

ARTICLE

The ‘First Exhibition of Russian Art’ in Berlin: The Transnational Origins of Bolshevik Cultural Diplomacy, 1921–1922

Ewa Berard CNRS-ENS, UMR 8547 Transferts culturels, 45, rue d’Ulm, 75005 Paris, France
ewa.berard@ens.psl.eu

The emergence of a Soviet cultural diplomacy in the 1920s was hardly predictable. Bolsheviks’ propaganda for ‘world revolution’ reduced the image of Soviet Russia to one of Leninist-proletarian victory, while the rejection of diplomatic tradition and a distrust of artists and intellectuals precluded any commitment to cultural action abroad. This article explores how, when and why a Soviet cultural diplomacy developed. It focuses on two episodes related to the famine of 1921, including, based on new archival evidence, the First Exhibition of Russian Art in Berlin in October 1922. The exhibition’s spectacular success paved the way for Soviet cultural diplomacy that moved away from overtly communist propaganda in order to address Western avant-garde literary and artistic milieus.

In 1967, at the very moment when Khrushchev’s ‘thaw’ was about to freeze, Ivan Maisky, the Soviet ambassador to London in the 1930s, published the memoirs considered to be the first account of the Stalin-Litvinov-era diplomacy. Simultaneously, Maisky published a collection of essays entitled *Shaw and Others*, his reminiscences of friendships with English writers. Here he praised the pioneering role of the Soviet Union in establishing a ‘direct and genuine link between diplomacy and culture’. Conceived ‘half-consciously, half-intuitively’ by the founders of Soviet foreign policy, such a link, according to Maisky, became a distinctive feature of Soviet diplomacy that the ‘free world’ would only later imitate.¹ Soviet diplomats, he argued, initiated ‘new, people’s diplomacy’ using culture and economics as alternative tools to influence ‘public opinion’ abroad and to promote state-to-state negotiations. Maisky’s remarks deserve our attention. As historians have pointed out, the absence of diplomatic relations with the main world powers up to 1924 forced the Bolsheviks to contrive ‘para-diplomatic’ devices, involving ‘the calculated use of non-diplomatic personnel, agencies and situations for covertly diplomatic purposes’.² As Maisky made clear, the practice of cultural and economic diplomacy was not the result of circumstances alone but a deliberate decision by enlightened diplomats to meet goals otherwise too difficult to reach.

This article investigates the origins of Soviet cultural diplomacy as it emerged in the early 1920s, when the revolutionary state, diplomatically absent from the post-Versailles world, could not intervene directly and openly in Western countries. This incipient stage is all the more intricate because Leninism dismissed two of the fundamental tenets of any cultural diplomacy, namely the notions of public opinion and of national cultural heritage, and voiced a fundamental distrust of intelligentsia

¹ I.M. Majskij, *B. Sou i drugie: Vospominanija* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1967), 7–12. Quoted in A. V. Golubev, *Vzgliad na zemliu obetovannuiu: Iz istorii sovetskoi kulturnoi diplomatii 1920–1930 gg* (Moscow: IRI RAN, 2004), 5.

² T.J. Uldricks, *Diplomacy and Ideology: The Origins of Soviet Foreign Relations, 1917–1930* (London and Beverly Hills: SAGE Studies in 20th Century History, vol.9, 1979), 54–5; Jean-François Fayet, ‘En absence de relations diplomatiques et de puissance protectrice : la protection des intérêts soviétiques durant la période dite de transition’, *Relations internationales*, 3 (2010), 75–88.

defined as an ambiguous class formation. The Bolsheviks' modernising bend and faith in utilitarian rationality, combined with urgent needs of a ruined country, oriented the Soviet government's attention on technical rather than cultural exchanges with the West. From that perspective the very existence, let alone the worldwide success, of Soviet cultural diplomacy was hardly predictable.

This study throws light on how and why, then, so unlikely a thing as Soviet cultural diplomacy emerged. In particular, it reflects on these questions by focusing on the unexpected dynamics behind the First Exhibition of Russian Art in Berlin, which opened in October 1922 to great public acclaim. Officially organised to help the famine relief, it ended up publicising the vitality and freedom of aesthetic creation under the Soviet regime and thus legitimising, in the eyes of the German public, the rapprochement between both countries. The treaty of mutual recognition between Germany and the Soviet state signed at Rapallo in April 1922 placed the exhibition at the very heart of European political attention, while its emphasis on the artistic avant-garde located the event at the forefront of European cultural life. The Berlin exhibition presented to the European public about one thousand items starting with the nineteenth-century realist paintings. However, it was Russian avant-garde, pre- and post-revolutionary expressionism, suprematism, constructivism and 'arkhitectons' – encapsulated in Nathan Altman's poster for the exhibition and El Lissitzky's catalogue – that stirred Western audiences' attention.³ Tatlin, Malevich, Chagall and Rodchenko entered world culture. The unexpected success of the Berlin exhibition left an important legacy and proved a turning point in the Soviet cultural offensive toward Western societies and non-communist public opinion. It shook up Bolshevik dogmas and opened them to foreign practices of propaganda. Later developments, such as the creation of the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad (*Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoi svyazi s zagranicei*; VOKS) in 1925, Soviet participation in international exhibitions, cinema propaganda, subsidised émigré journals and so forth, sprang from this original momentum. It is therefore important to establish the exhibition's leading actors and their respective roles since it appears that the driving forces behind the exhibition were to be found not only in Moscow but also in Berlin.

Studies on the impact of Soviet cultural policy on Western intellectuals and culture makers have been numerous after the Second World War, but the 1920s have found comparatively little attention. Frederick, C. Barghoorn's book *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy*, which introduced the very concept of 'cultural diplomacy' in Soviet studies in 1960 does not tackle the early 1920s.⁴ Soviet scholars were very keen to study 'cultural international ties' but refrained, willingly or under censorship pressure, from establishing a 'direct and genuine link' between officially organised cultural exchanges and diplomacy.⁵ In post-soviet Russia, the first significant comprehensive study was written by A.V. Golubev from the Russian Academy of Sciences.⁶ As regards the early 1920s, Golubev pays great attention to the interaction between domestic and foreign cultural policy, particularly the State Political Administration's (*Gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*; GPU) repressive measures against the culture makers. He mentions the latter's *individual* attempts at international outreach despite the lack of state support and underlines the pivotal role of the VOKS. VOKS, the main Soviet cultural diplomacy tool after diplomatic relations had been established with the United Kingdom and France, is the subject of two thorough studies based on extensive

³ The catalogue listed 594 items but it was usual to put under one single entry several works. V.P. Lapshin, 'Pervaia vystavka russkogo iskusstva. Berlin 1922 god. Materialy k istorii sovetsko-germanskih hudozhestvennyh svyazei', *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie*, 1 (1982), 357; Helen Adkins, 'Erste Russische Kunstausstellung, Berlin 1922. Text und Katalog', in Michael Bollé and Eva Züchner, eds., *Stationen der Moderne. Die bedeutenden Kunstausstellungen des 20. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland* (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, 1989).

⁴ Frederick, C. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960).

⁵ V.P. Lapshin, *Pervaia vystavka* is one of the best samples. Excellent as it is, the article hardly mentions the Treaty of Rapallo and censors Müntzenberg's name altogether. See also, albeit for the later period, A.E. Ioffe, *Internatsional'nye, nauchnye i kul'turnye svyazi Sovetskogo Soiuza, 1928–1932* (Moskva: Nauka, 1969).

⁶ A.V. Golubev, *Vzgliad*.

archival research: Jean-François Fayet's *VOKS: le laboratoire helvétique. Histoire de la diplomatie culturelle soviétique durant l'entre-deux-guerres* and Michael David-Fox's *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941*.⁷ Concerning the period covered by the present study, both historians acknowledge the crucial impact of the 1921 famine on the Bolshevik project of world revolution and on the cultural offensive launched at non-communist, 'imperialist' public opinion abroad. David-Fox mentions, among other early propaganda ventures, the First Exhibition of Soviet Art of 1922 in Berlin (although its title was, characteristically, 'The First Exhibition of Russian Art') but he establishes no connection either with the famine relief campaign or with the diplomatic negotiations going on with the Reich government.

The article explores unpublished Russian and German archival material to shed new light on the First Exhibition of Russian Art. In the Moscow archives I have explored, among others, the Workers' International Hunger Relief (*Mezhrabpomgol*) file 'Berlin Exhibition', the Commissar of Foreign Affairs Georgy Chicherin's and his Secretariat documents. In Berlin, the files of the Russian Section of Foreign Office, and in particular its cultural referee's correspondence, were of special interest. These archival documents expose incoherent Soviet bureaucratic organisation and the opposition of some leading Bolsheviks to the idea of publicising Soviet Russia through art. It re-examines Anatoly Lunacharsky's, People's Commissar of Enlightenment, claim to be the sole *spiritus movens* of the event, a claim subsequently repeated by the exhibition historiography. It stresses, on the contrary, the role played by the German Foreign Office (*Auswärtiges Amt*) and by the German Comintern man Willi Münzenberg. In short, this article uncovers the transnational origins of Soviet cultural diplomacy and places them in a European cultural and political context. Such an approach questions the claim of David-Fox's fundamental study to the effect that the Bolsheviks' experience in 'agitation and propaganda' and their 'international aspirations' made them embrace cultural diplomacy practice at once while brushing off 'tutelage from the bourgeoisie' in this realm.⁸

Quite the opposite, the article demonstrates that the 1921–2 cultural offensive, alien to Leninist ideology and practice, had been adopted under the pressure of circumstances, following German impetus and German examples, and faced protest and defiance among Bolsheviks. The article focuses on foreign policy objectives assigned to the culture ventures and culture makers rather than on ideological issues. Russia's longstanding debates regarding its European vs. 'Sonderweg' identity and its claims of messianic universality that are brought forward in important studies by Iver B. Neumann and Martin Malia shall be mentioned only in so far as these concepts were introduced by Soviet foreign policy actors.⁹

The article opens with an appraisal of the specific condition of early Bolshevik diplomacy – split as it was between the revolutionary call of the Communist International (Comintern) and a state conventional foreign policy – and the consequences of this duality for the evolution of the specific diplomatic culture versus revolutionary class propaganda.

⁷ Jean-François Fayet, *VOKS le laboratoire helvétique. Histoire de la diplomatie culturelle soviétique durant l'entre-deux-guerres* (Chêne-Bourg: Georg éd., 2014); Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also N.V. Kiseleva, *Iz istorii bor'by sovetskoï obshchestvennosti za proryv kul'turnoi blokady SSSR. VOKS: seredina 20-x nachalo 30-x godov* (Rostov na Donu: Izdatel'stvo Rostovskogo Universiteta, 1991).

⁸ David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 15.

⁹ Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, Ma, London: Harvard University Press, 1999); Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011). Michel Niqueux, *L'Occident vu de Russie. Anthologie de la pensée russe, de Karamzine à Poutine* (Paris: Institut d'Etudes slaves, 2016).

The Duality of Soviet Foreign Policy

Before we look more closely at the origins of Soviet cultural diplomacy, it is relevant to consider the state of Bolshevik diplomacy and its relations with regards to the Western world.¹⁰ Cultural diplomacy is frequently defined as the strategic use of national culture in order to influence foreign public opinion in favour of a country's international objectives.¹¹ Yet neither of this definition's core elements – foreign public opinion or national culture – was of any relevance to Marxist-Leninist ideology. Mobilising cultural factors in foreign policy requires two preliminary decisions: choosing elements of national cultural capital worth exporting and finding actors that can be entrusted with such a mission. In Lenin's eyes, Russian cultural heritage was a product of the Old Regime, and thus condemned to disappear. What should replace it was not clear because a genuine proletarian/revolutionary/Soviet culture had not yet emerged. Moreover, Russia's intelligentsia and artists, lacking proper class interests and political steadiness, could not be relied upon. As for the notion of 'public opinion', it had no more place in the Marxist theory of class consciousness than in the Leninist construction of the vanguard party. Among twenty-one conditions of Comintern membership put down by Lenin, the principles governing communist press and propaganda were very clear: the toiling and exploited masses were its target while the idea of 'public opinion' referred to the pitiful state of mind of capitalist societies manipulated by their greedy governments, bogus parliaments and bourgeois press.¹² As a consequence, cultural diplomacy as a concept was initially alien to Soviet ideology.

Still, the emergence of Soviet cultural diplomacy was hampered not only by this basic ideological incompatibility but also by what scholars have termed the 'duality' of Soviet foreign policy. On 8 November 1918, the day Germans and Allies met to settle the Armistice, the Sixth All-Russian Congress of Soviets addressed five Entente governments proposing 'in front of the entire world' to join the peace negotiations. The Soviet offer was rejected due to the opposition of the exiled Russian government and from then on, the Bolsheviks' presence within the international community was defined by two political options. The first option was to foment world proletarian revolution, using it as a shield to protect the unique proletarian state. This was the position outlined by the Communist International. Founded in March 1919, the Comintern became an unconventional but powerful instrument of Soviet foreign policy. The second option was for the Soviet state to temporarily accept the existence of the imperialist world and to engage in conventional diplomatic relations.

The theoretical background for both options was provided by Lenin's 1916 treatise *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. For Lenin, the 'objective' nature of the imperialist race for world natural resources and new markets fuelled an 'objective' antagonism between imperialist countries and ultimately led to military conflicts. Such had been the origin of the Great War and such was, by extension, the guiding principle of the 'predatory' 1919 treaty of Versailles. For the Soviets, the economic rivalry between imperialist powers – a rivalry only accelerated by the post-war impoverishment of European populations – turned out to be a distinct asset. 'As long as we haven't conquered the entire world . . . we have to keep to the rule of using the contradictions and oppositions among the imperialists', wrote Lenin in 1920.¹³ Rather than work towards official recognition, Soviet representatives abroad were instructed to focus on the trade agreements that would secure *de facto* recognition and provide immunity status to Soviet missions. According to Georgy Chicherin, People's Commissar of

¹⁰ For the evident yet rarely articulated difference with Soviet diplomacy towards Eastern world see G.V. Chicherin's remark below and Adam B. Ulam, *Expansion & Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy 1917–67* (New York and Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 121.

¹¹ This definition follows the one given by David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 14.

¹² *Manifestes, thèses, et résolutions des quatre premiers congrès mondiaux de l'Internationale communiste, 1919–1923* (Paris: François Maspero, 1975), 42–8.

¹³ V.I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 42, 5th ed., (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politiceskoj literatury, 1970), 56, 26 Nov. 1920.

Foreign Affairs since March 1918, 'the idea to appeal to the Entente in the name of economic advantages was one of the most outstanding in Lenin's foreign policy.'¹⁴

This two-pronged strategy, oscillating between world revolution and conventional diplomacy, was particularly notable with regard to post-war Germany, a country that had long held a special place in Bolshevik plans. The First Communist International Congress had adopted German as its official language and had placed Berlin at the centre of world revolutionary expectations. Although the Spartacus upheaval in Berlin, fomented with Bolshevik assistance, was crushed in early 1919, the Comintern managed to set up, on the top floor of the ex-Romanov embassy, its secret Westeuropäisches Büro. There, Viktor Kopp, Soviet plenipotentiary envoy for prisoner of war affairs, and Karl Radek, recognised expert on German matters in the Politburo and in the Comintern executive, were busy corrupting the press, smuggling out Russian gold and subsidising communist organisations.¹⁵ The Second World Congress of the Comintern (19 July–7 August 1920) proclaimed Soviet Russia the 'first proletarian power' and emphasised that 'together with Soviet Germany' it would be 'stronger than all capitalist countries put together'.¹⁶ But alongside these calls for radical ideological expansion, similar arguments were used in official interstate negotiations, as well. In December 1920 Lenin put out feelers as to the resumption of formal relations with the social-democratic Weimar Republic. As he observed: 'this country, bound by the Versailles treaty, finds itself in conditions which do not allow it to exist. And in this position, Germany is naturally pushed into alliance with Russia.'¹⁷

Public Opinion and Diplomatic Culture

E.H. Carr, the famous British historian of international relations and author of a fourteen-volume history of the Soviet Union (1950–78), observed this 'duality' of Soviet foreign policy with bewilderment, noting that the Bolsheviks waged the struggle 'simultaneously on two planes – the revolutionary plane and the plane of state action – without any sense of incompatibility between them'.¹⁸ This apparent incoherence disappears when we realise that *all* Soviet foreign policy actors – Commissars, trade representatives, Comintern agents, Bolsheviks and ex-Mensheviks alike – had years of underground activity behind them. Forged documents, fake identities, secret money dealings, weapon smuggling and illegal border crossings had shaped their mentality and conduct. None of them, except for Chicherin, had any notion of the diplomatic profession. In the 1920s underground life was over, but the Third International's rules of subversion and denunciation and the 'iron discipline' of its clandestine structures continued to promote this modus operandi. Historians have noticed that the bulk of the Soviet foreign policy apparatus came from the pool of radical emigrants exiled after the 1905 revolution. Granted, they learned foreign languages, acquired European manners and gained knowledge of European politics.¹⁹ But they were also alienated and learned to disregard the law and civil duties. When Alexandra Kollontai was named Soviet ambassador to Oslo in 1922, she was instructed by Chicherin to study the psychology of the country by reading literature and 'speaking with its citizens (*obyvateli*)'. In practice, however, the Commissar prevented her from accepting Norwegian students' invitation to speak about 'the New Russia', arousing her perplexity: 'Here I am, idle. . . . We are isolated, standing aloof. As if we were emigrants.'²⁰ Here, Kollontai emphasises a prevalent feature of

¹⁴ *Izvestija*, 30 Jan. 1924, quoted in E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1923* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), vol. 3, 111.

¹⁵ V.I. Chernoperov, *Diplomaticheskaja deiatel'nost' V.L. Koppa v Germanii 1918–1921gg* (Ivanovo: Ivanovskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 2006), 383–402; Babette Gross, *Willi Münzenberg. Eine politische Biografie* (Leipzig: Forum Verlag, 1991), 115–24; Niels Eric Rosenfeldt, *The 'Special' World: Stalin's Power Apparatus and the Soviet System's Secret Structures of Communication* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2009).

¹⁶ *Manifestes, thèses, et résolutions*, 77.

¹⁷ Lenin, PSS, 105, 21 Dec. 1920.

¹⁸ Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, 126.

¹⁹ Uldricks, *Diplomacy*, 107–8.

²⁰ A. M. Kollontai, *Diplomaticheskie dnevniki. 1922–1940*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Academia, 2001), vol. 1, 68; Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Bolshevik diplomatic culture: its sect-like tendency to isolation. Talking to bourgeois citizens, establishing contacts, smiling and conversing was not part of communist conduct, a fact that obviously could not stimulate the emergence of cultural diplomacy.

It was not until after the spectacular success of the Genoa conference in April 1922 that Chicherin – who was proud of mastering these skills – made conversation habits a standard feature of Soviet diplomats' culture.²¹ And it was not until the summer of 1924, when the hopes of European revolution were dashed but substantial progress had been made in building the Soviet state, that the Commissar formalised his recommendations to diplomats. In his 'Instruction for the Plenipotentiary Envoys of the USSR Abroad', he laid down the ground rules for those with assignments to the West (specifying that 'the tasks and the conditions of Soviet diplomacy in the Orient were quite different'):

The first and obvious principle of the relationships between our government and foreign ones is the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. . . . The tasks incumbent upon our Plenipotentiary envoys comprise professional matters, necessary contacts with various elements, mutual information, influencing various elements except for participating in worldly frivolities and rituals. The task of establishing contacts must be understood in a very large sense, taking into account scientific, technical, commercial-industrial and so forth circles. In any case, sitting enclosed in one's own shell, afraid of the least contact with the surrounding world, cannot be considered as the principle of behaviour of our Plenipotentiary envoys.²²

It was only once contacts with non-communist milieus had been officially approved, that is, when official diplomacy recognised the significance of foreign public opinion, that cultural action could come to the fore. It was only at this point that Olga Kameneva, head of the Committee on Foreign Aid, managed to establish the aforementioned All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad, a step that many scholars consider the beginning of 'official' Soviet cultural diplomacy. Acknowledging the unlikely nature of Soviet cultural diplomacy leaves us wondering just how the celebrated Exhibition of Russian Art in Berlin came into being? Who organised it and how did they overcome initial inertia with regard to cultural diplomacy?

The 'First Exhibition of Russian Art' in Berlin: People's Commissar of Enlightenment, Comintern and German Foreign Office

Tracing back initial attempts to establish cultural links with the West, historians make a special case for the First Exhibition of Russian Art opened in Berlin in October 1922.²³ In the atmosphere of the post-war creative revival, Western countries welcomed any news coming from the revolutionary country. Hosted by the Van Diemen gallery on Unter den Linden, the show comprised the old-regime realists, the 'decadent' Diaghilev's World of Art up to the Proletcult and the most audacious experiments of suprematists and constructivists. Unexpectedly for the Bolsheviks, the Russian avant-garde stirred up a tremendous applause, crediting the Bolsheviks with an extraordinarily modern open-mindedness.

Looking for the origins of this celebrated art exhibit, one clearly needs to acknowledge the impact of the Russian famine of 1921. In fact, Bolsheviks' ideological dogmas did not stand the test of the famine that afflicted the Volga region in spring and summer 1921. Thirty-five million starving people, plagued by typhus and surviving by cannibalism, moved westward, menacing central Russia; it was a civilisational collapse. The famine prompted not only the New Economic Policy, announced in April of 1921,

²¹ See Markus Mösßlang and Torsten Riotte, eds., *The Diplomats' World: A Cultural History of Diplomacy, 1815–1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²² Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv social'no-politicheskoi istorii, RGASPI), f.159, op. 2, d. 4, ll. 40–6. 'Instrukciia Polpredam SSSR zagranicei', 14 July 1924.

²³ Peter Nisbet, 'Some Facts of the Organizational History of the van Diemen Exhibition', *The 1st Russian Show: A Commemoration of the van Diemen Exhibition Berlin 1922*, Exhibition catalogue (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1983); Matthew Drutt, ed., *In Search of 0,10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting* (Basel: Fondation Beyeler, 2015), 13.

but also first measures to reach an international public, providing some leeway for ideological outsiders and civic leaders (like world famous writer Maxim Gorky or the head of the Orthodox Church Patriarch Tikhon) to become involved.²⁴ While civil society interference in foreign policy was cut short as soon as international relief was secured, the international famine appeals encouraged yet another project, the First Exhibition of Russian Art. And, yet, the span of time that passed between the initial conception of the exhibition in early 1921 and its final realisation in October 1922, six months after the Rapallo treaty, suggests the intricacy of the project. In the absence of conventional official channels how did Germans and Soviets manage to arrange it at all? Was this art project intended to facilitate the diplomatic rapprochement? And, above all, who were its main initiators and organisers?

Some historians credit the enterprise to the Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky,²⁵ others to Willi Münzenberg, chairman of the Workers' Relief for Russia, a humanitarian organisation emanating from the Comintern;²⁶ others do not tackle the question at all. What's at stake, however, is the origin of Bolshevik cultural diplomacy.

The exhibition catalogue, edited by the Van Diemen gallery, clearly indicates that the show had been jointly organised by the 'Russian People's Commissariat for Science and Art' (the name given to the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) and the 'Foreign Committee for Hunger Relief for Russia (*Auslandskomitee für die Hungernden in Russland*) to contribute to the relief campaign for the starving Russian population.²⁷ However, as the exhibition drew triumphantly to its end, Lunacharsky coined his own version of events. On 2 December 1922, *Izvestia*, the second national newspaper after *Pravda*, published his article hailing the political and diplomatic success of the venture organised 'officially' by the 'People's Commissariat of Enlightenment of RSFSR'.²⁸ The German comrades' input was not mentioned whatsoever: the initial binational authorship of the exhibit was rubbed out. Strikingly, the second part of Lunacharsky's paper provided a full-fledged apology for having let the show become contaminated by the 'left-bourgeois art of the Parisian bohemia' and 'leftist miasma' so that the German public wondered about the survival of 'realistic forms of art' in Russian art. This vehemently anti-modernist statement seems difficult to reconcile with the exhibition's legend as an icon of a Soviet avant-garde cultural policy. That such a censured version should be established at the very moment when the Soviet avant-garde was conquering the world (the exhibit was invited to travel to Paris, Amsterdam, London, New York and Prague) raises more questions as to the original project and its goals, which will be taken up in the following section.

March–November 1921: Why did Berlin Eventually Pick up the Project?

The idea of Russian artists exhibiting abroad was advanced as early as 1919 by artists themselves: by those of the ancient Diaghilev's World of Art and by the avant-garde artists from the Section of Visual Arts IZO of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, who called for an international congress

²⁴ V.G. Makarov, V.S. Hristoforov. 'K istorii Vserossiiskogo Komiteta pomoshchi golodaiushchim', *Nova i noveishaia istoriia*, 2006, n°3, available at <http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/JOURNAL/NEWHIST/POMGOL.HTM>; Irina Kondakova, "'Stol' uspeshnoe vtrianie ochkov vsemu svetu". Neizvestnye dokumenty o Vserossiiskom komitete pomoshchi golodaiushchim', *Istochnik*, 3 (1995), 55–7.

²⁵ Lapshin, *Pervaia vystavka*; Peter Nisbet, *Some Facts*; Matthew Drutt, *In Search of 0,10*.

²⁶ I.N. Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art: In the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990). Other historians mention the exhibition as a major event of cultural diplomacy but pass over the issue of its origin: David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 34; Bernd Finkeldey, 'Im Zeichen des Quadrates. Konstruktivisten in Berlin', in Irina Antonova, Jörn Merkert, eds., *Москва-Berlin/Берлин-Moskau, 1900–1950* (München: Prestel, 1995), 157–62.

²⁷ Nathan Altman, Poster for the First Russian Exhibition, *The 1st Russian Show*, 70; State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federacii, GARF) f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096 'Mezhrabpomgol (Vystavka v Berline)', r. 5, l. 235 ob.

²⁸ A.V. Lunacharskii, 'Russkaia vystavka v Berline', *Izvestiia VCIK*. 2 Dec 1922, 273. Reprint: A.V. Lunacharskii, *Iskusstvo i revoliuciia*. (Moscow: Novaia Moskva, 1924), *Ob izobrazitel'nom iskusstve* (Moscow: Sovetskii hudozhnik, 1967) vol. 2. Lunacharsky was supposed to write an introductory essay for the catalogue of the exhibition but he did not and was replaced by D. Sterenberg.

dedicated to establishing ‘a world-wide utopia’.²⁹ Both suffered from material hardship and draconian passport rules. When in spring 1921 Vassili Kandinsky, IZO member, approached Karl Radek, the Comintern executive member and the Politburo man for Germany, with a proposition to organise an exhibition in Berlin, it was first and foremost to provide his hungry fellow painters with a source of income.³⁰ Indeed, the rapid centralisation of all cultural activities under the Party’s umbrella and strict passport rules precluded any independent cultural project of international outreach.

On 31 March 1921 Kopp, Soviet plenipotentiary envoy for prisoner of war affairs in Berlin, presented the German Foreign Office with the Commissariat of Enlightenment project to organise, in six German towns, an exhibition of Russian art from 1914–21, with special emphasis on the Soviet years, altogether 250 items.³¹ However, as Germany had been swept by communist uprisings, fomented with the help of the Comintern, just a fortnight before, the Foreign Office rejected the proposition as ‘pre-mature’. Kandinsky, unhappy with the Comintern political hijacking of his art project, took advantage of the Bauhaus invitation and left for Germany. Eight months later, however, the exhibition project came back on the agenda, this time channelled directly by Lunacharsky, and at this moment, the German Foreign Office stepped up as a full partner of the venture.³² On 9 November 1921 the IV Russian Section (*Russisches Referat*) of the German Foreign Office received a note from its representative in Moscow on Lunacharsky’s proposition to organise an exhibition of Russian art. The note was transmitted to the IX Department charged with culture (*Kulturabteilung*), where the head of the Art section, the *Kunstreferent* Johannes Sievers, approved of the project with two conditions: the exhibition must not carry any political propaganda and the Russian material must undergo an evaluation by a German jury.³³

What had happened? Why had the Reich authorities suddenly changed their minds? The rapidly moving political scene might provide an answer. Since the summer of 1921 Germany and Soviet Russia had engaged in important economic negotiations. Germany needed to break off the Versailles ‘dictate’ that hindered its economic and military recovery while Russia looked for foreign investments free of the Entente claims on tsarist debts and the restitution of nationalised assets. The German–Soviet negotiations focused on reconstructing Petrograd’s port facilities by a German consortium and on relocating to Russia weaponry production for the German army.³⁴ During the summer Berlin also declared its willingness to help ‘starving Russia’, a generous but highly political offer that brought about endless conflicts, which Germany was interested to mollify. Suffice it to say that the German government, determined not to provoke suspicion of the Entente countries, required that the relief campaign be handled uniquely by the German Red Cross and that contacts with Russia be established exclusively through the Foreign Representatives of the Russian Famine Relief Committee ‘Pomgol’, conveniently created by Moscow in Berlin under the lead of the new Soviet envoy Nikolay Krestinsky. Willi Münzenberg, in charge of the Foreign Committee for Hunger Relief for Russia, was also involved.³⁵

²⁹ Vasilii Kandinskii, ‘O velikoi utopii’, *Biulleten’ hudozhestvennoi sekcii Narodnogo Kommissariata po prosveshcheniu*, 3 (1920), 2–4.

³⁰ Aleksandr Benua, *Dnevnik 1918–1924* (Moscow: Zaharov, 2010), 233–7.

³¹ L.S. Gaponenko et al. eds., *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki* (Moscow: Ministerstvo Inostrannyh del SSSR, 1959), 31 Mar. 1921, vol. 4, 39–40.

³² Ingmar Sütterlin, *Die ‘Russische Abteilung’ des Auswärtigen Amtes in der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 1994), 14–5, 72–5.

³³ German Foreign Office Archive (*Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes*; PA AA), R 94534. Ausstellungswesen im allgemeinen. B.1. 04.1921-01.1933. This note is mentioned in Peter Nisbet, *The 1st Russian Show*, 69, and quoted in Adkins, *Erste Russische*, 186. On the *Kunstreferat* and its leader Johannes Sievers, see Carolin Schober, *Das Auswärtige Amt und die Kunst in der Weimarer Republik. Kunst- und Kunstgewerbeausstellungen als Mittel deutsche auswärtiger Kulturpolitik in Frankreich, Italien und Grossbritannien* (Frankfurt am Main, 2004), 24–35. The author does not mention Sievers’ Russian connection.

³⁴ Renata Bournazel, *Rapallo : naissance d’un mythe. La politique de la peur dans la France du Bloc national* (Paris: Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques/ Armand Colin, 1974), 20–4; Horst G. Linke, *Deutsch-sowjetische Beziehungen bis Rapallo* (Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1970), 140–2.

³⁵ V.I. Chernopero, *Diplomaticskaia*, 400–3.

In this atmosphere, on 23 November Adolf Georg Otto (Ago) von Maltzan, head of the *Russisches Referat*, known for his advocacy of *rapprochement* with the Bolsheviks, approved of the ‘exhibition of Russian art and crafts’ for ‘foreign policy reasons’. Nevertheless, he added two new conditions, namely that all towns in which the exhibition was to be shown be indicated in advance, and that ‘the event should *not* be officially organised by the Soviet Republic. However, if necessary, one should not hesitate to indicate an art section of the local Soviet representation as an organiser.³⁶

The latter was already in place in the person of Willi Münzenberg, a German communist who had been appointed head of the Berlin office for Hunger Relief for Russia in 1921 and now took charge of the exhibition. Born into a poor family of a violent tavern keeper father, Münzenberg (1889–1940) got to know Russian revolutionaries in a émigré colony in Zurich in the 1910s.³⁷ Disappointed by German social democracy’s capitulation to military patriotism in 1914, he embraced the Zimmerwald anti-war left and became ‘one of Lenin’s earliest non-Russian followers’.³⁸ Chairman of the Communist Youth International in the Weimar Republic, he remained close to the Bolshevik leader: ‘Lenin was probably the only person who recognised the true genius in this young and restless man’.³⁹ Restless he was and indeed one could compare him to Herbert Hoover of the American Relief Administration (ARA). Both men had boundless energy, excellent organisational skills and a genuine understanding of the international dimension of their actions. Immediately after being charged by Zinoviev with organising international relief for the starving Russian population, Münzenberg founded an art annexe in Berlin, the German Artist Relief for Russia (*Deutsche Künstlerhilfe für die Hungernden in Russland*), with Erwin Piscator, Otto Nagel, Käthe Kollwitz, John Heartfield and George Grosz.⁴⁰ Münzenberg’s initiative kept up with the times but his *coup de génie* was to enhance the publicity of proletarian Russia by real images. His monthly *Soviet Russia in Pictures* (*Sowjetrusland im Bild*), the ‘first communist pictorial newspaper’, was launched on 6 November 1921. While drawing his inspiration from Bolshevik pictorial propaganda for the illiterate masses Münzenberg adapted it for modern means of communication and a more sophisticated non-communist public. This was the man whom the German Foreign Office acknowledged as an official organiser of the Berlin exhibit of Russian art and crafts.

Thus on 26 November, Münzenberg, visiting Moscow, left a note for Lenin:

I take the liberty of bringing once more to your attention the high political and moral value – quite independent from the material benefit for our relief action – that the exhibition, in the framework I have exposed to you, shall bring about to the West. . . . Please, please, see to it that I obtain a response on this and other questions before I leave Moscow.⁴¹

Apparently Sievers’ and von Maltzan’s endorsement emboldened Münzenberg to insist on the ‘political and moral’ benefits of the Soviet venture. But we know neither how faithfully von Maltzan’s instructions had been transmitted to Moscow nor what was the particular ‘framework’ Münzenberg had in mind for which he so urgently needed Lenin’s approval. What is clear, however, is that a major part of the initiative at this point rested with Münzenberg.

³⁶ PA AA, R 94534.

³⁷ Sean McMeekin, *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow’s Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003).

³⁸ Helmut Gruber, ‘Willi Münzenberg’s German Communist Propaganda Empire 1921–1933’, *Journal of Modern History*, 38, 3 (1966), 281.

³⁹ Gross, *Münzenberg*, 128.

⁴⁰ Kasper Braskèn, *The International Workers’ Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity: Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 42. The IAH membership also included a great number of German and European intellectuals and artists: Klara Zetkin, Albert Einstein, Arthur Holitscher, Leonhard Frank, Anatole France, Henri Barbusse, George Bernard Shaw, Martin Andersen-Nexö, Henriette Roland-Holst and others.

⁴¹ *Briefe Deutscher an Lenin, 1917–1923*; Ruth Smoljarowa und Peter Schmalfuss, eds., *Vertreter der Deutschen Arbeiterbewegung im Briefwechsel mit Lenin* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1990), 324.

Moscow's Project: Soviet Russia in Schemes and Diagrams

Let us now turn to the Soviet archives. The organisation of the Berlin venture was monitored in Moscow by the Council of People's Commissars, Sovnarkom, whose secretary, N.P. Gorbunov, also took on Lenin's personal secretariat. The Sovnarkom file covers the period from November 1921 up to 30 March 1922, when the Council cancelled the event.⁴² This file does not cover the following months, up to 15 October. Incomplete as they are, these archival documents reveal that there were not *one* but *two* – and very different – exhibition projects. They show that Lenin's personal control did not result in imposing his own vision but rather sparked internal battles between his lieutenants. They illustrate the Bolsheviks' apprehension of modern art and their 'cult of utilitarian rationality, quantomania and the machine age'.⁴³ The incoherent drama these documents narrate vividly demonstrates the gap between two conceptions of international propaganda and underline the Western impact on the establishment of Soviet cultural diplomacy.

On 28 November, with Lenin's endorsement, Nikolay Gorbunov drafted 'proposals to be presented to Münzenberg' which included to organise, in Berlin, a 'Russia' exhibition ('posters, paintings, films, schemes, diagrams related to the industry, agriculture, workers, child care etc., models, illustrations, newspapers').⁴⁴ What Gorbunov's 'proposals' amounted to, however, was not an art venture but a display of Soviet achievements intent on facilitating economic cooperation. Lunacharsky's name vanished and Willi Münzenberg appeared as the unique common denominator to the German and Soviet agenda. The four conditions put forward by the Berlin Foreign Office were never mentioned in the Soviet correspondence.

On 30 November 1921 the Council of People's Commissars voted the 70 million rouble budget presented by the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs for an 'exhibition in Berlin'.⁴⁵ A certain David Marianov was appointed to collect the exhibition items. All we know about Marianov is that he had been previously in charge of two Moscow exhibitions on behalf of the Supreme Soviet of National Economy (*Vysshii sovet narodnogo khoziaistva*; VSNKh). He was no longer a member of the Bolshevik party but the letters he sent to Gorbunov were written on the Communist International letterhead.⁴⁶ Here is how he crafted his assignment in December 30 letter to Gorbunov:

The items I took [to Berlin] are neither artefacts nor industrial objects but material illustrating the organisational aspects of economic and political issues. Assuming that the All-German capitalist exhibition wouldn't look further than its own stall, I thought that the Russian pavilion 'Soviet Russia' should be a battle slogan illustrating struggle and labour on absolutely new foundations. My task was to give it a propagandistic turn.⁴⁷

For months now the Politburo had pondered upon various proposals of common ventures of German and Soviet 'cooperative movements'.⁴⁸ It was not surprising, therefore, that Marianov's

⁴² GARF f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096 'Mezhrabpomgol (Vystavka v Berline)'.
⁴³ Michael David-Fox, 'Bolshevik Millenarianism as Academic Blockbuster', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 52 (2018), 80.
⁴⁴ GARF f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096, p. 5, ll. 186.
⁴⁵ GARF f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096, p. 5, l. 184.
⁴⁶ See Gabo's testimony to Marianov's working for the Cheka in Naum Gabo, 'The 1922 Soviet Exhibition', *Studio International*, 182, 938, (1971), 171. Quoted in Christina Lodder, 'Naum Gabo as a Soviet Émigré in Berlin', *Tate Papers*, 14 (2010). <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/14/naum-gabo-as-a-soviet-emigre-in-berlin>. For El Lissitzky's links with the Cheka see Christina Lodder, 'El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism', Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed, eds., *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Getty Research Institute: Los Angeles, 2003). I'm grateful to Prof. Leonid Heller for this reference.
⁴⁷ GARF f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096, p. 3–2, ll. 144–144 ob.
⁴⁸ Karl Schögel, *Berlin – Ostbahnhof Europas: Russen und Deutsche in ihrem Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Siedler, 1998); I. M. Trus, *Mezhdunarodnaja dejatel'nost' Lenina: mirnoe sosuschestvovanie, 1921–1924*. <http://leninism.su/books/4352-mezhdunarodnaya-deyatelnost-v-i-lenina-mirnoe-sosuschestvovanie>- 15 Apr., 2 July, 12 Aug 1921 and al.; Elena Osokina, *Nebesnaia golubizna angel'skikh odezhd: sud'ba proizvedenii drevnerusskoi zhivopisi, 1920–1930-e gody* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018).

project of the ‘Soviet Russia’ pavilion focused on the Cooperative Union (*Tsentrosoiuz*), the main actor of the New Economic Policy. Marianov’s letter was completed by the twenty-odd page list of items selected by the Moscow Permanent Didactic Industrial Exhibition. His idea was to open the pavilion with the portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and the presentation of economic and ideological principles of the cooperative movement ‘in the form of scrolls’.⁴⁹ That was to be followed by showcases with the Sovnarkom decrees, Kamenev’s and Krasin’s discourses ‘in the form of opened books’. Next to Tsentrosoiuz Hall there were other showcases devoted to various People’s Commissariats. The section on nutrition and famines got a ‘nice poster: “Help Starving People!”’ and several diagrams such as: ‘1913–1921 Wheat Production’, ‘Geography of Famine from a Historical Approach’, ‘Wheat Price Curve’ and so forth. The Commissariat of Enlightenment section would be decorated with diagrams and statistics, too, but also included books, scale models of theatre sets and photographs of the Proletkult studios. Whatever Marianov’s personal gifts, one is struck by the utter triviality of his ‘propaganda turn’ and by his ignorance of Western public expectations.

As Moscow had been transforming the project of an art and crafts exhibition into a display of Soviet economic and social achievements, Münzenberg put forward to Lenin a new argument of quite a different bearing. On 22 December 1921 he wrote from Berlin:

I’d like to let you know that émigré circles are engaged – through the creation of numerous variétés and cabarets, through the theatre on the Königgrätzer Strasse, through artistic and musical events – in developing considerable activity. If correctly organised, a Russian exhibition, in the form that I’ve presented to you, can act as a counterbalance.⁵⁰

Münzenberg’s intuition concerning the emigrants’ cultural role was extraordinary indeed. In the wake of the Russo–Polish war, a patriotic mood seized the ‘white’ emigration, and the New Economic Policy was greeted as evidence of the ‘transfiguration’ of the Soviet regime. Eurasian and Change of Signpost (*Smena Vekh*) movements hailed the Bolsheviks as heirs of Great Russia. For Moscow ‘white’ emigrants still represented a military, ideological and diplomatic threat, but the Entente initiative announced on January 1922 to summon a European conference with German and Soviet participation in order to reshuffle the new economic order (what would end up being the Genoa conference), fostered new tactics. Lenin now needed emigrants to support Russian interests abroad. In the coming months Moscow would secretly subsidise the literary journal *On the Eve* (*Nakanune*), launched simultaneously in Berlin and in Moscow, and thus showing the unity of ‘both Russias’. Writer Ilya Ehrenburg and designer El Lissitzky would be given passports and travel to Berlin where they founded an international constructivist review *Veshch, Object, Gegenstand*, edited in Russian, English and German, and initiated discussion in the émigré press about Russian vs Soviet art.⁵¹ In April, with the Genoa conference under way, the Eleventh Party Congress would recommend ‘approaching these groups [of emigrants] that used to manifest their hostility but now wish to help the working class, be it in a minimal way’.⁵² It was just at this time that a prescient Münzenberg, having quickly understood the situation, had the brilliant idea to cement the Western public’s empathy for starving Russia by founding informal ‘Friends of the New Russia’ groups and making emigrants participate in his Soviet economic undertakings.⁵³ He also correctly gauged the impact a Soviet art exhibition could exert on the Berlin émigré community longing for its native culture. We do not know when the decision to include emigrant artists in the Berlin show was taken but during the October 1922

⁴⁹ GARF f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096, p. 4–1, ll. 169–175.

⁵⁰ *Briefe an Lenin*, 326.

⁵¹ Ewa Bérard, *La vie tumultueuse d’Ilya Ehrenbourg – russe, juif et soviétique* (Paris: Ramsay, 1991); Leonid Heller, ‘Le contrebandier du modernisme ou Ilya Ehrenbourg entre les arts, les courants et les mondes’, in K. Amacher et G. Nivat, eds., *Russie-Europe, hier et aujourd’hui, Transitions*, XLVI-2, 2006, 103–32.

⁵² *Odinadcatyi s’ezd RKP(b), Mart–April’ 1922* (Moscow: Partizdat CK VKP(b), 1936), 30.

⁵³ GARF f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096, p. 4–2, ll. 31, 12 Mar. 1922.

opening ceremony their works were displayed bearing eloquent testimony to the new, open-minded Bolshevik policy.⁵⁴

Cultural Diplomacy by Smuggling

Meanwhile the German Foreign Ministry's position towards the Russian exhibits continued to be dictated by the interests of German foreign policy. For that reason von Maltzan was ready to close his eyes to Münzenberg's subversive activities. For example, the exhibition of Soviet posters organised by Münzenberg's Foreign Committee for Hunger Relief in Berlin in mid-December engaged in unabashed political propaganda and openly ignored the 'four conditions' recently agreed upon. But while it sparked the ire of the Foreign Office *Kunstreferent*, Münzenberg's art exhibition project was not altered. In fact, Münzenberg now asked von Maltzan's help in getting two wagons loaded with exhibition material that were waiting in Riga (Latvia) across the border and to Berlin, 'quickly and without any unnecessary obstacle'.⁵⁵ To the Reich Commissar for Public Order, he suggested simplifying custom duty by transferring all formalities to the terminal station in Berlin – and his suggestion was agreed to.⁵⁶

What did all of Münzenberg's manoeuvring mean? The real story behind this was discovered only on 30 January when the wagons arrived in Berlin. According to Marianov's report sent to Moscow, German customs officers refused to unload the shipment because its content did not correspond to the announced art exhibition. The other part of the story is told in Johannes Sievers' report:

On 2 February 1922 three young men showed up in the VI Section C [*Kunstreferat*] introducing themselves as representatives of the Workers International Relief for Russia and brandishing my own letter in which I had asked about the border station and the possible day the train with the so-called art items from Moscow should arrive. On my objection that the answer to this question had not come yet, the young men demanded to be immediately given a permit to unload, the wagons having been waiting indeed at the Berlin railroad station.⁵⁷

Sievers refused firmly. He turned instead to the Reich Commissar for Public Order to decide, 'according to the internal policy issues at stake', if it was convenient to issue a search warrant for an illegal shipment. Should 'these gentlemen' persist in refusing to disclose how the so-called 'art items' had got to Berlin, his section would abandon the exhibition project: 'we cannot order a search of these "art items" and then propose them for a jury's judgment'.⁵⁸ The list of items finally established by customs officers detailed 'models, books and diagrams' that could not have been considered art material.⁵⁹

Helped by the German Red Cross, Münzenberg eventually succeeded in convincing Sievers that this had simply been a misunderstanding, but he had a harder time with the Soviet envoy. Informed about the nature of the shipment and the Foreign Office refusal to unload the wagon, Nikolay Krestinsky summoned members of the Foreign Representation of the C.C. of the Russian Famine Relief Committee 'Pomgol' (including Münzenberg), who concluded that such material could not be exhibited.⁶⁰ But there came another surprise when Marianov announced that one more wagon was ready to depart from Moscow, carrying works of Russian artists selected by Lunacharsky and his close collaborator, David Sternberg, who was to accompany the shipment, to Berlin.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Émigré artists on display included Alexandr Arnshtam, Ksenia Boguslavskaya-Puni, Varvara Bubnova, David Burliuk, K. Zalit, Vassily Kandinsky, Nikolay Milioti, Ivan Puni and Marc Chagall. Lapshin, *Pervaia vystavka*, 339.

⁵⁵ PA AA. R 94534. 6 Dec. 1921.

⁵⁶ PA AA. R 94534. 28 Dec. 1921.

⁵⁷ PA AA. R 94534 L. R. Sievers. *Aufzeichnung*. 3 Feb. 1922.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ PA AA. R 94534. 4 Feb. 1922.

⁶⁰ GARF f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096, p. 3–1, ll.105–8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The Soviet Envoy's Letter to Lenin: Cultural Diplomacy Without Art

At this point, the combined effect of his party comrades' chaotic moves, an unorthodox art project and German leverage made the Russian envoy in Berlin, Krestinsky, turn directly to Lenin. A letter on 19 February 1921 (with a copy forwarded to Molotov, secretary to the Central Committee) is worth quoting at length for it sheds light on the Bolsheviks' reluctance to get involved in any cultural diplomacy enterprise. As a matter of fact, it was only after the opening of the Moscow shipment that the Soviet envoy realised there were indeed *two* exhibition projects, neither of which he had been consulted about. The alternative art project, wrote Krestinsky, 'had been apparently set up by Berlin or by the Foreign Representation of the C.C. of the Pomgol'. Never plainly elucidated, it had gained Lenin's approval thanks to a mix-up: 'I've gathered from Gorbunov's words that you were talking about the Russian pavilion at the Berlin exhibition. Whereas in fact there is no such exhibition in Berlin and never will be.' Another argument that aroused Krestinsky's suspicion regarding Lenin's approval was of an aesthetic order:

I don't understand anything about painting but I know that Sternberg belongs to one of the new painting trends, and I know that Lunacharsky is particularly fond of the new trends. I also know that you and the majority of the government and of the Central Committee are hostile to com. Lunacharsky's preferences. That is why I imagine that you are all unaware of the character of the planned exhibition and won't approve of it.⁶²

Krestinsky's denunciation of the Commissar of Enlightenment whose 'preferences' are presented in terms of political deviation explains a lot about Lunacharsky's later efforts to distance himself from the 'leftist miasma' in his *Izvestia* article of 1922. Although Münzenberg was never named, he was unmistakably the object of the envoy's ire. His insubordination was at the heart of this troubling situation. For, as the letter stressed, there had never been any Sovnarkom nor Central Committee decision or any funds for an art exhibition. Therefore, Krestinsky asked Lenin to halt all preparations (first and foremost, the wagon with the art works) and have the project examined anew by the Sovnarkom. Should the latter decide that the Russian exhibition in Berlin was worth organising, it should set up 'a special commission composed of competent people who would be in charge, in Moscow, of all the preparatory work'. In other words, if the exhibition were to be put on at all, it would have to be conceived and organised in Moscow, not in Berlin, and by 'competent' Soviet people, not by a German. Krestinsky's recriminatory remarks were symptomatic of the growing tendency to prevent the internationalisation of Soviet foreign policy and centralise it in Moscow. To conclude, Krestinsky disapproved of an exhibition that would, according to him, fail to have any 'substantial propaganda impact, and, at any rate, to fund the cause of the famine'. The final blow came on 7 March, when Zinoviev, the chairman of Comintern, agreed with Krestinsky's opinion that 'the exhibition should be eliminated'.⁶³ Such a pronouncement coming from such a judge would seem to definitely condemn the fate of the venture.

An International Team to Modernise Soviet Cultural Diplomacy

And, yet, it did not. The further developments in this intricate story demonstrate the continued international influence on this endeavour, not least Münzenberg's tactical skills. Just as he knew how to manoeuvre the German government, he managed to pull the right strings in the entangled web of the Soviet state and Comintern apparatus. Krestinsky's request to eliminate the German comrade from the exhibition project and entrust it to 'Moscow's competent people' was serious enough a threat for Münzenberg to jump into action.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ GARF f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096, p. 1, l.102.

The counteroffensive took multiple directions and skilfully invoked the weight of international public opinion. On 9 March, in a dramatic letter to Lenin Münzenberg (who had just arrived in Moscow) insisted that Krestinsky's opinion was erroneous. All of Berlin was talking about the upcoming exhibition of Russian art. Cancelling it now 'would have the worst possible effect not only on our relief campaign but above all on Russia'.⁶⁴ On the same day Anatoly Lunacharsky also addressed a letter to the People's Commissariats of Foreign Affairs and of Foreign Trade informing them that the Swiss Red Cross and Nansen had personally suggested bringing together all three commissariats (Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, Enlightenment) into a 'Committee for the Organisation of Exhibitions and Travels Abroad' dependent on C.C. Pomgol that he, Lunacharsky, would preside over. It was Nansen's opinion that such a step would 'stimulate the interest for Russia and help our famine relief propaganda'.⁶⁵ As a token of his orthodoxy, Lunacharsky signed a letter to the Sovnarkom taking personal responsibility for the artistic value of the selected works of art and declaring that they would 'never, in any situation, taint the good name of the Soviet Republic'.⁶⁶

On 28 March the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (*Vserossiiskii tsentral'nyi ispolnitel'nyi komitet*; VTsIK) approved of the new 'Committee for the Organisation of Exhibitions and Travels Abroad' emphasising that 'the origin of this initiative belongs to the foreign Relief organisations'.⁶⁷ With the setting of the new body the official monitoring of the exhibition was transferred to Lunacharsky. Contrary to what is upheld in the historiography of Soviet cultural diplomacy, this first governmental initiative to institutionalise cultural contacts with the West came into being not as a bold and resolute move of the international Bolshevik policy but as the fruit of circumstances. Ultimately, it originated not in Soviet Russia but abroad.

In fact, Münzenberg's, Lunacharsky's and Nansen's concomitant attempts at international propaganda were dictated by their understanding of the role that Western public opinion could play in the on-going process of recognition of the Soviet regime. During the last week of March a Soviet delegation headed by Chicherin left for the European economic conference in Genoa, scheduled on 15 April. On their way to Italy they stopped in Berlin in order to discuss the common position the Soviets and Germans should display in front of the Entente countries. It was certainly not the time to ruin either the exhibition project or the Soviet reputation. Thus, while the VTsIK approved of the new Nansen-Lunacharsky Committee, a formal March 30 letter signed by the Sovnarkom informed comrade Münzenberg that the Berlin event had to be cancelled on the grounds of the 'extremely difficult economic and financial situation of the Soviet Republic'.⁶⁸ Protected by Lunacharsky's new position, Münzenberg answered only with a laconic telegram: 'I urgently beg you to send off the paintings together with Sternberg'.⁶⁹ And thus it was done.

The People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs Discovers the Movies

The exhibition, it stands to argue, had a wider impact, not least with regard to Georgy Chicherin. While his role in the exhibition seems to have been minimal – as suggested by the fact that the Soviet envoy to Germany, Nicolay Krestinsky, addressed his recriminations directly to Lenin and the Central Committee, thus bypassing the Commissar of Foreign Affairs, cultural diplomacy eventually got hold of this perfectly cultured and well-read man by way of propaganda.

Leaving Genoa, where he scored an unexpected success by signing, under the noses of the Entente countries, the agreement of mutual recognition with Germany, Chicherin stopped in Berlin in August. There he discovered that the reputation of Soviet Russia was at its lowest point, his recent personal

⁶⁴ *Briefe an Lenin*, 326.

⁶⁵ Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federacii, AVP RF) f. 04 (Sekretariat Chicherina), op. 58, p. 369, d. 39, l. 15–15 ob.

⁶⁶ GARF f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096, p. 1, l. 97.

⁶⁷ AVP RF f. 04, op. 58, p. 369, d. 39, l. 16–16 ob.

⁶⁸ GARF, f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096, p. 1–2, l. 95.

⁶⁹ GARF, f. 3, op. 5, d. 1096, p. 1–2, l. 96.

achievement notwithstanding. Moscow's revolutionary aura had been tainted by the image of a country ridden by violence, destitution and lawlessness. The Social Revolutionary Party (*Sotsialisty Revolyutsionery*; SR) members' trial, the persecution of clergy, the military intervention against the Menshevik Republic of Georgia, to say nothing of testimonies of famine and cannibalism, had been broadly publicised, not least by the non-Bolshevik left. In face of such a radical change of public opinion, Chicherin alerted Stalin, General Secretary of the Central Committee since April, insisting on an urgent shift in Soviet propaganda: 'we must give up our self-isolation in foreign countries and our passivity in the issues of information. . . . In other words, what we need is modernisation and a wide-ranging policy'.⁷⁰ Aware of the unconventional character of his remarks, Chicherin appended an explanatory postscript:

In order to tackle SRs, Georgia's or clergy issues, it's not enough to go on with thick pamphlets and telegrams; we need a far-flung press campaign. The way is open to us if only we give up our self-isolation. . . . One must realise that the mood of large masses has changed unfavourably for us. The campaigns about Georgia, SRs or cannibalism have influenced the large masses lacking [class] consciousness. The masses that yesterday had but admiration for us look at us today as tyrants. . . . To explain the fundamentals of our regime to the widest possible public opinion in all these countries. . . is one of the most important aspects of the crucial problem of modernising our methods.⁷¹

It is quite plausible that Chicherin ignored all of Moscow's exhibition project where Bolshevik Russia was publicised by means of diagrams, statistics, brochures and excerpts of discourses. In Berlin, however, he observed another sample of Soviet propaganda, witnessed its highly unsatisfactory effect and called for its urgent modernisation. We do not know how the exhibition project evolved between April and October 1922, but we know that in Berlin Chicherin met the person who opened his eyes to the *modern* way to conceive political publicity. On 22 August, two weeks after his letter to Stalin, he sent a telegram to his deputy Lev Karakhan: 'We urgently need films on Russia. This is the best form of propaganda. I'm asked here if we can grant the rights to a German company.'⁷² Chicherin's interlocutor was almost certainly Willi Münzenberg, then on the threshold of establishing his media empire, and notably a film studio Mezhrabpomfilm-Rus (IAHfilm-Rus), set in Moscow with headquarters in Berlin. Münzenberg's genius was to occupy the *visual* realm of propaganda and to use art and modern means of communication to make publicity for Soviet Russia, the famine included.⁷³ His proposition was an eye-opener for Chicherin, whose training in the pre-war imperial Foreign Ministry provided little room for propaganda abroad, let alone for cultural diplomacy.⁷⁴ In this way, international influence and its different idea of public opinion found a way into Soviet foreign policy just as its relations with the West were beginning to normalise.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to outline the origins and the transnational setting of early Soviet cultural diplomacy. My study of the development of the Berlin art exhibition (fragmentary as the archival evidence may be), allows us to advance some conclusions regarding the process of constructing Bolshevik diplomatic culture and cultural diplomacy.

⁷⁰ RGASPI f. 159 (G.V. Chicherin), op. 2, d. 5, ll. 36–38. 8 Aug 1922.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² RGASPI, f. 159, op.2, d. 5, l. 45. 22 Aug.1922.

⁷³ Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985).

⁷⁴ Theodore H. von Laue, 'Soviet Diplomacy: G.V. Chicherin, Peoples Commissar for Foreign Affairs, 1918–1930', in Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, eds., *The Diplomats: 1919–1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Avieli Roshwald and Richard Stites, eds., *European Culture in the Great War: The Arts, Entertainment and Propaganda, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

The article opened with the assumption that Bolshevik ideology and their behavioural patterns towards the imperialist world provided little room for the cultural element in a diplomatic action. Bourgeois Western public opinion was considered a *quantité négligeable*, while native intelligentsia, by definition deprived of class consciousness, could not have been entrusted with the function of ‘ambassador’ of a proletarian state. The exhibition, and its inclusion of avant-garde artists seems at first glance to contradict this assumption. But ultimately the dogmatic party line proved quite uncompromising and eager to re-establish tight control. The art exhibition, intent on advertising Soviet achievements in Berlin, had been propelled by the hunger relief organisation monitored by the German Cominternist Willi Münzenberg and by the German Foreign Office. This *art* project proved unacceptable to the bulk of the presiding Bolsheviks, given its foreign provenance and its modernist bent. Cancelled, the project was launched anew only after being transferred to Moscow authorities’ control and ideologically reshaped.

This point implies two conclusions: first of all, to comply with ideological requirements, the leading actors of both initiatives had to contrive distinctive narratives addressed respectively to foreign and to domestic publics. Speaking at the opening of the show in Berlin, Zakhar Grinberg, Commissar of Enlightenment deputy, framed it as an opportunity to enlighten Western opinion by dispelling the dominant view that Russia was undergoing spiritual decay and persecuting non-revolutionary artists.⁷⁵ By contrast, addressing Soviet readers in *Izvestia*, Lunacharsky repudiated the bourgeois bent of the Russian avant-garde, attacked Russian émigrés and gave all the credit of this ‘diplomatic success’ to the RSFSR. Such a double narrative, one for foreign audiences, another for domestic use, would become the pattern of Soviet cultural diplomacy. Secondly, the Sovnarkom initial project of the ‘Soviet pavilion’ in Berlin with the prominent place reserved for the Tentosoiuz suggest that of the two sorts of ‘unconventional’ diplomacy Ivan Maisky spoke about – the economic and the cultural – the former was always given preference.

This predominance of economic diplomacy over cultural diplomacy seems to corroborate Alfred J. Rieber’s often quoted theory of ‘persistent factors’ of Russian and Soviet foreign policy (and, consequently, of cultural diplomacy), one of which being the imperative to overcome economic, cultural and technological backwardness with regards to the West.⁷⁶ It should be noticed however that post-war Europe, ravaged, depopulated and shattered by the fall of three empires was wrought with a similar imperative, and its search for Russian markets and natural resources was no less compelling than Russia’s quest for Western capital and know-how. It was Lenin’s major idea to turn the competition between decaying imperialist states into Russia’s advantage. It did not diminish Russia’s dependence on Western imports but it provided the Bolsheviks with a new bargaining card, including in matters of cultural and public opinion. Underdeveloped Russia advertised itself as a starting block of revolutionary modernisation. Its backwardness became a propaganda weapon and a cultural asset. Six months after its formal recognition by France in October 1924, the Soviet Union put up its official stand at the Paris International Modern Decorative Arts exhibition. Designed by Konstantin Melnikov, the pavilion deliberately combined avant-garde and primitive traits – and was enthusiastically acclaimed.

The Russian art exhibition in Berlin eventually owed its existence to an international team, composed of Münzenberg, Lunacharsky and Nansen. These men conceived of international public opinion in a much more modern, less ideological sense and ultimately succeeded in carrying these assumptions into the Soviet establishment. Nevertheless, the essential agent in pushing the project through was the German Foreign Office, notably its Russian and Culture Departments. The latter’s expertise had been built up on the French model of cultural diplomacy.⁷⁷ The war had set all three countries against one another but had also fostered transnational circulation of new diplomatic practices. This article gives

⁷⁵ Lapshin, *Pervaia vystavka*, 337.

⁷⁶ Alfred J. Rieber, ‘Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy: An Interpretive Essay’, in Hugh Ragsdale, ed., *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press & Cambridge University Press, 1993), 315–58; David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 9.

⁷⁷ Carolin Schober, *Das Auswärtige Amt*, 24–5.

some insight into how Bolshevik Russia was involved in this process and how post-war crises pushed cultural diplomacy into Soviet–German relations.⁷⁸ Finally, while my initial hypothesis conceived the target of cultural diplomacy exclusively in terms of foreign public opinion, Russian emigrants represented a second and no less important focus. In 1925 emigrant artists were welcomed to join the Soviet pavilion of the Paris International Modern Decorative Arts exhibition provided that they pledged allegiance to the Soviet Union. While the Western public became fascinated with Soviet art, Russian artists and intellectuals living abroad (like Ilya Ehrenburg, El Lissitzky, prince Dmitri Minsky and Alexandre Kojève) became valuable agents of Moscow’s outreach. That is where Isaiah Berlin’s idea of the ‘insular’ character of Russia’s stance in the world provides valuable insight.⁷⁹ With its cultural diplomacy oriented toward foreign countries but aiming at Russian ‘souls’, the Soviet Union succeeded in making the ‘Russian world’ well rooted beyond its borders.

Acknowledgements. The first draft of this article was presented within the framework of the George F. Kennan fellowship during the author’s Spring 2018 stay at the Kennan Institute of the Washington D.C. Wilson Center. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Kennan Center for contributing to making this research as fruitful as possible. I’m also deeply indebted to the archivists of Moscow archives: the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (*Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federacii*; AVP RF), the State Archive of the Russian Federation (*Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federacii*; GARF), and the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (*Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv social’no-politicheskoi istorii*; RGASPI), whose knowledgeable and extensive indications were of invaluable help. The Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts in Berlin provided me with excellent research conditions as well. Many thanks to my friends who treated me with housing, language expertise and clear insight into this intricate diplomatic and artistic case. Yvignac-la-Tour and Peredelkino should stay forever in the history of cultural diplomacy.

⁷⁸ Arno J. Mayer, *Wilson vs. Lenin: Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917–1918* (New York: Meridian Books, 1964).

⁷⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture under Communism*, Henry Hardy, ed., (Washington D.C.: Brooking Institution Press, 2016), 85–91.

Cite this article: Berard E (2021). The ‘First Exhibition of Russian Art’ in Berlin: The Transnational Origins of Bolshevik Cultural Diplomacy, 1921–1922. *Contemporary European History* 30, 164–180. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777320000661>