалов в современной архитектуре.
- 7 Проработку вопроса строительства социалистических городов.
- 8 Содействие ускорению темпа строительства социализма в СССР, индустриализации и реконструкции всех видов народного хозяйства путем активного участия в разрешении поставленных пятилетним планом задач промышленной типизации, снижения стоимости и улучшения качества строительства, а также путем индустриализации последнего периода от строительного сезона к новому строительному году.
- 9 Распространение среди широких масс рабочего класса сведений об архитектуре и достижениях техники в области строительства.
- 10 Активное участие в разрешении проблем, являющейся неотъемлемой организационной частью пятилетнего плана.
- 11 Организацию коллективов для содействия государственным, хозяйственным, профсоюзным и общественным организациям в практическом разрешении технических вопросов, связанных с архитектурой.
- 12 Создание коллективов по углублению теоретических и практических знаний в области архитектуры.
- 13 Организацию социалистических соревнований между группами и отдельными членами ВАНО и МОВАНО для развития творческих сил, необходимых для наиболее активного участия в строительстве социализма.

Всесоюзное Архитектурно-Научное Общество и Московское областное отделение обращаются к членам профсоюза строителей, ИТР строителей и других профсоюзов, кому дороги интересы советской архитектуры, с призывом вступить в члены общества и содействовать ему в выполнении поставленных задач.

Председатель ЦК ИТС ВССР  
и Председатель Оргбюро ВАНО АСЛАНОВ  
Председатель Моск. обл. бюро ИТС ВССР ВОРО  
Председатель МОВАНО ДИУС

**от редакции**

материал настоящего номера СА, так же как и предыдущего, разделяет не всем составом редакционной коллегии СА и печатается в порядке исполнения дискуссии о социалистической планировке расселения.

Fig. 7 Announcement of the Foundation of VANO, in SA

(Lenin Library)



The idea of assembling the various movements into a Federation was first proposed by OSA's Presidium in early 1929, obviously to maintain some control over the inevitable, which VOPRA rejected.<sup>24</sup> The procedure was an example of the way VOPRA simultaneously undermined the independent organizations, and tried to monopolize the architectural discourse. VOPRA's action represented the first stage towards creating a single architectural organization, easier to infiltrate and control. Soon, unable to impose themselves on the other federated modernist groups, which were not overly keen to waste their time in VANO meetings, VOPRA embarked in virulent attacks against it. Another more insidious problem was that VANO members were expected to prepare reports about the activity of each group. However, probably because VOPRA overlapped with the architectural Party organization (whose meetings and membership were secret), they refused to comply.

The VOPRA people used their membership in VANO as a pretext to claim the right to place some of their own members on SA's editorial board. Following a behind-the-scene top Party directive, VOPRA's leader Alabjan managed to have SA's neutral, professional name "Contemporary Architecture" changed into the ideologically charged Revolucionaja Arhitektura (RA), a name consonant with the unfolding "Revolution from above." But, although announced on the back cover of SA's last issue with a flashy design by Gan calling for subscriptions, not a single issue of RA ever came out.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See "Let's create a Federation" in SA Nr. 3, 1929 p. 89 (RGALI Archives). The documents also belie the accepted view that VOPRA had refused to join VANO as Anatole Kopp claims in his L'architecture de la période stalinienne (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires, 1978). Quite to the contrary, it was the first to join it as the RGALI (SSA papers) papers show.

<sup>25</sup> SA 6, 1930

**Журнал ставит своей целью**

- 1 Объединение всех творческих сил, работающих в различных областях архитектурной деятельности для борьбы за пролетарский метод в архитектурном творчестве.
- 2 Обязать работу общественности вокруг вопросов архитектурного строительства и пропагандировать архитектурные знания среди рабочих масс.
- 3 Давать марксистский анализ основных тенденций современной архитектурной мысли и посредством его создавать архитектуру эпохи диктатуры пролетариата.
- 4 Участвовать в разрешении поставленных в Бюлетне задач по рационализации архитектурного строительства (вопросам типизации, форм стандартизации, улучшения качества строительства, сложившиеся его отношения к труду основе социализации и удешевления).
- 5 Вести научную проработку вопросов теории и практики архитектурного строительства (общественно-коммунального, промышленного, сельскохозяйственного) и проблемы строительства социалистических городов.
- 6 Помещать общие вопросы архитектурного строительства: а) планировки, б) экономии строительства, в) подготовки архитектурных кадров, г) новых строительных материалов и конструкций и т. д.
- 7 Разработку вопросов теории архитектурной композиции, рациональных методов архитектурного проектирования и проблемы синтетического использования и архитектуры пространственных искусств.
- 8 Разработку вопросов марксистской социологии архитектуры.
- 9 Вести борьбу с чуждыми протектарату течениями в области архитектурной идеологии и практики.
- 10 Оказывать содействие обмену опытом в архитектурном проектировании и строительстве.
- 11 Давать критический разбор архитектурных конкурсов.
- 12 Освещать и руководить деятельностью ВА-О и местных архитектурных объединений.
- 13 Давать обзор архитектурной мысли за границей.
- 14 Освещать хронику архитектурной жизни.
- 15 Помещать библиографический материал по всем вопросам архитектуры.

**Журнал рассчитан** на архитекторов, инженеров, студентов старших курсов строительных вузов и всех лиц, достаточно подготовленных к интересующимся вопросам архитектуры.

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Fig. 8 Announcement of RA (Revolucionaja Arhitektura), on back cover of SA, 1930 (Lenin Library)

By the end of the year, the journal was closed forever. Like a virus implanted into a cell, VOPRA was at work gradually undermining and destroying from within the institutions of the avant-garde.

Just a few month later, in January 1931, a new journal, Sovetskaja Arhitektura was founded, this time as the bureaucratic “Organ of the Department of Housing at the Institute of Economy of the Communist Academy,” under the still enlightened editorship of Nikolaj Mil’utin, known for his theoretical work on the “Linear City.”

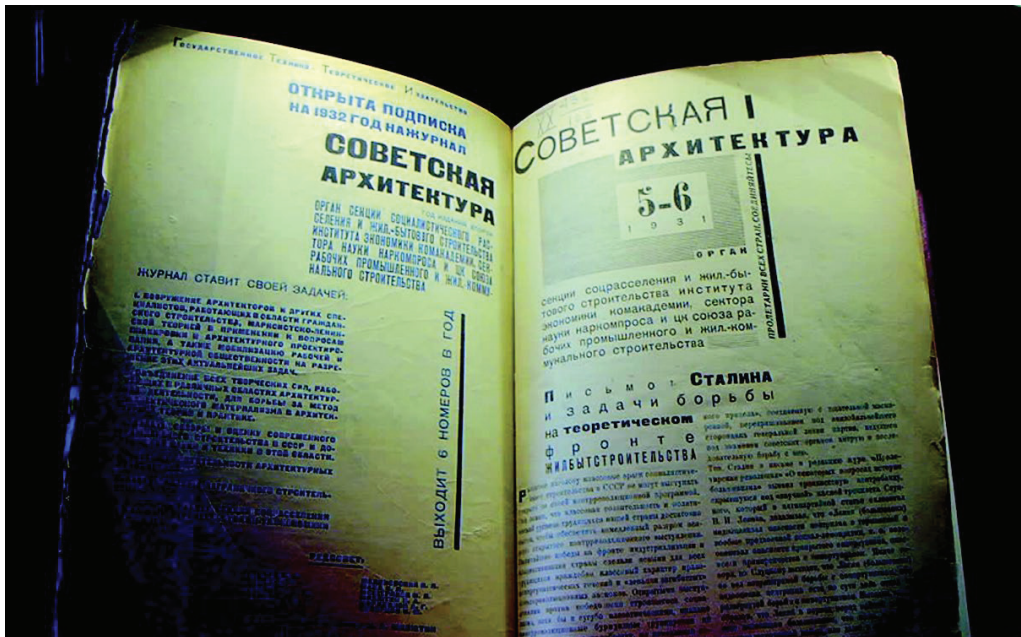


Fig. 9 Sovetskaja Arhitektura, May-June 1931. Design: Varvara Stepanova (Photo Udovicki)

Alabjan took the position of deputy editor. From the old editorial board, only Ginzburg survived. Avant-garde artist Varvara Stepanova replaced Gan as the journal’s designer, suggesting that, although an increasing number of individuals

were being displaced, Modernism itself was not yet attacked frontally. Gan was arrested six years later. He is believed to have died in 1942 in The GuLag system.

Stalin's grip on power was strengthened, if not completely assured at the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1930. By 1932, the Central Committee issued a decree replacing VANO with a single monolithic architectural organization: the official SSA (Sojuz Sovetskyh Arhitektorov). Sovetskaja Arhitektura was replaced by a single minded Arhitektura SSSR, organ of the SSA, with the former VOPRA leader Alabjan now installed as chief editor.

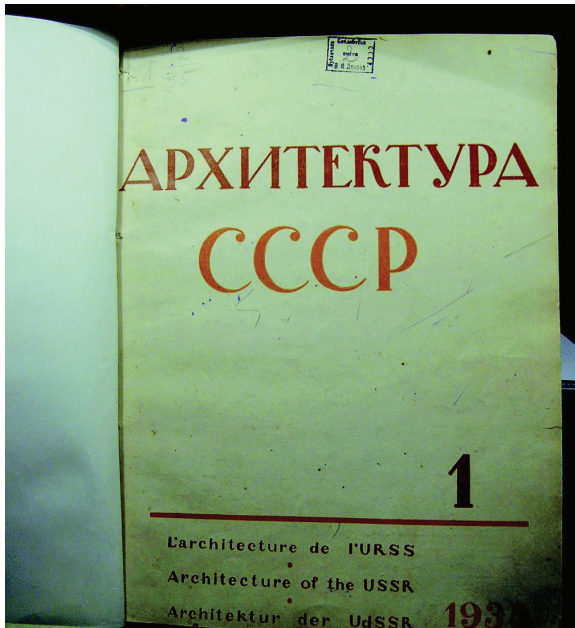


Fig. 10 Front Page of Arhitektura SSSR January, 1935, Design: El Lissitzky (Photo Udovicki)

Even though architects had been expecting such a party decision for some time, the RGALI papers show that it still caused a considerable shock, as meetings after meetings tried to cope with the situation. The control mechanism established through VOPRA helped, nevertheless, the transition. Structurally, a

compromise was arrived at between the positions of the Constructivists represented by Viktor Vesnin, and the leaders of the former VOPRA, Mordvinov and Alabjan. Vesnin assumed the presidency of the Union, whereas Alabjan was its Executive Secretary. The latter's real power resided in the secret role the Union's Party cell he headed would play over the coming years. Mordvinov took a position in the



Ministry of Enlightenment, once occupied by Tatlin and other avant-garde artists under Lunacharsky. It is from that position that he coined the term “Leonidovščina” in an internal speech at the Commissariat in February 1933. The term would become a key reference in the diatribes against the “formalists” that followed. None of the former editorial board members of either SA or Sovetskaja Arhitektura were invited to join. Surprisingly, the uninspired, bureaucratic look of the new journal’s graphic design was signed by El Lissitzky. This contrasted with the frankly modernist photomontages for the covers of USSR Builds destined to Western audiences. In this case, like in others already discussed, a double standard applied.

This partial victory of the “Revolution from above” over the architectural profession encouraged the Politburo (primarily Kaganovič) to turn their subversive actions into a system maintained to the end of the decade. Manipulation from behind the scenes in the name of a pre-established “historic objective,” similarly to Bolshevik clandestine activities before they seized power, was a favored method of control throughout the 1930s and it aimed at sabotaging the intentions of the nominal leaders of the Union. From the moment Vesnin became head of the new official SSA, he was secretly monitored in the name of “revolutionary vigilance” by his shadow figure Alabjan, who was “only” Executive Secretary, in fact the eminence grise whose Party cell received instructions directly from the top (that is, from Kaganovič).<sup>26</sup> This manipulation, which Kaganovič practiced with the help of the architectural Party leadership in the Union, was facilitated not only by the fact that all Party meetings were secret, as were the identities of the Party members, but to a large extent due to a very peculiar Party ethos. The cynicism and raw ambition of some notwithstanding, members regarded their Party as a historically mandated vanguard which, they genuinely believed, was not only

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<sup>26</sup> RGALI archives: SSA papers, Party cell papers.

implementing a new revolutionary course but was fulfilling a transcendental historic imperative, an imperative embodied in the wisdom of the Party leadership. Perceiving themselves as both agents and catalysts of history, a common claim among the members that “history was on [their] side” reflected a peculiar trans-historic, metaphysical conception of the Party. In the context of the Perestroika, any form of repression or persecution of individuals was easily perceived as a “historic necessity,” a necessity that, in the eyes of perpetrators and victims alike, transcended any singular, “subjective” or personal sense of injustice, wrongdoing or even responsibility.<sup>27</sup> Faith in the Communist ideal ruled supreme over reality. Secrecy added an aura to the imaginary “revived class struggle” that Stalin proclaimed at the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress against long dismantled social groups.

Such was the atmosphere surrounding the debates in the architectural world in the initial years of the Cultural Revolution. Many Modernist architects saw themselves as loyal supporters of the cause, and at the same time as defenders of a compelling architectural legacy.

### *Foreign Architects and the Perestroika*

The bold polemic around the Library competition – most likely the last large-scale public defense of Modernism in Russia – gained an international dimension as well when, on the occasion of one of his trips to the USSR in 1929, Bruno Taut published an article in the February issue of the official *City of*

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<sup>27</sup> This kind of Communist ethics explains, among others, how people who were rehabilitated after decades of GuLag, could feel that the day of their reintegration into the Party ranks was “the happiest day” in their lives; and most of all, how hardened Revolutionaries of the first hour were ready to confess to any imaginary guilt in order to “help the Party,” that is, fulfill a “historic necessity,” as numerous published accounts testify. Even in the West, you did not leave the Communist Party as you would drop any other political organization.

Moscow building journal, Stroitel'stvo Moskvy, not in support of the Modernists, as one would have expected, but rather to exalt the official Party line.<sup>28</sup> Most visiting foreigners at the time felt compelled to do the same. The sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, for example, was writing to Le Corbusier in October 1935, on the eve of the infamous Moscow trials: "...What I found here goes beyond all my expectations. I am fascinated by the scope and audacity of everything they do here in each and every domain..."<sup>29</sup> The great exception, if we discount the rising concerns of the CIAM, was the French writer and 'fellow traveller' André Gide, who had the courage to declare that the king was naked.<sup>30</sup> He was subsequently brutally attacked and ostracized by a large number of French intellectuals and leftists in general as a traitor to the cause.



Fig. 11 Front and Back Cover of Stroitel'stvo Moskvy (City of Moscow Building Journal) (Photo Udovicki)

<sup>28</sup> Bruno Taut, "Building and Architecture of the New Moscow", Stroitel'stvo Moskvy, February 1929, pp 11-12.

<sup>29</sup> Fondation le Corbusier H2-9-305, letter from Moscow 21 October 1935.

<sup>30</sup> In his book, the Retour de l'Urss (Paris: Gallimard, 1936).



As far as the Lenin Library competition was concerned, Taut claimed that “even the better architects had not freed themselves, in one way or another, from some form of academicism.” In a thinly veiled attack on the brothers Vesnin (who had used pilotis in their library project), Taut added: “Many who consider themselves free of mistakes [of academism] in reality did not go very far; all they [did] in essence [was] an imitation of Western architects, especially Le Corbusier.” Not surprisingly, Le Corbusier lauded the Vesnin project: “I have been lucky enough to study the Vesnin brothers’ Lenin Library. Magnificent, alive, gay, smiley, happy. A truly serene house of work and meditation.”<sup>31</sup>

Taking advantage of the occasion, Taut was not only echoing Soviet accusations against the modernists, but was implicitly bringing to the fore a simmering internal conflict within the so-called Modern Movement, notably between the Central European Modernists and Le Corbusier.<sup>32</sup> These disagreements of principle also surfaced in Hannes Meyer’s sarcastic attack against Le Corbusier’s Centrosojuz in Moscow.<sup>33</sup> But the tone of both Taut and Meyer probably expressed as well a degree of jealousy. Indeed no “Western” architect, with the exception of Le Corbusier, had been given the opportunity to build a major architectural work in the heart of Moscow. Clearly, Mendelsohn’s factory in Moscow did not have such a visible and prestigious location as the Centrosojuz.

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<sup>31</sup> Fondation Le Corbusier H2-9.

<sup>32</sup> See Eric Dluhosch and Rotislav Svácha, Karel Teige 1900/1951. L’Enfant Terrible of Czech Modernist Avant-Garde (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 106-140.

<sup>33</sup> See Hannes Meyer, “Bauen, Bauarbeiter und Techniker in der Sowjetunion”, Das Neue Russland (Berlin), 8-9, 1931, p. 49. For efforts of European architects to ingratiate themselves with the Soviets on Le Corbusier’s account, see also André Lurçat’s case in Danilo Udovicki-Selb “Charlotte Perriand and the Popular Front,” in Mary McLeod, ed., Charlotte Perriand, an Art of Leaving (New York: Abrams, 2004).

Taut's highbrow critique of Soviet architects mirrored more pointedly VOPRA's own. He chastised VHUTEIN's alleged "penchant for purely artistic enterprises," tantamount to the sin of "formalism."<sup>34</sup> He claimed to be "surprised to see [in Russia] two [competing] groups: those who deal with forms and 'play' with constructions, and those who think that solving structural issues is all that matters."

Taut concluded, however, with a puzzling if no less patronizing statement regarding an avant-garde that in many ways had surpassed Western achievements: "early signs of logical solutions, free of any prejudice in the design process, are budding among Soviet architects, and I hope that for the major part they will find the correct path."<sup>35</sup> While it sounded like a half-hearted, acknowledgement of the Modernists, his judgment in effect echoed VOPRA's formulaic defense of the "correct ('Proletarian') path," that is, Stalin's "General Line" articulated within the ongoing "Cultural Revolution."

From Bruno Taut and Frank Lloyd Wright to Hannes Meyer, André Lurçat, and Alfred Agache, "Westerners" who visited the Soviet Union and were ready to speak almost invariably lauded Stalin's policies, or at least echoed their vacuous statements.<sup>36</sup> Taut's attacks, no matter how suspect, were obviously aimed at the Rationalists on the one hand and the Constructivists on the other. Significantly, the same attacks were addressed to the avant-garde both from the "the conservatives"

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<sup>34</sup> The conservative MAO charged the VHUTEIN with the same faults, disregarding, as the School's Rector Pëtr Novickij pointed out, that VHUTEIN students regularly provided furniture and other prototypes for the Soviet industry. See P. Novickij, Rector of the VHT, "The Restaurateurs / Restorers and the VHUTEIN School of Architecture", Stroitel'stvo Moskvyy, July, 1929, pp 12-13.

<sup>35</sup> Bruno Taut "Building and Architecture of New Moscow", Stroitel'stvo Moskvyy February 1929, pp. 11-12

<sup>36</sup> See Jean-Louis Cohen, L'Architecture d'André Lurçat (1894-1970): l'autocritique d'un moderne (Liège: Mardaga, 1995).

(the MAO – the pre-revolutionary academic Society of Moscow Architects, responsible for the Lenin Library competition)<sup>37</sup> and from the “Proletarians” (the VOPRA). This was the beginning of the instrumentalization of the term “formalism” to be applied against whoever was to be eliminated. Taut may not have been aware of the weight and possible consequences of his words.

### “The Correct Path”

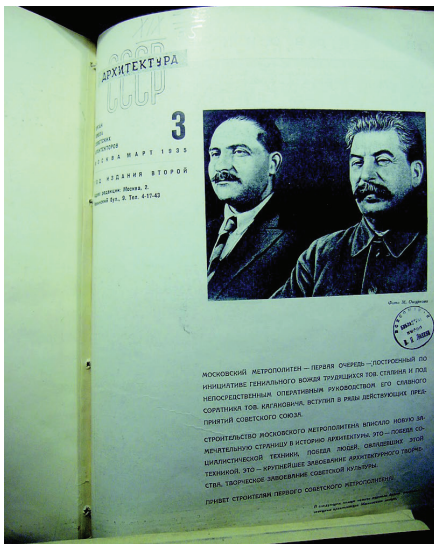


Fig. 12. L. Kaganovič and Stalin featured in the official journal *Arhitektura SSSR*, March 1935 (Photo Udovicki)

In a reversal of Lenin’s policies, all members of the reconstructed Politburo embraced intensive industrialization and forced collectivization of farmlands at all costs. Artists of Sergej Eisenstein’s and Vsevolod Pudovkin’s stature, lyrically immortalized industrialization and collectivization in their films, in response to Stalin’s new “General line.”<sup>38</sup> But the existing divergences on what constituted Modernity in architecture complicated matters significantly. Stalin favored modern American corporate styles, such as the Empire State Building that projected an image of power, stability and technical progress.

<sup>37</sup> See *SA* Nr. 4, 1928 p. 109-110.

<sup>38</sup> In Eisenstein’s “General line,” the sets representing model farms, reminiscent of Le Corbusier’s “radiant farm,” were designed as Constructivist buildings by Andrej Burov, a second generation Constructivist of Leonidov’s and Lidija Komarova’s class at the VHUTEMAS. Burov later embraced successfully a compromise that reflected both Kaganovič’s and Stalin’s differing “new lines” in the reconstruction of Moscow.

Kaganovič was sentimentally attached to classicism with a “proletarian content,” that is, like in the Red Army Theater (1934-1940), hammer and sickles stamped on the Composite capitals of columns shaped in section as five-pointed stars. The Red Army Theater was a perfect illustration of the taste of the Politburo’s second man, Kaganovič. He looked over Alabjan’s shoulder, as the latter labored to fit a theater into a five-pointed star floor plan in response to Stalin’s strongman’s desire.



Fig. 13 K. Alabjan, “Red Army Theater” Moscow, 1934-1938.  
Bellow, Corinthian Capitals of the Theater with Hammer and Sickle  
(Photo:MuAr)



Upon returning from the USSR, Wright recounted in the Architectural Record his conversation about the Theater with a somewhat embarrassed Alabjan. In a characteristic Armenian self-deriding good humor, Alabjan told Wright, pointing at the endless peristyle lined up all around the five star's arms, that he had put into the theater his entire repertoire of classical columns, and was now done with it.<sup>39</sup> Closer to Stalin's taste was the recently completed, sober and unadorned government building, just across from the hotel "Moskva," by Arkadij Langman – one of Stalin's favorite architects. The hotel "Moskva" completed in 1936 was a synthesis of the two. Its "American" character was immediately visible to Frank Lloyd Wright who declared, when the hotel was proudly shown to him, that, yes, this was exactly what he had been fighting against in the United States all his life. The hotel, designed by Ščusev for the dignitaries visiting Stalin, became, despite its mediocrity and awkward urban setting, a symbolic cultural icon of the era.<sup>40</sup>

Kaganovič was not isolated in his affinity for classicism in the name of Modernity. Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture, echoed in secular buildings, remained dominant in Russia since the time North-Eastern Slavs adopted Christianity in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and built the first Byzantine inspired Kievan Rus' churches. Therefore in Russia inroads into Classicism since the turn of the century were viewed as a progressive alternative to the entrenched formal Byzantine vocabulary.<sup>41</sup> By the end of his life, in 1933, Lunacharsky explained that Classicism, far from being counter-revolutionary, could after all symbolize effectively the aspirations of the proletariat, because of its links to the democratic

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<sup>39</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, "Architecture and Life in the USSR," Architectural Record, October 1937, p. 60.

<sup>40</sup> The hotel *Moskva* was unfortunately demolished three years ago, this time to meet the financial needs of the Russian Mafia, which owns most of the hotel industry in Moscow.

<sup>41</sup> See Dmitrij Švidkovskij, Russian Architecture and the West (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

ideals of ancient Greece.<sup>42</sup> It was Hellenic Greece pitted against the Byzantine. This specious argument was readily endorsed even by a Hannes Meyer, involved after 1932 in the massive urbanization of the Soviet Union. He too had come to consider Classical architecture as the best expression of peoples' national aspirations.<sup>43</sup>

Still, the "Renaissance revivals" were also harshly criticized even in the general press. As late as 1937, "Palladianism" was sardonically referred to as "plagiarism." One cartoon, reproduced from a Soviet periodical in the Architectural Record, showed Palladio dragging a Soviet architect to the police headquarters, claiming that the only original feature in that architect's design was his signature.<sup>44</sup> At the November 1934 Conference of Soviet Architects in Moscow, a month before Kirov was assassinated, while the avant-garde still had the upper hand, despite the efforts of the Party members in the Union, Viktor Vesnin could declare that, after the first competition for the Palace of the Soviets "all the architects were drawn into a great movement of enthusiasm, but many erred in choosing the path of lesser effort, that is, the path of eclecticism and kitsch, instead of dedicating themselves to creative work." According to Vesnin's paper, three essential tendencies had emerged: "First of all an effort to restore classical architecture; then a current of eclectic architecture; and finally one that genuinely strives for new architectural forms."<sup>45</sup> He still belonged to the latter.

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<sup>42</sup> Lunacharsky's 1933 speech to the Party members of the Moscow All-Union of Soviet Architects, RGALI Archives, Moscow. He was preparing a book on the subject, but unfortunately died before completing the manuscript.

<sup>43</sup> Borngräber, p.31.

<sup>44</sup> Reproduced by New York architect Simon Breines, American delegate to the First Congress of the Union of Architects, in Architectural Record, October 1937, p. 65.

<sup>45</sup> Reprinted in the Belgian journal La Cité, January 1934.



## *The Fate of the Modernists*

The institutionalization of “socialist realism,” a term coined at the First Congress of All-Soviet Writers in August 1934, entailed the almost impossible task of discrediting film-makers, writers, artists, architects, pedagogues and theoreticians of international repute, long associated with the Revolution. So compelling was the prestige of the leaders of Soviet architectural Modernism that, unless identified with “formalism” in exemplary cases such as in the case of Konstantin Mel’nikov, they rarely lost their positions, at least as figureheads of most of the new Stalinist architectural institutions. Arrests occurred rather among the younger generation, leaving the masters suspended in a vacuum. Viktor Vesnin became Secretary General of the All-Union of Soviet Architects from the very moment the new organization was officially instituted in 1932. Throughout the 1930s, Ginzburg was in charge of a team that built sanatoria and rest homes in the Crimea, while occupying a prominent position in the Union of Architects. Viktor Vesnin, a leading constructivist, was elected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in 1936, one of the darkest years of Stalin’s political repression.

It is also important to note, however, that the persecutions and trials – the “Great party purges” or “Čistka” – were at the beginning primarily, if not exclusively, directed against old Bolsheviks and engaged Party members such as Gustav Klucis (1895-1938), one of the few avant-garde artists who had taken part directly in the Russian Revolution and the Civil War. He was arrested in 1938, upon returning from Paris where his photomontage in the Soviet Pavilion featured a Stalin bigger than life, towering above an applauding congregation of citizens acclaiming his 1936 Constitution. Klucis was shot almost immediately upon arrest



on Stalin's orders, along with a large group of other Latvian Communists.<sup>46</sup> There was never a need for a specific reason to be arrested, but a 1930 poster by Klucis showing Stalin as a dark, looming figure in the background, half concealed behind Lenin's radiant face, may have alerted Stalin. His vengeance could take several years to materialize. Added to this, Klucis' sincere belief in the revolution and the communist cause may well have been another motive to eliminate him. As an early Bolshevik revolutionary, he had strong political motivations of his own that were not derived from any devotion to Stalin, making him suspect a priori. By contrast, none of the Vesnin brothers ever joined the Party, nor did Ginzburg or Leonidov, and they were therefore much less vulnerable, at least until mass arrests were started as a way of obtaining unpaid labor to accelerate industrialization. These architects belonged to the category of "nepartijci," or non-Party sympathizers without stakes in the functioning of the Party itself.<sup>47</sup> Among the most noted avant-garde architects only Mel'nikov, the staunchly independent expressionist, was an exception among the "nepartijci." Subjected to growing public attacks for his alleged "formalism", Mel'nikov ceased to practice architecture altogether after 1937. For most of his long life thereafter, living quietly in the idiosyncratic house

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<sup>46</sup> About the arrest and execution of Klucis see Margarita Tupitsyn, Gustav Klutis and Valentina Kulagina, Photography and Montage After Constructivism (New York: Steidl, 2004).

<sup>47</sup> A notable exception was the trial of a phantom "Industrial Party," as early as 1928, directed against engineers of "bourgeois" descent. This trial was concocted in support of Stalin's claim that the "class struggle" soared with every "success in the construction of socialism" – a claim Buharin derided as absurd in a 1929 Central Committee meeting. Yet, the pattern having been established by that early trial, accusations of "sabotage" as the work of an alleged "class enemy," remained throughout the Terror a way to generate free labor for the burgeoning industry. Editorials of each issue of Arhitektura SSSR echoed the news of arrests and executions, while deploring the callousness of the "class enemy." The "unmasking of saboteurs" was also a frequent topic of Socialist Realist paintings. Moscow, RGASPI, Central Committee and Kaganovič papers.

he built for himself in the heart of Moscow in the form of interlocking cylinders, he made a living as a painter, his first vocation.<sup>48</sup>

Ladovskij, the theoretically oriented architect and former VHUTEIN teacher, inventor of Russian architectural Rationalism, built little besides a street level metro station in Moscow in 1935, before dying a few years later. El Lissitzky translated the teachings of Suprematism from abstract to realist representation, and visualized Stalinian foreign propaganda in the superbly innovative design for the journal USSR Builds. Derived from, but not partaking anymore in the Suprematist experience, his design remained clearly modernist. His new course, started in 1929 at the Berlin Press Exhibition, manifested itself also in his design of the front page of Stroitel'stvo Moskvyy that same year.

The Politburo's cautious attitude towards the Modernists was reinforced by the fact that a building under construction could not be torn down as a book could be censored, nor could a building under construction be abandoned. Equally important was the fact that the country's leaders, that is, the Politburo and Stalin, were careful not to be perceived abroad as abandoning "progressive" positions. Their personal divergent tastes and disagreements on what constituted "progressive" architecture notwithstanding, when their image abroad was at stake a double standard applied. In their effort to gain total control over the architectural culture of the country the Party's supreme authority had to cater to at least two audiences, the domestic conservative one, and the international intelligentsia, which supported the October Revolution and the art it had come to expect from the USSR.

The establishment had its ear on two drums. Architecture journals of the period illustrate this clearly, as shown already in both the case of Stroitel'stvo Moskvyy and Arhitektura SSSR. The front cover of the same issue of an

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<sup>48</sup> Author's conversation with Mel'nikov's son Viktor, Moscow, May 2004.

architectural periodical could differ, depending on whether it addressed a domestic or a foreign public.

Kaganovič himself was keen to project abroad an interest in Modernism that foreign Communist parties supported. As new documents of his now declassified correspondence reveal, Kaganovič, who was orchestrating the monumental reconstruction of Moscow with a markedly conservative bent in architecture, was particularly interested to entice the international group of Modern Architecture – the CIAM – to hold its congress in the Soviet capital. Behind closed doors, and at least until 1935, he exhorted the members of the architectural Union’s Communist cell to arrange for such a meeting.<sup>49</sup> However, to this day the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) were commonly believed to have cancelled its Moscow “IV Congress” planned for 1933 when the alarming results of the 1932 Palace of Soviets international competition reached its members, something they interpreted as an official disavowal of Modernism. This belief is based on two letters Cor van Eesteren, Victor Bourgeois and Sigfried Giedion wrote to Stalin, on 19 April 1932, lamenting the anti-modernist choice of Žoltovskij, Iofan and Hamilton as ex aequo winners of the international competition. They raised serious doubts that their Congress could be held in Moscow under such circumstances. The meeting, however, was not cancelled by the CIAM, but postponed on Moscow’s request, obviously due to the confusion

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<sup>49</sup> RGALI archives: All-union of Soviet Architects files, Correspondence between Kaganovič and Alabjan, the Party secretary of the All-Union of Soviet Architects. Fondation Le Corbusier, H2-5 266, 270. For consistency, despite fierce attacks on Le Corbusier in Moscow from 1932 on, invitations kept coming throughout the 1930s. On the occasion of his visit to Le Corbusier in the Spring 1935, Iofan had already urged Le Corbusier to come to the Soviet Union for a lecture series. Le Corbusier responded positively on 28 July 1935 (Fondation L. C. H2 – 9- 373 3-4). These invitations could not have been extended without Kaganovič’s approval and wish behind the scenes, the same way as he kept insisting on a CIAM congress in Moscow. In December 1935 Le Corbusier was also invited to join the newly founded All-Union Academy of Architecture as a “scientific correspondent,” an invitation he also accepted even though he expressed at the same time his distaste for “Academies.” FLC I2-5-292

caused by the recent creation of the official Union of Architects forcing independent movements into a single organization, and the difficulties the party experienced with controlling the situation. In fact, the CIRPAC (CIAM's executive body) continued making plans to hold its fifth and even sixth Congress in the Soviet capital on Soviet insistence.<sup>50</sup>

Kaganovič also instructed the Communist architectural apparatchiks, the former VOPRA members, to control the Modernists in the Union of architects from behind the scenes, but to refrain from attacking the Constructivists too openly in public, because they were still involved in a large number of building sites around the country. These included some Moscow Metro stations, the Dnieprostroj dam, prestigious sanatoria, rest homes and cultural institutions. The most notorious among them, the Palace of Culture in Moscow by the Vesnin brothers, which won the first award in a 1930 competition, was inaugurated under Kaganovič himself as late as 1937, the second worst year of the Terror. The innovative character of the building's never published interiors (except for two grainy photographs in Arhitektura SSSR), with its symphony of wavy stair landings and balconies all clad in white marble was a novelty in the brothers' architecture and could be compared to the new modernist inroads Aalto was developing in the same decade, while the coiled stairways were obviously derived from the Villa Savoye published in SA.

The Palace of Culture was built for the automobile factory ZIL (Zavodi Imenni Lihačeva) on the site of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Smirnov monastery that was almost entirely demolished to clear the ground for the Palace. It is one of the ironies of Russian history that the Palace was never fully completed, nor was the monastery completely destroyed. To this day, they stand side by side as witnesses of aborted histories.

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<sup>50</sup> Letter 29 March 1933, FLC I2-5-293.



Fig. 14 Palace of Culture, Moscow, Brothers Vesnin, 1930-1937

The Modernists, the Vesnin brothers, Ginzburg, Ladovskij, and even Ivan Leonidov, played into Kaganovič's game of deception. Probably in accord with his expectations, in 1933, as the VOKS papers show, they sent a letter to L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, protesting the journal's coverage of widespread concerns in Europe and the United States that Modern architecture was under siege in the Soviet Union.<sup>51</sup> They were probably pressured into writing the letter. But

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<sup>51</sup> Letter of L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui main editor Pierre Vago to the VOKS secretary David Arkin, dated 3 October 1933. VOKS (Vsesojuznoe Obščestvo Kulturnoj Svjazi s Zagranice: All-

even though their journal SA was closed since 1930 (like their school, the VHUTEIN), it was also true that most of them were still building, holding important professional positions, while Ginzburg published in the early 1930s a critical analysis of the communal housing experiment (Žilišče) he lead since 1926. The belief in Modernism, and the belief in the Party overlapped; any divergence from it was regarded as the result of temporary tactics. Boris Iofan – the ultimate architect of the never built Palace of the Soviets<sup>52</sup> (with its various interlocking design strategies), author as well of the no less multifarious 1937 Soviet Pavilion in Paris, was most probably sincere when he assured Frank Lloyd Wright that Modern Architecture would be back in the Soviet Union in a matter of ten years, once the “masses” were ready for it.<sup>53</sup>

Also convinced this was true, Aleksandr Vesnin rose in defense of Constructivism against its detractors at the First Congress of the All-Union of Soviet Architects. One of them was no less than Nikolaj Kolli, former Soviet member of the CIAM. His own architecture had become an example of the most banal eclectic platitude.<sup>54</sup>

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Union Society for the Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. RGALI archives, 1932-33 674-1-8.

<sup>52</sup> Boris Iofan (1891-1976) was an Armenian of Jewish descent, who joined the Italian Communist Party as a student in Rome, and built equally good modernist and “Socialist Realist” work. He had an office in the Kremlin where Stalin could supervise him at will Iofan shared the authorship of the project with Vladimir Ščuko and Vladimir Gelfreich.

<sup>53</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, “Architecture and Life in the USSR”, Architectural Record, October 1937, p. 59-63. On Wright’s trip to the USSR, see also Donald Johnson, “Frank Lloyd Wright in Moscow”, JSAH, March 1987, pp. 65-79.

<sup>54</sup> RGALI archives, Moscow: SSA papers, First Congress of the Union of Architects files. See also Simon Breines, “First Congress of Soviet Architects”, Architectural Record, October 1937, p. 63-94. Even though all the papers to be presented at the Congress from all-over the USSR had to be sent to Alabjan for approval several months in advance, some degree of spontaneity in the debates obviously subsisted. Architect Simon Breines kept an unpublished manuscript on his trip





Fig. 15 Frank Lloyd Wright in Moscow with Kolli, Iofan and Interpreter, 1937  
(Photo private collection)

This can easily be explained by Kolli's grave concerns at the height of the purges about his having traveled abroad and represented Soviet architects at the CIAM, hosted in his house Charlotte Perriand in January 1934, but most of all about his association with Le Corbusier and the building of the Centrosojuz, now both

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to the USSR as delegate to the Congress, and he also mentions Vesnin's response. I am grateful to Andrew Shanken for giving me the opportunity to consult the manuscript. Vesnin's response is also mentioned by Anatole Kopp "Le Premier Congrès des Architectes de l'URSS," in J. L. Cohen, M. De Michelis, M. Tafuri, eds., *URSS, 1917-1978: La ville, l'architecture*, (Paris/Roma: L'Equerre; Officina edizioni, 1979), p. 316.



vilified: Le Corbusier as a bourgeois architect, and his Moscow building as “an orgy of glass and concrete” in Hannes Mayer’s own words.<sup>55</sup>

Among the foreigners, apparently only the architect Francis Jourdain, a member of the French Communist Party, warned against the dangers of academism. At the height of the Terror, in the midst of an incantatory, religious-like Congress glorifying Stalin like a divinity, over the backdrop of mass arrests, Vesnin effectively championed Constructivism as a “scientific” approach to architecture.<sup>56</sup>

### *The Palace of the Soviets and the 1937 Paris Pavilion*

Well into the 1930s, persistent echoes of Modernity and Modernism resonated in the least likely places. At close scrutiny, the Palace of the Soviets – this never built, yet most visible symbol of Stalin’s “Cultural Revolution” in architecture – reveals, in its advanced versions, intriguing affinities not only with American corporate modernity but even to the Soviet avant-garde art itself.

The long history of the competitions for and incessant remodeling of the Palace of the Soviets can be regarded as a prime example of the inherent contradictions of the Soviet struggle to redefine its architecture in terms of “socialist realism.” Twenty-eight year old architect Hector O. Hamilton of East Orange, New Jersey, initially won the competition in February 1932 ex-aequo with

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<sup>55</sup> Le Corbusier complained repeatedly in his letters to Kolli, between 1933 and 1934 for the latter’s complete silence while the building of the Centrosojuz was going up, and the absence of any acknowledgement of the numerous books he was sending Kolli. When Kolli finally appeared in Rome as a member of the Soviet delegation to the 1934 Architecture Congress, he sent a letter to Le Corbusier, explaining that he “finally could tell” him that the letters and the books he was not receiving were all given to him a day before leaving Moscow for Rome, as he had been added to the delegation at the last minute. Fondation Le Corbusier.

<sup>56</sup> RGALI, SSA papers, First Congress of the SSA.

Iofan, and Žoltovskij, a neo-Palladian expert. Despite his young age, and with only two years at the Cooper Union in New York, Hamilton was far from being a novice as he was represented to be in some news media. He had already under his belt several interesting buildings in the United States and in Italy. He designed the Municipal Center of Verona when he was 18 years old, and another in New Jersey; he also was author of three restaurants for the Fischer chain; a municipal housing

estate for the city of Naples; a number of large apartment houses, along with several residences. He was born in England, and a registered architect in New Jersey.<sup>57</sup>

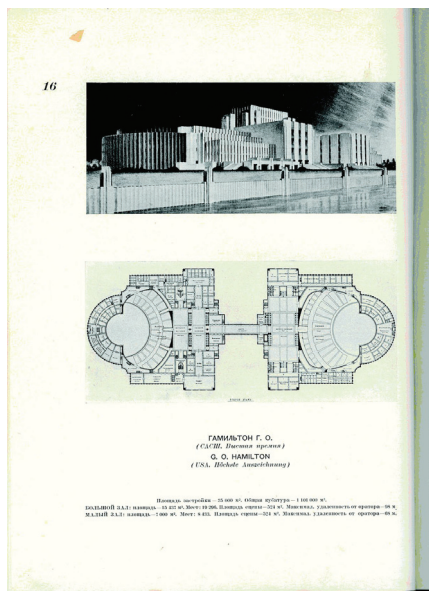


Fig. 16 Hamilton, Competition Entry for Palace of Soviets, 1931 Plan and Perspective (Lenin Library)

The prize given to Hamilton clearly reflected the general Soviet fascination with the United States, whereas the two other winners completed the panoply of acceptable design

<sup>57</sup> There is a substantial literature on the competition for the Palace of the Soviets and its pre-history. From among them, we wish to mention Selim O. Khan/Magomedov, "K istorii vybora mesta dlja Dvor. Sovetov," *Arhitektura i Stroitel'stvo Moskvy*, January 1988, pp. 21-23. See also the Central Committee Bulletin *Dvorec Sovetov*, 1931-1932; Alberto Samonà, ed., *Il Palazzo dei Soviet 1931-1933*, (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1976); N. S. Aratov, *El Palacio de los Soviet* (Montevideo: Pueblos Unidos, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1945); Peter Lizon, *The Palace of the Soviets: The Paradigm of Architecture in the USSR* (Colorado Springs: The Continents Press, 1992). For the Program, see: "Programma proektirovanija Dvorca Sovetov SSSR v Moskve" in *Dvorec Sovetov* (Moscow: Vshudožnik / SSA), p. 123-129. See also *Stroitel'stvo Moskvy* 8, no. 6, 1931, pp. 8-10.

strategies, that is, restrained modern and academic classical.<sup>58</sup> Like the 1933 version resulting from the association of Iofan, and classicists Ščuko and Gelfreich, the remodeled 1937 version in a certain sense still referred to Hamilton’s project. They glorified the ultimate American icon, the skyscraper, and competed with Bertholdi’s Statue of Liberty reinvented with a Lenin whose extended arm pointed towards the “ultimate liberation of humanity” – the “liberated ones” as Wright referred to the Soviet citizens in 1937.<sup>59</sup> As solid American references were being incorporated into the skyscraper – suiting Stalin’s taste – Hamilton was gradually removed from the winning trio and conveniently replaced by Ščuko (the Ščuko of the Lenin Library), in conformity with Kaganovič’s classical predilections.

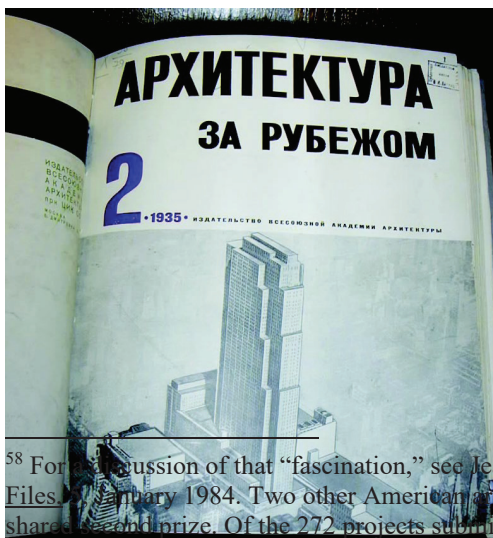


Fig. 19a. The Rockefeller center on Cover page of Architecture Abroad, 2, 1935 (Photo Udovicki)

An attentive second reading of the 1937 version of the Palace reveals equally significant references to the recent Rockefeller Center by Raymond Hood (1881-1934). It features a series of

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of that “fascination,” see Jean-Louis Cohen, “America: A Soviet Ideal,” AA Files, January 1984. Two other American architects, Albert Kastner and Oscar Stonorov, shared second prize. Of the 272 projects submitted, 14 were from the United States, among them designs by Joseph Urban and Thomas Lamb whose projects were retained along with Le Corbusier’s, Perret’s, Mendelsohn’s, Gropius’, Pöelzig’s and Brazini’s. In their second letter to Stalin, the CIAM signatories compared Hamilton’s project to an American corporate building, a church on the Hohenzollernplatz in Berlin, and department stores with “pseudo-gothic appearance.” Fondation Le Corbusier P5 11. In reality, it was closely related stylistically to Langman’s government building in Moscow, across the Hotel Moskva.

<sup>59</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, “Architecture and Life in the USSR,” in Architectural Record, October 1937, p. 60. In this article he also addressed the Secretary General of the Bolshevik Party as “Comrade Stalin.”

stacked, gradually receding vertical units of slabs of Art-Deco vintage, ornamentally repeated in concentric rings, like so many “Rockefeller Centers,” that were, actually, already present in Hamilton’s project itself, as evidenced by the figures lined along the retaining wall along the Moskva river (see Fig. 16).

Hood’s high-rise was an attraction repeatedly and lavishly featured in the Soviet professional press (See Fig. 19a). Iofan himself had visited New York in the early 1930s and witnessed the building of the two most celebrated versions of the American corporate architecture of the time: the Empire State Building and the Rockefeller Center. Iofan’s 1937 version of the Palace clearly took its cues from both.



Fig. 19b. Detail of the Palace of Soviets, 1937 version in Stroitel'stvo Moskvy; (Photo Udovicki)

The iconic reference to the Rockefeller Center had already emerged in Iofan’s entry to the 1934 competition for the Commissariat of Heavy Industry, a project that recalled again Hamilton’s design strategy for the Palace of the Soviets. The



main difference was that Iofan's Commissariat featured a monumental "Rockefeller Center" crowning the building's central axis.

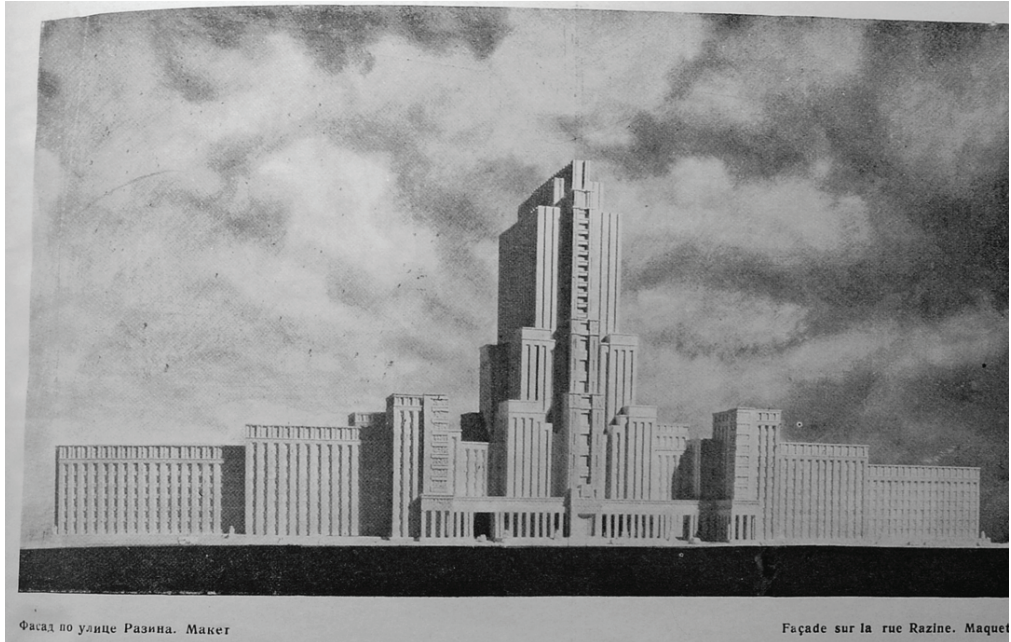


Fig. 20 Boris Iofan Competition Entry for Commissariat of Heavy Industry, 1934 (Lenin Library)

Evidently, Iofan was not trying to hide his fascination with modern Americana. He actually shared this fascination with Stalin. Iofan's office was located in the Kremlin, and thus exposed to Stalin's impromptu visits. Inevitably, Iofan's projects represented Stalin's vision of Soviet progress as much as Iofan's own. The point was to outrun America, not to trash it, at least not in the domain of technology and aesthetics. In keeping with this goal, Iofan's skyscraper was planned to be taller than the tallest American building of the time.

The symbiosis between the two modernities – the Soviet and the American – was multi-layered. The Lithuanian born American sculptor William Zorach (1887-

1966) complained in the Architectural Record that his entry to a competition for a Lenin monument was plagiarized by Iofan's Palace of the Soviets.

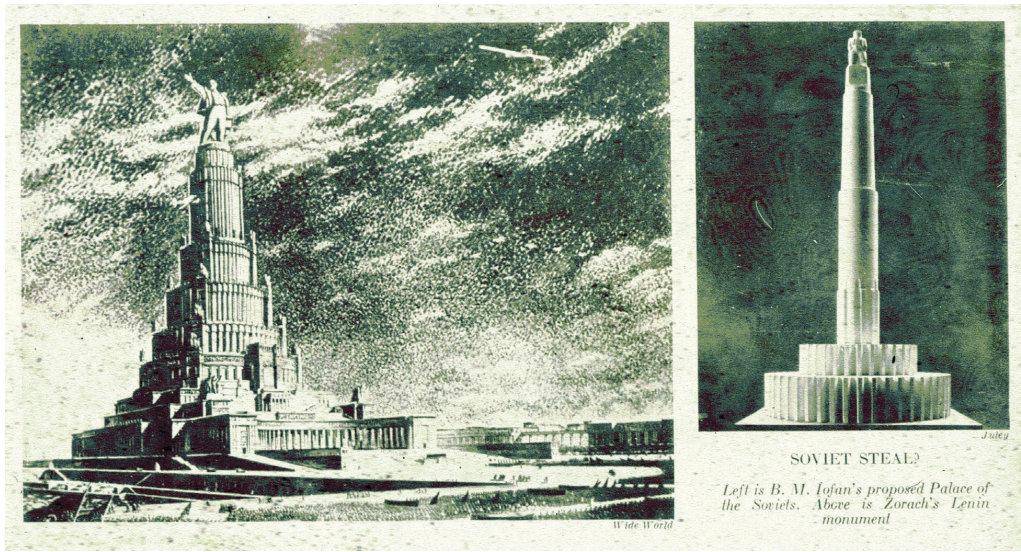


Fig. 21 Palace of Soviets (1933) and Monument to Lenin by W. Zorach (1931)  
(Architectural Forum)

Zorach was not so much frustrated by the plagiarism itself, as he was by his own sculptural concept being turned into a “reactionary” caricature of his work. Whether this was the case or not, it is obvious that the two projects were involved in an analogous quest.

If the Palace retooled American corporate design for the needs of the Soviet state, it also provided a case study for the long lasting impact of the Soviet architectural revolution of the 1920s. Both the 1933 and 1937 renditions of the Palace represent at first sight the antithesis of everything the avant-garde stood for: its embrace of abstraction, its rigorous minimalism, and its rejection of axial symmetry. But, at closer scrutiny the Palace reveals, at its core, a hidden Geist of Modernism. Juxtaposed to Kazimir Malevich's white “Arhitektoni,” Iofan's 1937



white gypsum model of the Palace (now kept in the storage room of the Ščusev Museum, the MuAr) perhaps better than any other single architectural work of the time helps one understand the imprint Suprematism left on the history of Soviet modern architecture.

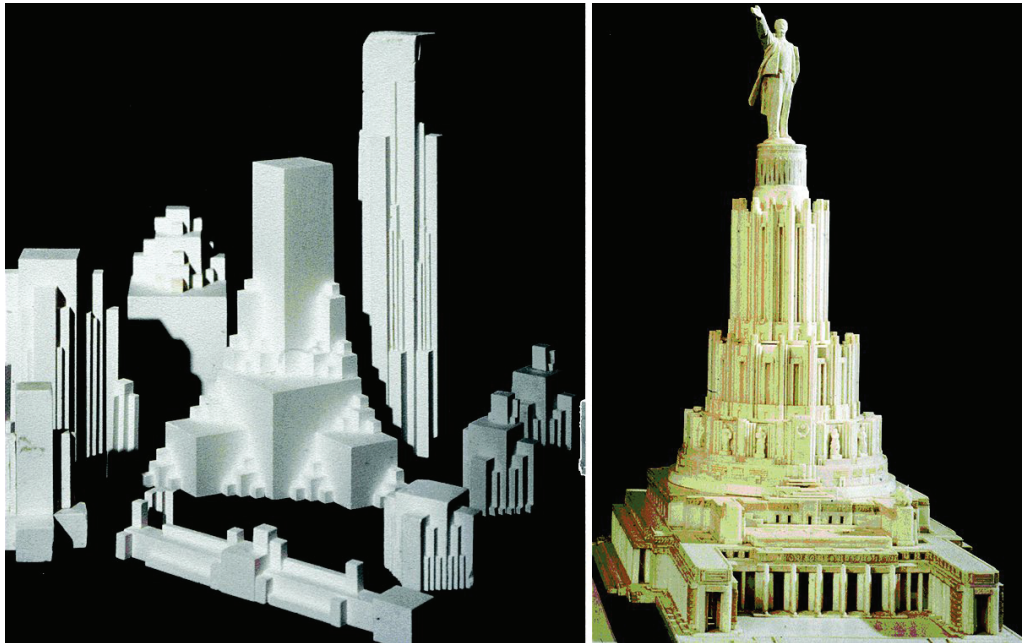


Fig. 22 MuAr Model of the Palace of the Soviets (1937) and a collection of “Arhitektoni” by Malevich (1920s). In 1930 Malevich tops them with Lenin statues.

Malevich’s Planici and Arhitektoni produced between 1920 and 1927, starting with his collage of a “Suprematist skyscraper” pasted on a photograph of Manhattan, celebrated the power of Suprematism to transcend everyday reality through art.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> It would be interesting to determine in this context the possible influence Malevich may have had not only on Hamilton’s project, which seems rather evident, but also on both the massing of the Rockefeller Center and the Empire State building – a connection Malevich would seem to have invited early on with his “Suprematist Skyscraper over Manhattan” less than a decade earlier.

Malevich himself contributed to the convergence of Suprematism and Stalinism. Predating Iofan's Lenin statue set on top of his skyscraper, at the 1932 Leningrad exhibition of "Soviet Artists in the Last Fifteen Years," Malevich featured several of his Suprematist skyscrapers topped with a Lenin, exactly as Iofan did two years later. Albeit now designed in strict axial and symmetrical American "Art-Deco" manner, Iofan's skyscraper, more illusory than Malevich's own, was involved in an analogous dream of transcendence.

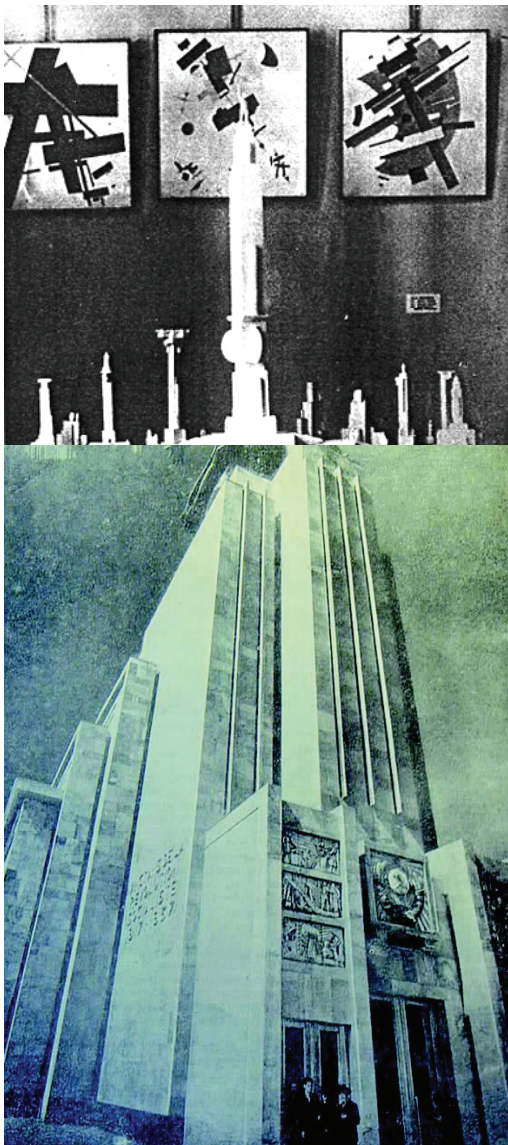


Fig. 23 "Arhitektons" by K. Malevich topped by Lenin Statues, at the 1932 Exhibition in Leningrad "Russian artists of the last 15 years."

Suprematism reverberated equally in the Palace's interior, as analogous abstract ornamental paneling was displayed in the main congress hall. Even the massing of a monumental sculpture's pedestal recalled the arhitektoni of the previous decade.

Fig. 24 Soviet Pavilion at the Paris World Fair, 1937, published in Arhitektura SSSR without the statue. (Lenin Library)

A similar case can be made for Iofan's Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 World Fair in Paris, also designed under Stalin's gaze. The early sketches, for the Paris

Pavilion showed formal concerns comparable with the two previous projects, the Palace of the Soviets and the Ministry of Heavy Industry.

The “Rockefeller skyscrapers” assembled in the 1937 model of the Palace, were actually replicas of the Soviet Pavilion in Paris, in the works since the end of 1935, when the Soviet Union accepted an invitation to participate in the Fair.

Significantly, the pavilion’s photograph published by Arhitektura SSSR cropped out the monumental statue, thus emphasizing the structure’s affinities with its American model. With the Rockefeller Center detectable in all three projects, Iofan created an American Trinity celebrating Stalin’s power.

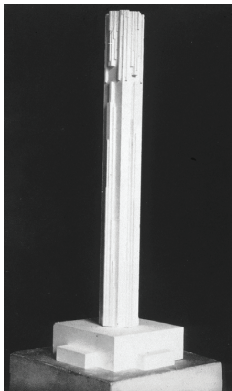


Fig. 25 An “Arhitekton” by Malevich and Fig. 26 (below) the Interior of the Soviet Pavilion in Paris (1937) with Nikolaj Suetin’s “skyscrapers” in the Suprematist key.

Iofan was quite explicit about his Suprematist references. In the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 World Fair, Iofan lined up on both sides of the Pavilion’s monumental central stairs, a series of white Suprematist ‘skyscraper’ allegories, designed by Suprematist artist Nikolaj Suetin – a follower of Malevich who



later also worked on the Soviet Pavilion in New York.

As late as 1937, two years after Malevich's death, and again in 1939, the progeny of the "arhitektoni" was still celebrated in multifarious ways. Far from dead, modernity (the American skyscraper) and modernism (Russian Suprematism) remained alive for a long time in the imaginaries of Soviet architects.

It does not come, therefore, as a surprise that Wright was unabashedly enthusiastic about Iofan's Paris pavilion. He lauded it as the best at the 1937 Expo – an indication that he sensed a deeper truth in a project historians would later dismiss simply as vacuous "Stalinist" architecture (which it was in part) or even "Classicizing" architecture (which it was not at all).<sup>61</sup>

This complex architectural fusion, where political power controlled contradictory, if not outright incompatible architectural programs, was part of the strategy of the Soviet leadership to consolidate its position on the international scene, while simultaneously trying to legitimize its self-image with the leftist movements that had sided or sympathized with the Bolshevik Revolution. As they considered it important to cultivate a progressive stance abroad, the Soviets generally instructed foreign Communist parties not to adopt "socialist realism."<sup>62</sup> Their explanation was that the capitalist countries had not yet reached the revolutionary conditions that made Soviet (socialist) realism possible<sup>63</sup> – a bizarre

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<sup>61</sup> See for example Leonardo Benevolo, Storia dell'Architettura Moderna (Laterza: Bari, 1960), p. 555.

<sup>62</sup> Some Party-member artists, such as Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros and José Orozco in Mexico championed instead what they called "Social Realism."

<sup>63</sup> This point was articulated explicitly in the famous "Querelle du Réalisme" that the French Communist literary journal Commune, edited by Louis Aragon, organized in 1934 in the wake of the Moscow Congress of writers.



inversion of the Soviet architects' claim that Modernism would come back when the "masses" would be ready for it.

It was also important to convince the world that Stalin had no designs for spreading the Bolshevik Revolution. Trotsky's "permanent revolution," or Marx's view that Socialism could be successful only if achieved worldwide, was abandoned in favor of Stalin's determination to "build Socialism in a single country" – the explicit goal of his Perestroika.<sup>64</sup>

A telling example of the official effort to project a non-threatening face abroad, one that renounced revolutionary expansionism, is found on the covers of architectural journals. A juxtaposition of the holdings of the Lenin Library and of the Library of Congress in Washington reveals that the same issue of Stroitel'stvo Moskvy had two different covers, one for the USSR, and the other destined to the United States. Whereas the January 1937 issue of Stroitel'stvo held at the Lenin Library featured the profile of Stalin superimposed on a wavy red flag with a prominent 'Hammer and Sickle' floating over a receding silhouette of the "Palace of the Soviet," under a self-satisfied figure of Stalin the cover of the same issue, stored in the Library of Congress, features only the skyscraper in monochrome pastel blue, with no ideological insignia whatsoever, but the vague figure of Lenin topping the skyscraper.

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<sup>64</sup> See Stalin's account of the conversation he had in 1929 with an American businessman "Mr. Campbell," a semi-official envoy of the US government, "Zapis besedy s g-nom Kembellom, 28 Janvarja 1929g." in I. Stalin, Sočinena (Moscow: GOSIZDAT, 1930), Vol. 13, pp 146-157.



**Fig. 27** Same issue of City Journal Stroitel'stvo Moskvy (“Building of Moscow”) With different covers for internal and international use. Lenin Library Holdings. Library of Congress Holdings.

The 1937 Soviet Pavilion in Paris and the 1939 Soviet Pavilion in New York offer an analogous example. The Paris Expo coincided with the Popular Front government in France and the Soviets felt they could safely boast a dramatic hammer and sickle carried by an industrial worker and a Kolhoz woman (sculpted by the Paris trained Vera Muhina), using the Pavilion as a pedestal. The 1939 New York Pavilion, instead, exhibited only a diminutive five-pointed red star a male worker figure brandished as a torch, in obvious reference to the one carried by Lady “Liberty.” That the red star, the symbol of the Third International, represented Communism on the five continents, could not be immediately



discernable to the general American public, as a hammer and sickle would.<sup>65</sup> In New York, indeed, Stalin opted for minimal symbolism, seeking international acceptance in competition, rather than confrontation.

### *The Sanatoria*

The building of Rest-Homes and Sanatoria in the 1930s, to which Stalin's regime attached great prestige, represents one of the most interesting examples of conformity and self-censorship on the one hand, and of surviving spirit of Modernism on the other, for most of the decade.

The sanatoria were important social and medical institutions in the USSR from the onset. Already between 1919 and 1921, in the midst of the Civil War, Lenin signed several decrees giving a new impulse to the construction of both Spas and Sanatoria to promote medical protection of the working classes. From 1930 on, in the wake of the "Perestroika," Stalin too launched a huge program of rest homes and sanatoria. But in the spirit of his "revolution from above" those were accessible primarily to members of Government ministries, Central Committees, the Army and to selected members of the newly created professional societies under state control.

As the Stalinist regime grew in strength after the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress (1930), the number of facilities intended for "the masses" shriveled, allowing minimum room space per person and limited furniture. Those sanatoria were typically absent from the literature that celebrated Soviet achievements in the field. More individualized medical services offered one - three-person bedrooms. These rooms were

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<sup>65</sup> Like those on the Kremlin towers, the star was made of ruby glass tinted with gold, lit from inside at night.

conceived not only as sleeping facilities but were equipped with living-room furniture as well.

The top group of sanatoria and rest homes was built for the most meritorious citizens: scholars, artists, master shock-workers and, in particular, for the so-called “professional revolutionaries,” that is, the higher party and government dignitaries. The living spaces of this category of sanatoria had to satisfy more demanding standards of comfort allowing personalized attention. They could accommodate the patient’s family in private quarters with several rooms, at the time when a typical family in Moscow shared a two-room, single bathroom apartment with another family. But in the world of elite sanatoria the hierarchy of health facilities according to social rank of patrons reflected the new system based on “merit” decreed from above that abolished the egalitarian spirit of the Bolshevik revolution where a high-ranking Party official never received a salary higher than the best paid factory worker. Nor was the new regime apologetic of its elite privileges. The beauty and comfort of the restricted facilities were lauded unashamedly as successes of socialism.

Most sanatoria, rest homes and hospitals under Stalin were built essentially in three different competing architectural manners found also in the rest of Europe, and in one way or another most were expressive of Modernity. A style that could be termed “modernized academicism,” or “stripped down” classicism exemplified by the 1933 “Kirov” sanatorium in the Northern Caucasus, was reminiscent of Marcello Piacentini’s own approach to architecture. The same style was commonly found in France in the wake of the 1930s call for a “retour à l’ordre,” such as a Soči sanatorium for the Leningrad City officials, in a style close to the modernized French neo-classicism of the 1937 Paris Museums of Modern Art. “Academized modernism” was represented by rest homes such as the 1935 “New Riviera” hospital (later transformed into a hotel) by B. V. Efimovič, also in Soči, a type

quite common in Western Europe at the time, and whose full efflorescence occurred at a massive scale at the Paris 1937 International Exhibition.<sup>66</sup> Finally, a literal classicist style or Italianate revival was exemplified by the “Frunze” Military Academy rest home opened in Soči in 1937.



Fig. 28 The “Frunze” sanatorium, Sochi, 1937.

Despite the Renaissance overtones of the “Frunze” rest home, Modernity was reinstated by a car featuring on the official photograph of the Italianate rest home, casually parked next to the building. Manifestly expressing a “will to modernity,” the car echoed an identical vehicle, a ZIL,<sup>67</sup> which appeared on the cover of the 21st issue of the 1937 Stroitel'stvo Moskvy, parked next to the Moscow Palace of Culture (see figure nr. 1). The same iconic car – actually a Ford

licensed to the Soviets – was also standing on the staircase landing inside the Soviet 1937 Pavilion in Paris (see figure nr. 26). All three settings certainly drew in spirit on Le Corbusier’s photographs of cars parked in front of his villas, or

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<sup>66</sup> See Danilo Udovicki-Selb, “The Elusive Faces of Modernism: The 1937 International Paris Exhibition and the Temps Nouveaux Pavilion”, doctoral dissertation, MIT, 1996.

<sup>67</sup>ZIL stood for Zavodi Imenni Lihačeva (Lihačev factories) licensed by Ford. For a history of the ZIL/Ford automobile, see N. V. Adfel'dt, et al., Istorija Moskovskogo Avtozavoda im. I. A. Lihačeva (Moscow: Misl', 1966) and “ZIL” Stranicy Trudovoi Slavy (Moscow: Plakat, 1986). Founded in 1914, the factory was reorganized by the engineer Lihačev in 1924.

associated with the Parthenon itself, providing a line linking Classicism to Modernity. No doubt a similar reading was intended in both cases.

As discussed earlier, in the Stalinian cosmology, Modernity was a predominantly American affair. Like the “Palladian” New York skyscrapers (as Le Corbusier called them derisively), a “Renaissance” villa with an American car in front of it was assimilated to Modernity. Equally linking the car and Modernity to Americanism – a Soviet quintessential Modern reference – a 1937 oil painting by Jurij Pimenov showed an open cabriolet, casually driven by a woman on a sunny day after the rain—a surreal image in the darkest year of Stalin’s Terror. The car passed by a just completed, American-style building designed by the architect Langman whom Stalin held in highest esteem. Langman’s architecture, directly modeled on American corporate style, was sufficient to get Stalin’s attention. According to an anecdote commonly told among Russian historians, Stalin burst unexpectedly into an exhibit of competition projects, and immediately asked where Langman’s entry was. As the project had not won any award, the reception committee quickly hung a “First prize” tag on it before Stalin arrived to the wall displaying Langman’s entry.

In 1937, Stalin was bringing his second Five-year plan to a nominal completion while carrying out the most brutal purges of his career. He saw a high power corporate gloss in Langman’s architectural repertoire as lending a progressive edge to Soviet architecture, as opposed to the refined historicist architecture built just around the corner on Tverskaja Street, by then already renamed Gorky Street. Of particular importance for the Perestroika, 1937 was also the year when the second line of the Moscow subway was started under Kaganovič whose name was given to the Metro system. The end of the second Five-Year Plan, and the twentieth anniversary of the Revolution, called for visible

accomplishments, whether fictitious or not. A mix of terror and spectacular achievements, harkening back to Modernity, cemented irreversibly Stalin's myth.

In 1933, contrasting with historicist revivals, a modernist sanatorium was opened in Barviha, near Moscow, as an exclusive medical center for the members of the Politburo and the Central Committee.<sup>68</sup> The architect was again Iofan. He was simultaneously busy, as we have seen, with the Palace of the Soviets, the 1934 entry to the Commissariat of Heavy Industry, and soon with the future Soviet pavilion in Paris, all crucial projects for the regime. Under Stalin's gaze, Iofan produced simultaneously in at least three different architectural languages: in a Modernist (the Barviha sanatorium), a Socialist Realist (the Palace of the Soviets) and in a cosmopolitan language of American vintage (the Commissariat of Heavy Industry). A non-ceremonial, technical, science-oriented architectural type such as a sanatorium, where function was paramount, allowed him to embrace Modernism with serenity.



Fig. 29 Boris Iofan, Barviha Sanatorium, 1934 (Photo MuAr)

His dynamic, asymmetrical plan of interconnected blocks, the innovative bubbly windows and obliquely oriented rooms increasing the exposure to the

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<sup>68</sup> The Barviha Hospital serves again today as an exclusive medical facility of the Presidency of the Russian Federation, and is again off limits to visitors. Despite repeated attempts, I was unable to secure a permit to visit and photograph the building. The recent restriction of research freedoms decreed by the Russian government has compounded the difficulties. I am thus relying merely on the limited, if excellent historic photographic material available at the Ščusev Museum of Architecture in Moscow (MuAr).

sun, essential in tuberculosis therapy, gave the sanatorium its distinctive look.

The simplicity of the whitewashed horizontal volumes of the building contrasted lyrically with the dark and crystalline openings, rhythmically distributed along the façade, and with the verticals of the surrounding white birch forest. A circular dining room and kitchen formed a hinge articulating the arms of the various branches of the dormitories.

The sanatorium's interior was no less surprising. The furniture, expressly designed for the sanatorium, paid homage to the Modernist work of the 1920s.



Fig. 30 Interior of Barviha Sanatorium with Furniture by Iofan, 1934 (Photo MuAr)

The ascetic, thin tubular chairs, tables and beds in the spacious and well lit rooms owed their elegance as much to a tough Productivist aesthetics, as they did to Iofan's own experience with Italian modern design he absorbed in Rome.



M. I. Meržanov's "Vorošilov" sanatorium, designed in 1932, and completed in 1936, for the Ministry of Defense in Soči, exemplified another project that featured a mainstream modern architectural sensibility.<sup>69</sup> Even though planned in a Beaux-Arts fashion, its main palatial buildings were decidedly 'modern'.



Fig. 32 "Vorošilov" Rest Home, Sochi, Black Sea Riviera, 1934.

(Photo Udovicki)

The complex dominated a hillside overlooking the Black Sea. Accessed by a funicular from the former "Stalin highway" below, running along the seashore, the main building of the Sanatorium was compositionally completed by two

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<sup>69</sup> This sanatorium was part of the recent MoMa photographic exhibition "Lost Vanguard: Soviet Modernist Architecture, 1922-32," by Richard Pare, July 18-October 29, 2007. The hospital's name, still unchanged to this day, was given after Stalin's Politburo member, Marshal Kliment Vorošilov, People's Commissar for the Defense in 1934.

symmetrical dormitories. Contradicting this formal arrangement, a series of pavilions including a theater, a rose garden, billiard rooms and sports facilities were freely distributed over the steep slope graced with Mediterranean vegetation.

Architecturally the most intriguing, and semantically the most complex sanatorium was no doubt the all but forgotten “Ordžonikidze” sanatorium in Kislovodsk.



Fig. 32 M. Ginzburg, “Ordžonikidze” Sanatorium, View of the three pavilions, 1938  
(Photo Udovicki)

The North-Caucasian spa was already prized under the Tsars. The sanatorium was completed in 1938, when the Terror began to abate. Its designer was Ginzburg. Author in 1924 of Epoch and Style, of a manifesto of Constructivist architecture, often brought to bear with Le Corbusier’s Vers une Architecture. In the 1920s, as we saw, Ginzburg had initiated the architectural avant-garde journal SA, designed by Gan. He headed OSA’s Commission for the study of standardized housing

types, until it was closed by a Central Committee resolution in 1931.<sup>70</sup> His seminal 1929 NARKOMFIN housing project (built with Ignatij Milinis<sup>71</sup>) anticipated by full twenty years Le Corbusier's Marseilles Unité d'habitation. Le Corbusier had the opportunity to see the NARKOMFIN in Moscow. In this project, Ginzburg also introduced the concept of an external "street" that he reused in Kislovodsk. Instead of locating it at the core of the building, as Le Corbusier did, Ginzburg pushed his "suspended street" to the periphery of the structure, thus exposing it to natural sunlight behind ribbon windows. The "street" occurred at every second level, anticipating by more than two decades the Golden Lane "Team 10 members," Allison and Peter Smithson, designed in 1952, contravening Le Corbusier's internal streets in Marseilles.<sup>72</sup>

By 1938, Ginzburg was leading a team of architects in the Crimea, transforming a huge area of 650 square kilometers into an elite resort of rest homes and sanatoria. This work may have helped Ginzburg test the "de-urbanist" theories he inherited from Mihail Ohitovič, a young sociologist and planner, executed by the GPU soon after his arrest in 1934 as a "Trotskyite adventurer."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The official reason for closing the institute, as announced in the press, was that overly experimental housing types it produced risked alienating from socialism a still predominantly traditional population. The text of the resolution seemed to have been written by Nikolaj Mil'utin himself. Its argument made sense in many ways, but then the same argument could have been applied to the appropriateness of the Bolshevik Revolution under Russian conditions in the first place.

<sup>71</sup> On the NARKONFIN building see Victor Buchli, "Moisei Ginzburg's Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow: Contesting the Social and Material World," JSAH, 57:2, June 1998.

<sup>72</sup> Among the experimental communal housing types, Ginzburg had also solutions with "streets" running in the core of the building that Le Corbusier had the opportunity to see during his visit to Moscow in 1928 and 1930.

<sup>73</sup> About the Ohitovič case, see the passionate and engrossing book by Hugh D. Hudson, Blueprints and Blood: The Stalinization of Soviet Architecture, 1917-1937 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Contrary to Hudson's assessment of Alabjan's responsibility in Ohitovič's arrest, however, the RGALI archives allow, in my view, a somewhat different

In the mid-1930s, Ginzburg received the commission for Kislovodsk, his second major work in this mountain spa. The facilities still bear the name of Stalin's Politburo member Sego Ordžonikidze who sponsored the project and intervened in the design process as a virtual patron.<sup>74</sup>



Fig. 33 Politburo member Sego Ordžonikidze, as Patron of the Kislovodsk Sanatorium  
(Photo Udovicki)

Two years after the completion of the “Ordžonikidze”, Nikolaj Kolli – Le Corbusier's former collaborator and the only Soviet member of the CIAM – wrote an introduction to a monograph on Ginzburg's sanatorium calling it a “prime example of Socialist Realism.”<sup>75</sup> But the “Ordžonikidze” complex seemed to follow neither a Constructivist nor a Palladian

style. Manifestly searching for an independent architectural expression, away from eclectic pots-pourris of common Stalinist production, Ginzburg reached out for

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interpretation of the man's persecution. Hudson tries to establish personal responsibilities among perceived willing ‘collaborators’ (Alabjan in this case) of the repression. In my opinion, it is almost impossible to establish such responsibilities where little space was left for truly independent decisions and where any Party member, especially in a prominent position, was subject to arrest at any moment with no cause whatsoever. Once set in motion by the GPU, the mechanics of arrest could not be either modified or stopped, even less reversed, short of Stalin's intervention, like in the case of the poet Osip Mandelstam. Alabjan's own position was all but certain.

<sup>74</sup> M. Ja. Ginzburg, *Arhitektura Sanatorija: NKTP v Kislovodske* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Arhitekturi SSSR, 1940), p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> Ginzburg, op. cit. “Vvedenie” p. 2.



an architecture reflecting the “Mediterraneità” he had experienced in Italy as a young student. His first model for the sanatorium reflected a classicism of open courts and open sky peristyle in curious contradiction with the frigid Alpine climate of the Northern Caucasus.

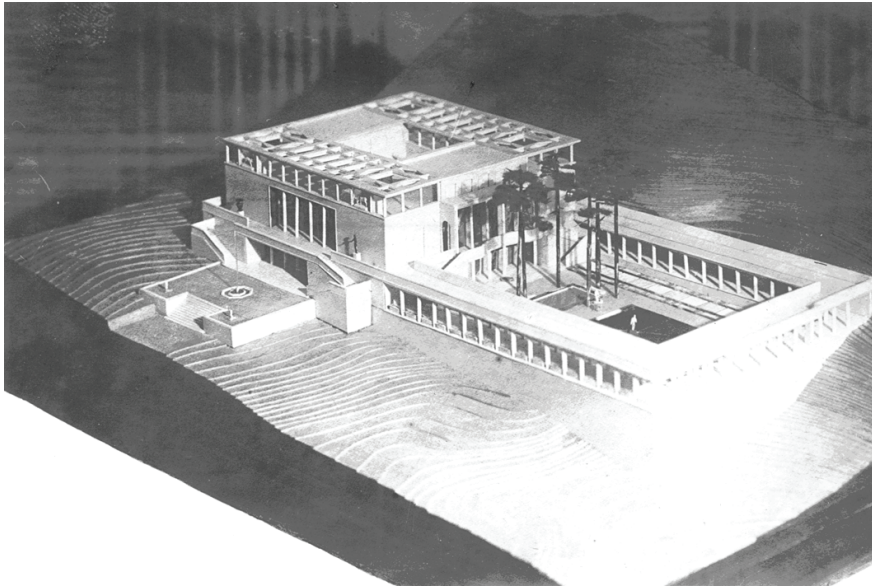


Fig. 34 Early Model of the “Ordžonikidze” at Kislovodsk. (Photo MuAr)

Indeed, Ginzburg seemed to hesitate about which modernized classicism would be most appropriate in the new Soviet conditions “where now architecture [had] to please the people” as Kolli wrote apologetically to Le Corbusier in 1935.

In his sustained search for a compromise that would avoid a slavish glorification of the banality of “socialist realism”, Ginzburg settled for a telling solution. At the Kislovodsk sanatorium, he opted for a reinterpretation of the Italian “Novecento”<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>76</sup> On this innovative Milanese movement (1919-1939), lead by such figures as Giovanni Muzio (famous for his famous “Cà’ Brüt” in Milanese dialect), Caneva and Carminati, see Giorgio



Fig. 35 Above, Caneva and Carminati, Trade Unions Palace, Milan, in “Novecento” Style from Rempel’s Book  
 Below: Ginzburg’s Sanatorium in Kislovodsk (Photo Udovicki)

Its modernized classicism was the most original, and would be, Ginzburg obviously believed, well suited as a variant of the Socialist Realist genre. His early work in the Soviet Union, prior to his embracing of modern architecture, such as his 1922 competition entry for the Palace of Labor in Moscow, was still expressed in a classical key.<sup>77</sup> Trained as an architect in Milan before World War I, Ginzburg had returned to Italy in 1934 as head of the Soviet delegation to the International Congress of Architects in Rome. There he had become familiar with the evolution of Italian architecture that offered several modern reinterpretations to the Mediterranean classical heritage.

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Ciucci “Il Dibattito sull’ architettura e la città fasciste”, Storia dell’arte Italiana, VII: Il Novecento. (Torino: Einaudi) 1982. The movement, which has been branded in somewhat facile ways as a “precursor of Post-Modernism,” acquires in the case of Ginzburg’s actual “post-modernism” an intriguing dimension.

<sup>77</sup> The first to break with their historicist past were the brothers Vesnin with their own 1922 entry for the Palace of Labor. Although they did receive only a third award, their entry became an iconic cause célèbre of Constructivism.



Closely associated with the Italian architectural scene, Ginzburg was no doubt familiar as well with L. I. Rempel's excellent book The Post-war Italian Architecture,<sup>78</sup> published in Moscow in 1935. The book, richly illustrated with work by Piacentini, Libera, Carminati, Sironi and others,<sup>79</sup> emphasized that the Italians had successfully combined "Constructivism" with traditional art. This resonated with the Stalinist idea of the "unity of the arts" that mandated "enriching" the "laconic" Constructivist "box-like" architecture with ornamental sculpture or murals. Even though the book was withdrawn from circulation as a "scandal" just a few months after its publication, the intriguing fact that such a book, praising "fascist" architecture, could be published in the USSR, where censorship was applied prior to, not after publication, points out to the ambiguous relationship between Italian Fascism and Stalin's regime.<sup>80</sup>

What is more, the previous year, Rempel' had already published, in the architectural journal Za Rubežom ["Beyond the Borders"], a journal specializing in foreign architecture, an essay on Adalberto Libera's Palazzo del Littorio – a temple

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<sup>78</sup> L. I. Rempel', Arhitektura posle voennoj Italii [Post-War Italian Architecture] (Moscow: Academy of Architecture, 1935). By virtue of his intimate acquaintance with Italian architecture and his trip to the United States, Boris Iofan also wrote on the subject of both Italian and US contemporary architecture. See, "Materialy ob sovremennoj arhitekture SŠA i Italii", Akademija Arhitektury, Moscow, No. 4, 1936, pp. 13-47.

<sup>79</sup> None of the Rationalists were represented in the book, even less Giuseppe Terragni – for obvious reasons.

<sup>80</sup> Given uninterrupted Soviet exchanges with Mussolini's Italy, the book may have been given the green light for publication in the wake of the Rome international congress of architects to which the Soviets sent a large delegation. The delegates continued traveling through the country after the Congress while sending reports for publication in the Soviet professional press (Kolli even went to Paris in an unsuccessful attempt to see Le Corbusier who was then in the United States). Despite an apparently favorable context, the book inevitably caught the eye at some point of a concerned party official. Any failure of "vigilance" (bditel'nost), that is, the failure to report suspect occurrences, could be costly to those who would have possessed or read the book without denouncing it. The episode, nevertheless, emphasizes the uncertainty and confusion that marred Soviet architectural discourse of the 1930s.

to Fascism. Such apparent tolerance for Italian Fascism would deserve further research.<sup>81</sup> To play it safe, however, Rempel' insisted in his book, without elaborating, that Fascism and Nazism were not to be conflated.

A degree of collaboration that existed between the Soviet and Fascist regimes, at least until the Rome-Berlin Axis was established in 1937, made it possible for a number of Italian engineers to work in the USSR, helping the “construction of Socialism.” The Soviet Avant-Garde was well known and admired in Italy – especially by the Rationalists – so much so that the huge 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition of the “Fascist revolution” was, to a large extent, a compendium of recycled Soviet Constructivist, Suprematist and Rationalist forms. Even one of the first works by young Giuseppe Terragni, his 1929 “Novocomum,” was clearly derived from Il'ja Golosov's “Zujev Workers' Club” in Moscow, despite the overlapping of dates of completion.<sup>82</sup> Golosov, the more experienced architect, was a refined classicist who had studied under Žoltovskij before the Revolution. With Stalinism now tightening its grip on Soviet culture, the order was

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<sup>81</sup> Even if Za Rubežom fell in the group of publications accessible only with a special authorization, the appearance of the article remains symptomatic. The fresh, modern graphic presentation of the journal, visibly contrasting with the barren Arhitektura SSSR, as well as the unusually well preserved copies stored in the Lenin Library, might, however, lend credence to a special status of Za Rubežom. In the same issue, the journal also featured an article on the Rockefeller Center, side by side with the Littorio. In his book Le Corbusier and the Mystique of the USSR (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 205n, Jean-Louis Cohen mentions in a footnote, without citing his sources (actually a doctoral student of his who interviewed Rempel's daughter), that “Rempel' was imprisoned” following the publication of the book, as the latter “escaped the attention of the censor.” A censor's “oversight” that would have occurred twice seems unlikely, especially in a time of reinforced “bditel'nost” regarding the “class enemy”. Obviously, confusion and ambiguity loomed over USSR's rapport to Fascist Italy. A positive attitude in various degrees regarding Mussolini's regime was not limited to the sole Soviet Union, witness numerous American pronouncements under Roosevelt.

<sup>82</sup> The plans of the Club were widely published in the architectural press in the 1920s. The slow building process in the USSR allowed Terragni to catch up with Golosov and complete his building roughly at the same time as Golosov.

reversed. In the 1930s, with their “palaces for the masses,” the Soviets began emulating classicist aspects of contemporary Italian architecture.

Whereas at Kislovodsk, Ginzburg did introduce the Novecento, this was the case, significantly, only with the main façades, those likely to be photographed and published. In contrast with its official, ceremonial face, quoted as the nec plus ultra of socialist realism, Ginzburg’s sanatorium, a complex of three buildings, displayed on its sides and rear façades a radically different architecture.<sup>83</sup>

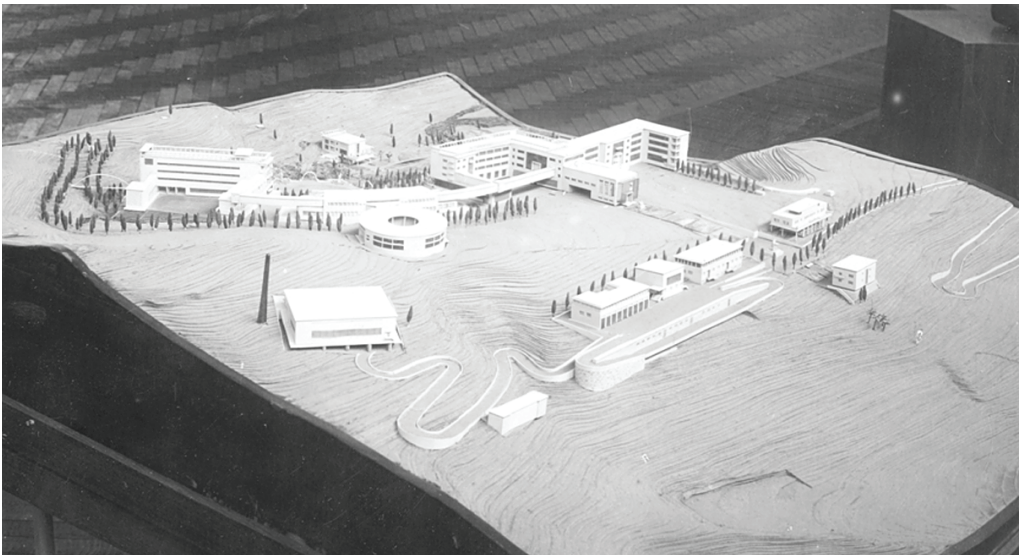


Fig. 36 General Model of the Kislovodsk Sanatorium, by Ginzburg, second version. Still planned and designed in a straightforward Constructivist manner. (Photo MuAr)

Once the Novecento front façades were left behind, one would be surprised to discover a radically different architecture that has not been photographed or published to this day. The inconspicuous rear and side façades appeared as so many reminiscences and quotations of some of the most noted achievements of the

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<sup>83</sup> It should be noted that the general model of the sanatorium was still designed in an evident Constructivist mode.

European ‘New Architecture.’ The buildings reveal fragments of Ginzburg’s dialogue with his own time; with his own architecture of the 1920s; and with the architecture of other builders around the world who had taken part, like him, in the uncertain adventure of the “Temps Nouveaux.” Evoking a last salute to a bygone era, the swan song of a Modernist, his buildings subtly suggested Walter Gropius’ Bauhaus dormitory, inserted as it were in the most reclusive parts of the western building.



Fig 37 “Echo” of the Bauhaus Dormitory façade in the back of the Western Wing. (Photo Udovicki)

More accessible, on the flank of the eastern pavilion, appeared the fragment of a glass curtain wall, a wink to Mies van der Rohe, to which Ginzburg jokingly added a “floating” balcony recalling the ‘anti-gravitational’ exercises of the Russian



Suprematists and Rationalists, notably those of Nikolaj Ladovskij, a teacher at the VHUTEMAS and Ginzburg's rival of the 1920s.



Fig. 38 Western Façade of Eastern Wing. Glass Curtain Wall and “Suspended” Balcony. (Photo Udovicki)

The most direct allusion to the Modern Movement's principles, and to Le Corbusier's architecture in particular were, of course, the flat roofs with their suspended gardens and pergolas. At the same time this arrangement recalled as well Italian 18th century Palazzo architecture praised by "socialist Realism."



Fig 39 Roof Garden of the Eastern Wing (Photo Udovicki)

The sculptural, geometric masses recalled on both flanks of the Western pavilion Le Corbusier's "volumes under the sun".



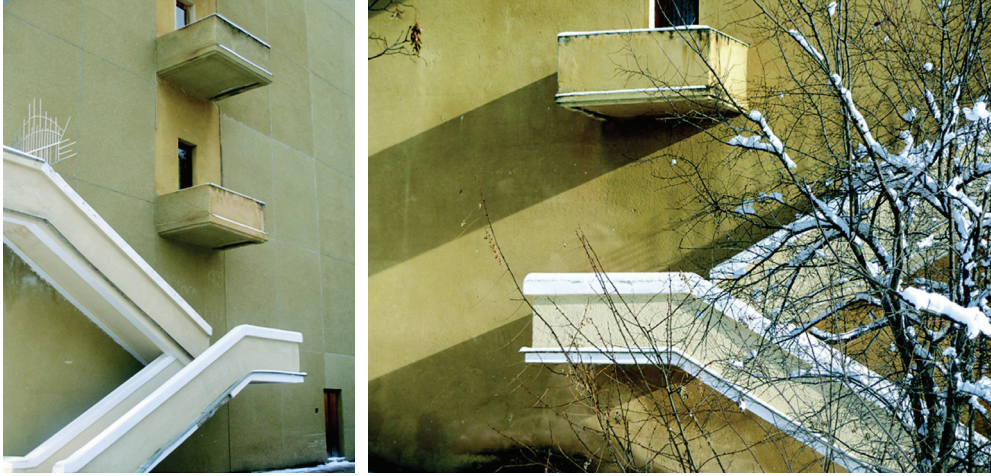


Fig. 40 Side Walls of the Western Wing. (Photo Udovicki)

Those masses were clearly related to his own projecting balconies on the flank of the 1929 NARKOMFIN housing block, the closest point of convergence between the two architects.

Less than ten years had passed since that white, elongated experimental apartment building rose up on its black pilotis in the center of Moscow, and yet Ginzburg's world had been turned around and upside-down for the second time in his life: the first, when redemptive dreams appeared at arm's reach in the wake of a Revolution, the second when they all began to unfold into nightmares. His best student and collaborator of genius in SA, Leonidov, certainly the most promising architect of the century, was reduced to painting icon-like elusive worlds on scraps of wood, something he had learned to do before he went to the VHUTEMAS. By the mid-1930s, Ginzburg had lost two close collaborators, Ohitovič and Gan, to incomprehensible incarceration and death. Besides the wide publication of the arrests in the media in general, and of long editorials in the architectural press in particular, each incarceration had to be followed by interminable SSA meetings

where vociferous ritual denunciations and expressions of public “dismay” were in order, while silence would be suspect.

Still, the Central Medical pavilion in Kislovodsk, linking the western and eastern buildings, gave Ginzburg an opportunity for one last elusive daydream. Using cutting-edge technology and science, the building’s program itself allowed Ginzburg to be unabashedly modern: he now explicitly introduced a huge glazed cylinder of the central solarium, and connected it to the luminous interior of the main therapeutic swimming pool by magnificent, brutalist ‘industrial’ staircases.



Fig. 41 Winter Garden of Central Wing. (Photo Udovicki)



Fig. 42 Main Stairs of The Central Medical Wing. (Photo Udovicki)

This, of course, had to be legitimized. In the description of his project,<sup>84</sup> Ginzburg claimed, “the severe form of the medical pavilion, sternly closed upon itself, arose from the rigor of its function (...) needing no external embellishments and thus remaining simple and laconic.” “Laconic” stood for “modernist,” the best that could be uttered about the otherwise vilified, “box-like,” “schematic,”

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<sup>84</sup> M. Ja. Ginzburg, *Arhitektura Sanatorija: NKTP v Kislovodske* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Arhitekturi SSSR, 1940), p. 10.

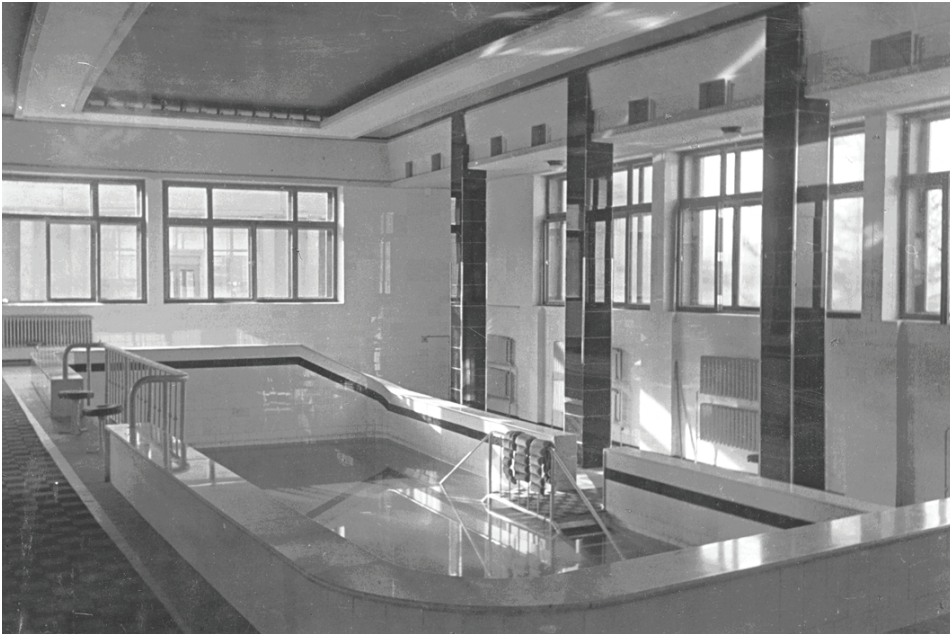


Fig. 43 The Swimming Pool of the Central Wing.

(Photo MuAr)

“ideologically unprincipled,” or “foreign” architecture of the former Soviet Modernists. In defense of his project, Ginzburg first paid his due rhetorically to “socialist realism” and found ways to conceal his modernist intentions by avoiding the use of recognizable constructivist catchwords. He praised the noble cause of the Perestroika, which, like his hospital, was profoundly indebted to “Stalin’s concern for the human person.”

Adherence to Stalinian priorities was reflected, according to Ginzburg, in the fact that in his hospital “all the rooms [were] oriented to the South.” Through discrete irony, undetectable in the context of ritual praises, Ginzburg found a way to both satisfy an imperative and safely distance himself from it. Like with the architecture of his sanatorium, in his verbal description he resorted to double speech. After dutifully taking issue with the “generic,” i.e., modernist forms – he went on to

defend the principle, evident in his sanatorium, of an “organic connection between the internal life of the organism and its architectural expression.” This was another way of saying that in his architecture, form followed function in a Wrightian sense.

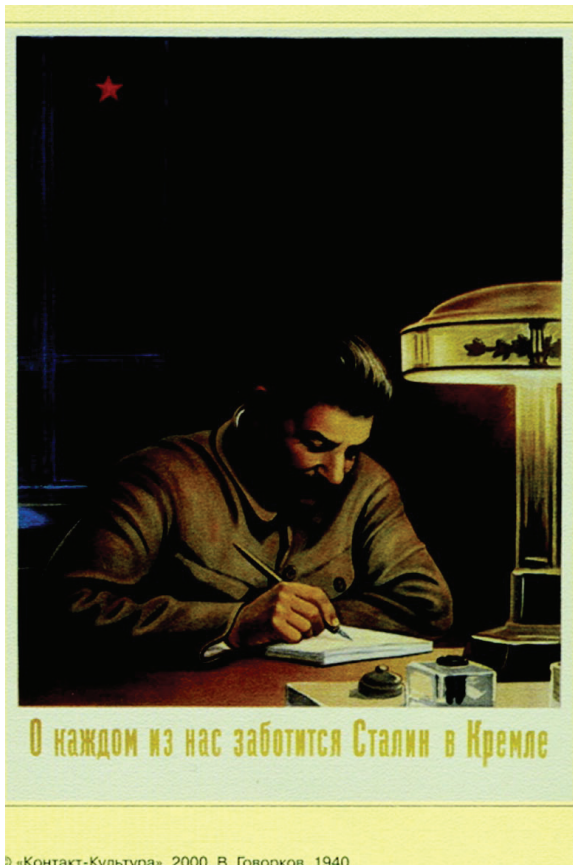


Fig. 45 Reproduction of 1940 Postcard: “Stalin in the Kremlin cares about each of us”

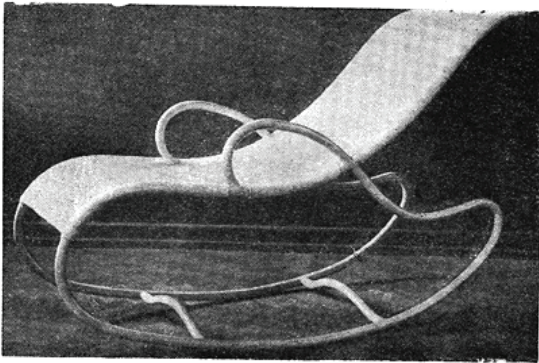
Beyond the three medical pavilions, further north, invisible from the distance, lay additional multi-storied service pavilions embracing, without hesitation, a “laconic” style closer to German Modernism, with flat roofs, bereft of pergolas or any ornaments. This way, a clear hierarchy was established from the monumental south façades with their Novecento forms, through the non-ceremonial Modernist back façades, to the outright

“functionalist” Neue Sachlichkeit service buildings on the north end.

Not only did Ginzburg implement, against all odds, a Modernist vocabulary in his project; to his credit, he also included in his architectural team working on the Kislovodsk project the thirty five-year-old Leonidov, marginalized since the mid-thirties. Leonidov’s name was erased from the list of delegates to the founding



congress of the official All-Soviet Association of Architects held in 1937.<sup>85</sup> Ginzburg, who had previously invited Leonidov to Crimea to solve some difficult architectural problems of the projects, gave the latter now the opportunity to design some of the sanatorium furniture, in the spirit of the furniture Leonidov successfully created in 1934 for the Moscow House of Pioneers in collaboration with his former classmate, the ambitious Alabjan.



19. Шезлонг для террас

Fig. 45 Lounge Chair. Design Ivan Leonidov for Kislovodsk.

Above all else, Ginzburg offered Leonidov the opportunity to build the monumental staircase of the sanatorium park – the only thing Leonidov, this genius among architects, was ever to have built (see figure 2).

Boldly, Leonidov reused the “balconies” of his failed 1934 competition entry for the Ministry of Heavy Industry, the same Ministry, the NARKOMTJAŽPROM, for

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<sup>85</sup> Leonidov appears on the official list of delegates as early as December 1932. His name never reappears again, even though I did not find an explicit cancellation. RGALL, SSA papers. Even El Lissitzky beat the drum against Leonidov when he criticized his 1934 astounding competition entry for the Ministry of Heavy Industry, indeed anticipatory of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. After praising his efforts to contextualize his project with Saint Basil and the Bolshoi Theater, Lissitzky dismissed the project as merely a “stage set,” in other words, a “formalist” project, the worst indictment of an architect’s work at the time. Still, one has to concede that Lissitzky had at least the good taste to avoid using the term itself. *Arhitektura SSSR*, November 1934.



which the sanatorium was being built.<sup>86</sup> The 1934 competition was indeed his last and most ambitious project, condemned, like all other ones, to remain on paper. When, as late as 1936, he was again ritually attacked in the architectural press for the sin of formalism, he responded with disarming candor that he did not understand why he was called a “formalist” since he had always been a Constructivist.<sup>87</sup> In the published and unpublished records, Leonidov appears consistently and strikingly as someone who had the openness, the candor, and even the ingenuity of a child’s heart. (Even his slowly and fully spelled out signature, looking like that of a child, contributes to this perception). He never attempted any compromises. In the mid 1930s, he voiced scathing criticism about the state of Soviet architecture. When it came to his beloved profession, he spoke with the same passion and directness of speech he had used twenty years before, as a teenager, from a small village, in his application to the VHUTEMAS. Kislovodsk was, for Leonidov and Ginzburg alike, their last chance in architecture. Ginzburg died in 1946. Leonidov ended his life ten years later as a model maker in the basement of the Moscow School of Architecture, where students discovered him as being the legendary Leonidov.

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<sup>86</sup> Leonidov was at the time an employee of that Commissariat’s Design Department. He repeated these balconies in 1955 on his icon-like fantasies representing on wooden tablets Tomaso Campanella’s City of the Sun he situated in a utopian island of the south Pacific. On his project for the Ministry, see Rem Koolhaas and Gerrit Oorthuys, “Ivan Leonidov’s Narkomtjažprom, Moscow”, *Oppositions* No. 2 January 1974, pp. 95-103. On Leonidov’s collected works see Andrei Gozak and Andrei Leonidov, *Leonidov* (London: Academy Editions, 1988).

<sup>87</sup> See *Gazeta Arhitekturi*, July 1936.

## *Conclusion*

The rationale and stated reason for replacing the various architectural movements flourishing in the 1920s with a single Union of Architects, was to secure the success of the Five Year Plan, launched in 1928. The Plan required the “concerted efforts” of “all extant architectural forces.” The prospects were grandiose, as the architects and urbanists were faced not only with the task of thoroughly modernizing Moscow – including building its state-of-the-art subway<sup>88</sup> – but with an immense program of raising entirely new industrial cities linked to the strategies of the Five Year Plan. Architects and engineers from all over the world, including the United States devastated by the Great Depression, were invited to join forces in building the USSR, “the sole country today boasting healthy finances,” as even the conservative French Beaux-Arts magazine wrote in 1935.<sup>89</sup> It seemed that, now more than ever, architects were fully entrusted with the task of “pulling the Republic out of the mud,” as Majakovskij wrote in a poem. Competitions of all sorts, national and international, were organized in the USSR. The authorities knew that competitions were a way of maintaining, like a mirage, an indispensable sense of enthusiasm and hope. Competitions, no doubt, contributed to the illusion of progress, hiding the voluntarist nature of most of Stalin’s redemptive campaigns. Like the five year plans, incessant competitions were doomed, for the most part, to remain on paper. The project for the Palace of the Soviets stands as the most explicit metaphor for both.

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<sup>88</sup> Each surface and underground station was a subject of open competitions that lasted for most of the decade, and were designed in a variety of styles, from mainstream modern to Art Deco, to classical revivals of all kinds.

<sup>89</sup> Beaux-Arts, January 1935, p. 3.

Involved, at least since 1920, with the revolutionary movements, the most prominent Soviet architects remained long convinced that Stalin's Perestroika represented a genuine effort to revive and save the Revolution. The concessions they were now asked to make by a Party claiming a "scientific understanding" of History, were perceived by many, and especially by devoted Communists, only as temporary measures.

If temporarily giving up radical experiments and cutting edge architecture was the price to pay, immense promised collective rewards of the First Five Year Plan certainly appeared to be worth it. The official invitation to Frank Lloyd Wright (and to Le Corbusier)<sup>90</sup> to attend the first Congress of the new Union of Architects at the time of the worst repression of 1936-1937, no doubt contributed to the perception that sacrificing modern architecture was indeed only a temporary, pragmatic hiatus. The myth of History (Historical Materialism) as an ineluctable, scientifically predictable unfolding of which the avant-garde of the Proletariat as the last agent of history had a unique understanding was, more than fear or the need for professional and personal survival, among Stalin's strongest tools in achieving total control. "Socialist realism" borrowed an aura from the commonly held transcendental perception of History and the Party. It was also a fluid formula, particularly in architecture, where it left some limited, but fiercely debated room for subjectivism and plurality – and, in the same way as Mussolini refused to give a clear definition of his "chameleon-like" regime, to use Palmiro Togliatti's expression, allowing architects to compete in giving fascism their own architectural definition, the vagueness of the term "socialist realism," at least in

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<sup>90</sup> Le Corbusier was officially invited to join the Congress in a letter signed by Alabjan, Ščusev, and Viktor Vesnin on 10 May 1937. FLC P5 11. The invitation, however, may have been a mere gesture as the start of the Congress was scheduled for 15 June, hardly more than a month later.

architecture, definitely allowed for subjective responses and plural answers throughout the decade. The Kislovodsk project exemplifies it best.

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Revivalist historicism in architecture was already a well-established practice in Russia, much before Stalin and the mandated Party representatives began intervening in cultural affairs, be it art, architecture or literature. It competed with Modernism for the most prominent commissions. The foundations of “socialist realism” were already in existence in the architectural practice, abetted by the country’s general aesthetic conservatism, and, indirectly by the effects of the NEP. The models of what would become the trends of socialist realism, from 1929 on, were, therefore, established in the USSR well before the Party considered any intervention in questions of architectural culture.

Historicist and folkloric tendencies referred to as “National architecture” emerged soon after Lenin’s death. They were carried on by the Stalinist dictates deep into the 1930s to reemerge after the war as their own caricature, known in Russia as “Stalin Rococo,” or “Stalin Empire.” Ironically, when in 1928 the Modernists called for the Party to intervene in the polemic about progressive architecture on the occasion of the Lenin Library, they were convinced that the response of a “revolutionary” Party would necessarily be the rejection of historicism in the name of Modernity. With Stalin in place, however, it is exactly the opposite that occurred.

On the other hand, the slow process of building in the USSR (as projects designed in the late twenties were often not completed before the end of the next decade); the mixed signals coming from the centers of power; the technical and scientific character of buildings such as sanatoria; and the resilience of

revolutionary utopia that pervaded the imaginaries of the Moderns, made it possible to perpetuate the Modernist and anti-historicist trends almost to the end of the decade. It took until after WW2 for the parvenu taste of the growing nomenklatura, eager to part-take in the glitters of luxury once available only to the deposed aristocracy, to fully prevail.

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Half a century later, the former dacha of Joseph Visarionovič Stalin, built on the Black sea resort of Soči during the Terror (and painted in poison green, probably to avoid detection in the forest), was to become after the fall of the Soviet Union an elite rest home for today's privileged "New Russians." The historical circle has been closed, ready to be "repeated as a farce."



Fig. 46 Stalin's Dača in Sochi. Exterior and his study, in 2004. (Photo Udovicki)



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