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## **RUSSIAN BERLIN: 100 YEARS LATER**

## **РУССКИЙ БЕРЛИН: 100 ЛЕТ СПУСТЯ**

### **Abstract:**

2021 marks the 100th anniversary of the golden era of what scholars have designated as “Russian Berlin” (Русский Берлин). The phenomenon was by many forgotten, except for the few who remained in the city after 1923; overshadowed by the new emigre centers in Paris, Prague, and later New York; intentionally overlooked and ignored by Soviet literary historians for decades. When I began my study of that time and its writers in 1984 there were few scholars interested in the period, among them Fritz Mierau at the time in East Berlin and the then German Democratic Republic. We relied on writings by Ehrenburg, Shklovski, and the living witnesses, Nina Berberova in Princeton, Alexander Bakhrakh in Paris, Roman Goul in New York. A newly discovered Vera Lourie in Berlin would become for a few years a sought after interviewee by the German press. Gorbachev’s “glasnost” opened doors, accelerated by the fall of the Berlin wall and ultimately the Soviet Union. German scholars, Karl Schlögel and Amory Burchard, the exiled Lew Kopelev, and Russians began to pay attention culminating in a 700 page illustrated Berlin-Moskau /Moskau-Berlin 1900-1950 [1]. But today 100 years later little attention is being devoted to this truly golden era in Russian literature.

**Keywords:** Russian Berlin, émigré literature, Bely, Berberova, Goul, Lourie, Remizov.

**Аннотация:**

В 2021 году исполняется 100 лет золотой эры того, что ученые назвали “Русским Берлином.” Много забыто, исчезнувшее с теми, кто остался в городе после 1923 года; и ростом других новых эмигрантских центров в Париже, Праге и Нью-Йорке. Когда я начал свое изучение того времени и его авторов в 1984 году, было мало тех, кто интересовался этим периодом. Одно исключение было Фриц Мирау в то время в Восточном Берлине и Германской Демократической Республике. Мы опирались на сочинения Эренбурга, Шкловского и живых свидетелей, Нины Берберовой в Принстоне, Александра Бахраха в Париже, Романа Гуля в Нью-Йорке и одной из последних свидетелей в Берлине, Веры Лурье. «Гласность» Горбачева открыла двери, потом падение Берлинской стены и, в конечном итоге, распад Советского Союза. Немецкие ученые Карл Шлегель и Амори Бурхард, изгнанный Лев Копелев, и русские наконец в 90-х годах начали обращать на это внимание. Кульминацией интереса стал 700-страничный иллюстрированный том Берлин-Москва / Москва-Берлин 1900-1950 гг.

**Ключевые слова:** Русский Берлин, литература в эмиграции, Белый, Берберова, Гуть, Лурье, Ремизов

**Introduction**

The interest has since faded, and given the current state of German-Russian affairs, complicated by the Navalny affair, it is unlikely that either nation will devote much attention to these glory years. This paper looks at a set of snapshots in time and place, the years 1921-1923 in Berlin, to examine their centrality for Russian culture, art, and literature, and then the intersections with German and consequently European culture.

For a few years at the beginning of the 1920s, Berlin became the cultural center of Russian artistic life. Russian writers, actors, and artists supplied Berlin’s newspapers, journals, and art exhibitions with an extraordinary array of creative output. In the art world especially their names and works are inextricably intertwined with the history of modern twentieth century art: El Lissitzky and Vasily Kandinsky. The writers, some now forgotten, included Boris Pasternak, Vladimir Nabokov, whose father was editor of one of the Russian language newspapers in Berlin, and for a time Maxim Gorky was in Berlin and Germany. Why were all these Russians in Berlin?

There were dark clouds on the horizon in Russia for intellectuals in the summer and fall of 1921. In August of 1921 Aleksandr Blok died. More menacing was the arrest and ultimate execution of the poet, Nikolai Gumilev. This signaled an end to the “hands-off-policy” on intellectuals, and the fall of 1921 saw significant departures.

I have proposed elsewhere that “Russian Berlin” be dated from the fall of 1921 to October 1923 — neither the starting nor ending dates are arbitrary. The arrivals in Berlin of several Russian writers in the fall were noted in *The Voice of Russia (Голос России)*: Aleksei Remizov on September 27, 1921; Maksim Gorky September 29. On November 22nd the paper announced “The famous writer Andrei Bely arrived in Berlin” [2]. In November Aleksandr Drozdov’s journal, *Northern Lights (Сполоху)*, first appeared with poems by Sirin (Sirin–Vladimir Nabokov), and the Moscow Art Theater was performing. By late November 1922 the literary elite currently residing in Berlin included Andrei Bely, Ilya Ehrenburg, Aleksei Remizov, Lev Shestov, Aleksei Tolstoy, and a dozen other important, albeit today forgotten figures.

Several factors at the beginning of the 1920s, among them political, economic and historical-cultural, combined to make Berlin an appealing community for the Russian intelligentsia. First the political. Berlin had emerged from World War I somewhat poorer and wiser than before—but its cultural and architectural heritage were intact. In 1920 Berlin became a metropolis of four million inhabitants. In the early 1920s some 100,000 Russians lived here and another 300,000 were scattered around other parts of Germany. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 had brought an early cessation of hostilities between Russian and Germany. The Bolshevik regime desperately needed trading partners and the Weimar Republic still smarting from the burden of the Treaty of Versailles had signed an economic agreement in Berlin in May of 1921 that resulted in *de facto* recognition of Soviet Russia. By November 1921 Russia had permanent diplomatic representation in Berlin and on April 16, 1922 the Treaty of Rapallo between Germany (the Weimar Republic) and Bolshevist Russia extended diplomatic and economic relations as each renounced all territorial and financial claims against the other following World War I. The two governments agreed to normalize their diplomatic relations and to “co-operate in a spirit of mutual goodwill in meeting the economic needs of both countries.” For one of the first discussions of the Berlin emigration was by Hans von Rimscha as early as 1927 [3]. A modern day excellent overview is contained in Fritz Mierau’s, *Russen in Berlin* [4].

The economic conditions in Germany at the time also played a considerable role in attracting a critical mass of literary and cultural figures. Differences in the value of currencies resulted in a particularly low cost of living for those with access to the more stable currencies. Thus a writer or publisher who could sell some of his or her works in Paris, or London, or New York, could benefit from an advantageous exchange rate. For most of 1922 there was a real window of opportunity in Berlin. In that year Berlin would have forty Russian language publishing houses, three major daily Russian newspapers, and more than twenty Russian journals.

The emergence of the Russian press and printing industry in Berlin is a topic once well documented. As the Bolshevik authorities consolidated their political gains in 1918, they succeeded in stifling newspapers and journals unsympathetic to their cause and views in those areas where they had military control. The Civil War in Russia presented a complicated picture of temporary papers in pockets unoccupied by the Bolsheviks. At least as effective as the political and legal obstructions to printing were the material difficulties and shortages of newsprint, ink and paper which even when available were allocated to more mundane and pragmatic areas.

Within the borders of Bolshevik Russia precious little was printed. There were the publishing houses of Alkonost' and Grzhbin, but the figures for new book titles which appeared in 1920 were disappointing: Great Britain produced 11,026, America 8,329, compared with Germany that had 32,345, while Russia had a meager 742 [5]. Meanwhile the explosive growth of the numbers of Russians living abroad, including many of the intellectual elite, constituted fertile grounds for literally hundreds of publishing ventures. Figures vary on this account. One source claims that Berlin had fifty five Russian language periodicals in 1922 and identified 471 Russian language books published in the city in that year. While they flourished, Russian writers prospered. Aleksandr Jashchenko, the editor of the leading bibliographical journals of the Russian emigration summed up some of the reasons for Berlin's prominence:

By the beginning of 1922 the significance of Berlin in the field [of publishing] had been established. The freedom and tolerance of the German republic, the friendly and hospitable relationship of the German people (the only ones who had

been a true friend of Russians in the most difficult days), the assembly here, because of those reasons, of significant intellectual and entrepreneurial forces, the low cost of production, the skill and adaptability of German typography, a highly developed system of international trade, the liberalism of German legislation of the press — all these and many more conditions facilitated Berlin becoming in actuality the third (intellectual) capital of Russia. The laws of the economic competition . . . resulted slowly but surely in that almost all the Russian bookpublishers in countries other than Germany were forced to cease operations or transfer their bookpublishing to Germany [6].

The final factor, the historical-cultural one, need only be touched upon. Germany had long held attraction for Russians. Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Chekhov had frequented the spas and casinos of Baden Baden; many Russians had made frequent study trips abroad to German Universities of Heidelberg, Marburg, Berlin and other cities. Many Jewish families sent their sons abroad to get the higher education closed off to them in Tsarist Russia. The rich German cultural heritage found resonance in Russian intellectual families at the turn of the century. Andrei Bely, who himself would become a leading figure in Berlin in the 1920s recalls:

I considered my first real contact with culture to be those evenings of a distant past when my mother would play Beethoven's sonatas and Wagner's preludes.... My first touch of poetry was when my German governess would read aloud the verse of Uhland, Goethe and the tales of Anderson. ...Perhaps that is why there still lives in me a love of old Germany and of Germany itself, for the German music of Beethoven, Schuman, Wagner, for the art of Dürer, Wollgemut, Grünewald and Striegel, for the poetry of Goethe, the romantics, Nietzsche, for the philosophy of Kant, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Rikkert and again Nietzsche, for the mysticism of Eckhart, Boehme, and among the contemporaries Rudolf Steiner. Everything that I loved in the West was automatically connected for me with Germany [7].

#### Literature

The phenomenon of Russian Berlin was largely overshadowed by the emerging Russian émigré community in Paris until the war and thereafter in New York. Contemporary witnesses documented in Russian memoirs the people and times. Most of these were in emigration: Nina Berberova [8] who would go on to a Professorship at Princeton University, Aleksandr Bakhrakh [9] who remained in Paris, and Roman Gul' (Goul) [10] who would edit in New York *The New Journal* (*Новый журнал*). After the "Thaw" in the 1950s Ilya Ehrenburg [11] and Viktor Shklovskij helped to illuminate to a degree the period.

Western scholars began to touch the theme still largely taboo in the Soviet Union in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One of the major contributions was by Fritz Mierau mentioned above, his groundbreaking *Russen in Berlin* (1987) [4]. Robert Hughes and Lazar Fleishman published under the somewhat misleading title some of the holdings of Stanford's archival collection of A. Jascenko, one time editor of the Berlin bibliographical journal *Russkija kniga* (*The Russian Book*) [12]. The German interest was supported by the efforts of Walter Andreesen, Gottfried Kratz, culminating in a volume *Russische Autoren und Verlage in Berlin* [13]. Thomas Beyer, primarily an Andrei Bely scholar contributed several articles devoted to the Berlin Russian House of the Arts, Bely in Berlin, and later on Remizov and Bely in their Berlin years [14]. With the emergence of Gorbachev and *glasnost*, a new ability for Soviet scholars emerged, and soon with the fall of the Soviet Union, Soviet and German scholars showed a new interest. Karl Schlögel

organized a conference and then published several works [15]. In Russia a major conference on the emigration took place in Moscow in 1992 at the Library of Foreign Literature. Amory Burchard continued that work in Berlin [16, 17]. Of course, there was enormous interest in offering the works of Vladimir Nabokov and Nabokov studies to an eager audience. One of the few survivors of the Russian Berlin literary circles was Vera Lourie only re-merged from obscurity in the 1980s [18,19].

Curiously and sadly the Russian Berlin of 1921-1923 has receded to a footnote in the history of Russian literature. We have already alluded to some reasons why the centenary will not be celebrated in either Russia or Berlin.

#### Materials and methods. Results and discussion

Little remains of their physical presence. The Russian cemetery at Wittestrass (Русская православная церковь св. Равноапостольных царей Константина и Елены) guards peacefully the remains of the few hundred Russians who perished in the city after 1917, including the grave of V. D. Nabokov. Most of the houses are gone too—victims of the bombing of Berlin in 1945. Twenty percent of all the buildings were destroyed and another fifty percent severely damaged. The Cafe Landgraf, the Grand Casino Nollendorf and the Cafe Leon (actually the Cafe and Conditorei of Gustav Leon) where Ehrenburg, Remizov, Esenin, Pasternak, Majakovskij, Shklovskij, Cvetaeva, Khodasevich, Aleksei Tolstoi and Andrei Bely would come together are no longer to be found. The Prager Pension and Prager Diele are gone. Here at Ehrenburg's *Stammtisch* the literary elite would gather and in the words of Belyj "*pragerdil'stvovat*." A curious exception is the house at Viktoria Luise Platz 9 where the top floors were occupied by the widow Ella Crampe's Pension. V. Khodasevich lived here with Nina Berberova. So, too for a time, did Andrei Bely.

The very "best of times" in Russian Berlin were in 1922, and I would like to focus on two segments of that year, March/April and October/November, as pivotal in understanding the challenges to Russian intellectual life.

March 1922 was the apex of intellectual life of Russian Berlin. April 1922 represents a key turning point — the beginning of the end — for those blessed with hindsight. Russians of all political factions as well as Europeans could still join together in a common cause. The most compelling of these was the urge to help the starving in Russia, the Famine of 1921-1922 that called forth international relief efforts. The month that was rich with cultural and social events, balls, concerts, lectures, meetings, began optimistically for the Russian community, but it would end in tragedy and signal hard times to come.

On March 1, 1922 the price of the daily newspaper edited by the senior Nabokov, *Rul'* (*The Rudder*), was raised from 1 Mark to 1,50 Mark. According to the latest official count, the number of foreigners in Berlin had reached 220,000, with Russians constituting the largest group. On March 7 there is an announcement of the arrest of Socialist Revolutionaries in Moscow. Scores of them, the intellectual elite, would be expelled from Russia in the fall of 1922. "A Meeting to Aid the Starving" in March was chaired by Vladimir Nabokov senior. At the meeting Andrei Bely spoke of the responsibility of the Russian intelligentsia to put aside its opinions on the cause of the famine and simply come to a realization of the necessity to assist those who were starving.

This first fundraising event had barely passed when ads appeared for another event to be held on Sunday evening, March 19, a concert ball at the Brüdervereinshaus on Kurfürstenstraße for the aid of starving children in Russia. The artistic group Blue Bird (Синяя птица) was scheduled to perform along with appearances by Bely and Aleksei Remizov.

In Berlin Bely would assume the role of the leading literary and social figure, organizing and participating in several groups including the Russian House of the Arts in Berlin. He published twenty two major works in the short span of two years — and breathed new life into his own literary career.

Bely would be joined by Alexei Remizov, one of the most prolific writers of the Berlin period. Remizov was nearsighted, short, and impish in delightful, albeit for some, disturbing ways. He had formed his own Simian Chamber – the Great Free Order of the Apes or Planet of the Apes —into which he inducted members, held meetings, and celebrated their membership with handmade certificates that are highly valued today by collectors. Remizov too would publish scores of works in the brief two year window of opportunity in Berlin.

Perhaps no one was more cosmopolitan of the Russians than Ilya Ehrenburg born 1891 in Kiev. In 1908 Ehrenburg was arrested, released, went to Paris where he met Lenin and also made the acquaintance of Picasso and Marc Chagall. In World War I Ehrenburg worked as a war correspondent for Russian newspapers. Ehrenburg was one of the first Soviet intellectuals to be granted a passport to travel abroad first to Paris in March 1921. In October 1921, Ehrenburg moved to Berlin, his own *Stammtisch*—table at the local bar and grill—became THE gathering place for the literary elite living in or traveling through Berlin. Ehrenburg, forever the optimist, might have seemed to some an example of having your cake and eating it too—being able to look and write critically of the Bolshevik regime, without necessarily incurring its wrath. But Ehrenburg was not above controversy, and his name figures prominently in some of the literary scandals of the day.

Both Bely and Remizov were central figures at the most important event of March 1922 that brought together the German and Russian literary communities. As we have said starvation in Russia served as a common cause uniting various political factions in the emigre community. On Monday evening, March 20, the House of the Arts arranged for the appearance of Thomas Mann who spoke at a benefit performance for writers in Petrograd in the Logenhaus (Kleiststraße 10).

Mann spoke first on the theme of Goethe and Tolstoi after which Bely thanked the writer (in German) for his help. At the second half of his performance Mann read from his *Das Eisenbahnglück*. Bely's remarks that evening were eventually found and published in Russian translation, and then in the original German text. They are significant as testimony to one of the very few documented intersections between the Russian literary community and its German counterpart. Russian, i.e. the Russian language, was both the means of communication which fostered community, while at the same time the lack of Russian proficiency excluded most Westerners from entrance into that Russia Abroad. Bely stands as something of an exception, having published some things in German.

A few excerpts of those comments—now in my own English translation point to the significance of Mann's participation.

... on behalf of the Russian writers and Russian audience permit me to express our gratitude. We thank you for the enormous artistic pleasure that you have prepared for us, and even more that you answered our call, in these difficult times, as we stand helpless before the enormity of the misery that has overtaken our country, .... Seeing you with us today, after all the horrors of the war years, we can believe again that once more we can all relate to one another as people, regardless of one's nationality. Today you have come to us as a German writer, today a common cause had united us. May such instances of individual interactions, individual encounters between Germany and Russia repeat themselves more often, so that in the face of never ending human sorrow and never ending human joy, from one heart to another heart we will spin a yarn of true brotherly love and unity.

Just when the community had seemingly come together, united by the need of Russians in the motherland, the passing of an era could be seen. A tug of war was beginning for the minds and hearts of Russians, drawing some home to Russia, threatening the final break with those who remained in Europe. Events soon conspired to make Russia's writers focus on more important issues, life's choices and death. Political developments would soon force many to make a choice of being "with them" or "against them." The newspaper *Nakanune (On the Eve)*, sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause, seen by some as an instrument of the Russian government, began publishing in the final days of March.

The regular meeting of the House of the Arts scheduled for March 31 was dedicated to the memory of V. D. Nabokov who had been shot on March 28. This assassination, perhaps more than any other event, symbolized the new emerging intolerance in the Russian émigré community. Nabokov, a leading figure in the Kadet Party (Constitutional Democrats) was shot several times as he attempted to protect Pavel Miliukov, who had just finished the first half of his lecture. On March 30, a funeral service was held at the old Russian Embassy Church, which had continued operating at Unter den Linden 7 even after the fall of the Romanovs. On March 31 the body was transferred to the Orthodox Church attached to the cemetery in Tegel, and on the next day, April 1, Nabokov was buried.

The fall of 1922 signaled the end of the days for "peaceful co-existence" of political factions. Two events were a last chance to celebrate collectively: a celebration to honor the thirtieth anniversary of Maxim Gorky's literary debut with his the publication of his story "Makar Chudra." In November Andrei Bely and Aleksei Remizov would be at the Berlin gala to celebrate the sixtieth birthday of the German writer, Gerhardt Hauptmann [20]. Here is the second, after the meeting with Thomas Mann, significant intersection between German and Russian literary figures.

In the fall of 1922 more Russian intellectuals, this time expelled from their homeland would arrive, inflation was on the rise and the seeds of the dispersal again of the Russian artistic and intellectual community a year later in the fall of 1923 were already in place.

The scandal that broke apart Russian Berlin was an artistic one that spilled over onto the literary community. The extraordinary exhibit of Russian art at the Galerie van Diemen on Unten den Linden # 21 opened on October 15. It presented works by over 150 artists and 500 works. Among those displayed were Burliuk, Chagall, Kandinsky, Kustodiev, Malevich, Benoi, Wasiliev, Zetlin and Tatlin [21].

In fact this effort to please all, pleased very few indeed. While the exhibit ran from mid October to the end of December, the occasion that splintered Russian art and literature in Berlin occurred in the house of the Arts on Friday evening November 3. Andrei Bely who had just been elected president of the organization, a true mismatch if there ever was one, presided, or tried to over a lecture by Ivan Puni.

Puni criticized the “subjectless” art, which after a few original designs had produced only “three hundred thousand combinations out of a single circle and a pair of squares.” The artistic composition no longer justifies itself and so every subjectless artist wanted to be an engineer, or philosopher, or preacher, or organizer, or weaver, or midwife. Very nice. The replies of Lissitzky, Natan Altman, and Vladimir Mayakovsky came quickly. Viktor Shklovsky, famous later for this leading role in the Formalist School of Russian literary criticism, called some of Altman’s pictures ones that even a “*Schieber*” wouldn’t buy. Decorum broke down, the meeting broke up as many stormed out. A few days later one of the factions formed its own Russian Writers Club.

### **Conclusion**

Things would never be the same again. The valiant attempt to bridge the gaps within the Russian community and beyond the Russian community were doomed to failure. What is left of the period? For many Russian writers, Russian Berlin of 1922 was their golden year. By the end of 1923 the hyperinflation overtaking Germany and violence in the streets probably reminded many of the events in Russia of 1917. Many returned to Russia including Bely who would publish little in the years before his death in 1934. His works were long ignored. Gorky moved on to Italy, returning only years later, and then to what most consider a not very happy existence. Some moved to Prague or Paris, Alexei Remizov died largely ignored or forgotten except for an aging group of Russians who kept alive his memory. Pasternak as we know would write the novel *Doctor Zhivago*, for which he was awarded the Noble Prize in literature, but feared to leave his county to accept it. Ehrenburg dies in 1967—the ultimate survivor of them all. His own attempts to keep alive the memory of Russian literary figures were only partly successful in his lifetime. The uncensored version of his memoirs was published only in 1990. The lot of many writers was less than happy. Literary works of those who remained in the West and even of many who returned to Russia were suppressed or simply not reprinted. This condition prevailed well into the 1980s, and I am reminded of my age, for I remember clearly, when it was primarily Western scholars who could read and write and discuss Bely, Pasternak, Remizov, Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova, Nabokov and dozens of others.

Russian Berlin and much of its legacy disappeared. The newspapers, journals, books, letters and diaries did not survive Hitler’s rage or the war years. Nor except in Prague and perhaps the archives of the Russian secret service, whatever initials it was called by, was there an organized attempt to collect those materials. Sadly a similar phenomenon, “Russian Brooklyn” from the mid 1970s to late 1980s is in danger of a similar loss caused by oversight. Several hundred Russian writers, dozens of journals, Russian language newspapers, archives and documents are in danger of disappearing before our eyes. I invite the scholars among you, young and old, to examine and preserve that very rich heritage.

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