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Melting–Hardening

ONE. BEGINNING–ENDING

Culture One is oriented toward the future. “There is no return to the past” were the words with which People’s Commissar for Enlightenment Anatolii Lunacharskii ended his first address to the public in 1917.¹ Culture One broke off its ties to the past and denied the legacy of that past; this was already evident in the liquidation of the practice of legal inheritance.² Culture One generated itself anew, as if in a vacuum. Everything that existed before its arbitrary starting point had to be thrown, together with Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy, from the “steamship of modernity,” as the authors of the 1913 futurist almanac *Poshchchina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (A Slap in the Face of Public Taste) proclaimed.³ The story of that word, “throw,” is itself characteristic. The contributors to the almanac, among them Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, Kandinsky, and Burlinuk, discussed several possible versions, including *brosit’* (throw) and *sbrosit’* (dump), but Mayakovsky said, “*Dump* implies that they had been aboard; no, we must *throw* them from the steamship.”⁴ Mayakovsky was not particularly worried by the fact that in order to throw Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy from the steamship of modernity one would first have had to drag them on board. This brief and violent dragging on and subsequent throwing off, from his point of view, was less dangerous than the supposition that the classics had sneaked aboard on their own.

Whatever has been thrown overboard sinks to the bottom and turns into lost (and, perhaps, mourned) treasure. It is a heroic, superhuman, Nietzschean act. “We are splendid,” declares the short-lived newspaper *Iskusstvo kommuny* (Art of the Commune), “in our steadfast betrayal of the past.”⁵ “We leave the past behind like carrion,” insisted the “Realistic Manifesto” of N. Gabo and A. Pevsner.⁶ “Old – to be killed,” insisted Mayakovsky, “skulls – into ashtrays.”⁷ Everything done by Culture One is “done for the crematorium,” and its principle is “to build creativity, burning your path behind you.”⁸

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The crematorium and burning were favorite themes of Culture One. The journal *Stroitel'stvo Moskvy* (Construction of Moscow) ran an article in 1925 entitled “Burning Human Corpses,” profusely illustrated and beginning with this energetic announcement: “Burning Human Corpses is winning over more and more adherents.”⁹ Next to it was another article: “Burning Refuse in Cities of Western Europe.” Another journal, *Stroitel'naia promyshlennost'* (Construction Industry), published in 1927 the article “Corpse Burning and Cremation.” Its beginning was no less optimistic: “The coming opening of the Moscow Crematorium is naturally creating a heightened interest in cremation both among the populace and among specialists.”¹⁰ The next article in that issue was “Composting Starter for Manure and Other Organic Waste.”

The crematorium in Culture One was constantly juxtaposed with the cemetery. “Cemetery” has mostly negative connotations, as, for instance, in “Moscow is not a cemetery of a past civilization.”¹¹ Kazimir Malevich even tried to instill a certain logic in this juxtaposition. “Having burned a corpse,” he reasoned in a businesslike manner, “we obtain 1 gram of powder; therefore we can fit thousands of cemeteries on a single apothecary shelf.”¹²

Malevich’s prophetic words on burning, spoken in Petrograd in February 1919, were realized horribly that same winter. The city was plunged into total darkness at night; the streets were not lit. The entire heating system was out of order, and homemade stoves called *burzhuiki* (bourgeois), *pcholki* (bees), and *liliputki* (lilliputians) sprang up in houses. The stoves needed fuel, and absolutely everything was used. “I burned all my furniture,” Viktor Shklovskii recalled, “my sculpture bench, my bookshelves, and books, books without number or measure. If I had had wooden arms and legs, I would have burned them and ended up without extremities by spring.”¹³

In Moscow, the situation was no better. In July 1919 the Moscow City Council passed a resolution permitting wooden buildings to be used as fuel. Actually, they had been dismantled before the resolution was passed. Between 1918 and 1920 close to five thousand buildings were torn apart for firewood. Some houses burned in the stoves of other houses, but those other houses burned too. Houses left by the fleeing aristocracy were now occupied by workers and peasants. New residents, not knowing that ventilation ducts were often insulated on the inside with felt, vented their *pcholki* and *liliputki* into them. The buildings, as Mikhail Bulgakov described vividly in his story *House no. 13*,¹⁴ caught fire and burned down, turning into those “grams of powder” that could fit on an apothecary shelf, had those apothecary shelves not been burned in the *burzhuiki* by that time. In the winter of 1919–20 alone, 750 buildings burned down in this manner in Moscow.¹⁵

The culture’s striving to break its ties to the past, to throw off its burden, was apparently so contagious that even people for whom it would seem contraindicated gave in to it. “What joy it would be to dive into the Lethe,” wrote the literary historian Mikhail Gershenzon in 1921, “so that memory of all religions

and philosophical systems, of all sciences, arts, and poetry would be washed away without a trace, and to come up on shore naked, remembering only one thing from the past – how heavy and constricting these garments were and how light it is without them.”¹⁶ But the lightness that came with discarding old garments occasionally would turn into the cold of the grave. On 31 August 1926, the newsletter of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) announced with melancholy: “The housing section of the Central Commission on Improving Living Conditions for Scholars is familiar with several grave incidents when the anxiety, suffering, and ordeal brought on by housing problems led to the untimely death of scholars – [e.g.] the famous professor and writer Gershenzon.”¹⁷ The waters of the “revolutionary residential redistribution” became for Gershenzon the River Lethe in which he sought oblivion, for which he was prepared to cast off the garments of memory.

The enthusiasm for fire captured another great representative of the old culture, Aleksandr Blok:

To the grief of all the bourgeois
 We'll blow up a worldwide fire,
 A worldwide fire in blood –
 Lord, bless us.¹⁸

But when this fire burned down his estate in Shakhmatovo, and his books, and his manuscripts, and his diaries – all the words that had been at Blok’s disposal seemed to burn with them, and only a cry remained: “I dreamed about Shakhmatovo – aaaargh. . . .”¹⁹

There was only one way to keep the worldwide fire burning: by throwing in your arms and legs, as Shklovskii had put it. You could fly on the Firebird only if, as in Russian fairy tales, you fed it in flight with flesh cut from your thighs; and the more closely you look at the beak of the magical Firebird, the more it resembled a pig’s snout. The words Blok uttered two months before his death in a sense refer to all of Culture One: “That nasty, snuffling, beloved mother Russia went and gobbled me up like a sow her piglet!”²⁰

Thus, Culture One wanted to burn its limbs, wash memory from its soul, kill its old, and eat its children – all this as an attempt to free itself from the ballast that was interfering with its surge into the future.

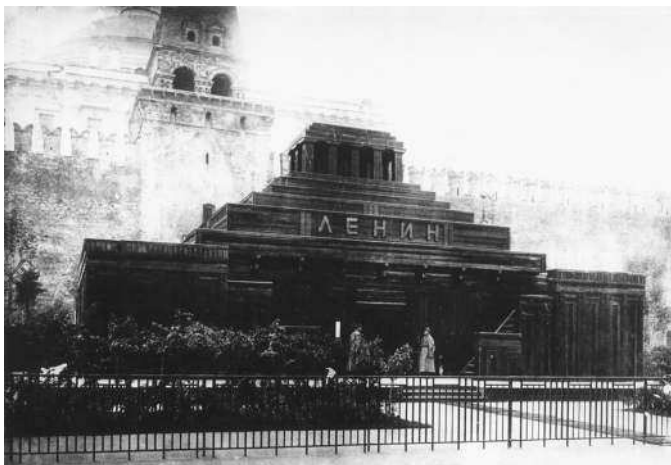
In Culture Two, the future was postponed indefinitely. The future became even more beautiful and desirable, and the movement forward was even more joyous, but there did not seem to be an end in sight to that movement – the movement had become an end in itself. The state prosecutor Andrei Vyshinskii ended his speech in one of the infamous show trials of the 1930s with the following words:

Time will pass . . . and above us, above our happy land, our sun will shine as brightly and as happily as before, with its rays of light. We, our people,

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14. A. V. Shchusev, first, wooden Lenin’s mausoleum, 1924. MA, coll. 11, 32763.



15. A. V. Shchusev, second, wooden Lenin’s mausoleum, 1924. MA, coll. 11, 2326.

will still be striding along a road, cleansed of the last traces of filth and vile-ness of the past, following our beloved leader and teacher – the great Stalin – forward, ever forward towards Communism.²¹

This kind of movement “forward, ever forward” changed nothing: The sun went on shining as before; the goal was still the same; therefore, there was no way to determine whether this was movement or rest – there was nothing to relate to it. Movement in Culture Two became tantamount to immobility, and the future to eternity. This eternal future now appeared thus:



16. A. V. Shchusev, third, stone Lenin's mausoleum, 1929–30. Photo: Vladimir Paperny, 1979.

People will be born – generation after generation – live a happy life, age gradually, but the Palace of the Soviets, familiar to them from their dear childhood books, will stand exactly the same as you and I will see it in the next few years. Centuries will not leave their mark on it; we will build it so that it will stand without aging, forever.²²

The idea of an eternal structure put engineers in a rather difficult position. “Engineers are not accustomed to building such structures,” said G. Krasin, deputy chairman of the Palace of the Soviets building team, at the First Congress of Soviet Architects in 1937. “The structure must not only be durable for a certain period of time, but must last forever, as the whole idea of our society is eternal.”²³

The history of the building of the Lenin Mausoleum is a good example of how culture's idea of the longevity of an architectural structure changed. In Culture One, the idea of a mausoleum evoked a temporary structure, one that was needed “in order to grant all those who wish to, and who cannot come to Moscow for the day of the funeral, a chance to bid farewell to their beloved leader.”²⁴ Culture Two had no intention of bidding farewell to the beloved leader. The temporary wooden mausoleum erected in 1924 [Fig. 14] was replaced first by a more solid wooden structure [Fig. 15], and then, in 1930, by one of stone built to last [Fig. 16].

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Another example of the reorientation for eternity is the story of the design and construction of the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (VSKhV). In 1937 the exhibition was meant to be open for one hundred days. During construction, the idea changed radically. The period the pavilions were to remain open was extended first to five years, and finally the exhibition became permanent. (A more detailed history of the exhibition is recounted in section 8, “Good–Evil.”)

The future, having become eternity, was so homogeneous and unchanging that it was pointless even to look there – there was nothing to be seen. The culture’s gaze gradually turned back, as if making a 180° turn. The present turned out to be not the first moment in history, but rather the last. The culture started to take interest in the path by which it arrived at the present – it began to be interested in history.

Nothing done by this culture was burned or left behind “like carrion”; rather, its products were immediately turned into historic monuments. The official opening of the first subway line in Moscow occurred on 14 May 1935. Five weeks later, there was already a lavishly printed, leather-bound volume with a gold-stamped title on the cover, *Kak my stroili metro* (How We Built the Metro).²⁵ The title page indicated that this was the *second* volume in the series *Istoriia metro* (History of the Metro). Thus, the history of the metro was being written simultaneously with its construction.

There were numerous books published in the 1930s with titles starting with the word *kak* (how) – for example, *Kak my spasali Cheliuskintsev* (How We Saved the *Cheliuskin* Expedition). The welcoming ceremony for the surviving participants of this ill-fated arctic expedition and their rescuers took place on 23 May 1934, in Moscow, but as early as April there had already been a government decree “On Erecting a Monument for the *Cheliuskin* Arctic Expedition.”²⁶ The book – over five hundred pages long and containing numerous color and black-and-white photos, memoirs of the participants, their childhood stories, stories of the expedition itself, and the courageous arctic flights of the rescue mission – could not have been written and printed in less than three months, considering the state of the printing industry in Russia in the 1930s; yet it came out on 13 August 1934. Apparently, the history of the expedition was written simultaneously with the expedition itself.

The crystallization of current events into historical monuments is not irreversible in Culture Two. The monuments kept evolving and reflecting changes in the present, as if time in Culture Two flowed backward. Some events in the present caused changes in the past. For example, the names of the architects expelled from the Union of Soviet Architects (SSA) later were erased from archival stenograms.

The primary subject matter of Culture Two became its own history; subsequently, history became the primary genre of Culture Two. The basic, canonical document of the epoch is *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*

(*Bolsheviks*): *Short Course* – an “encyclopedia of basic knowledge in the sphere of Marxism–Leninism,” as it was called in a resolution of the Central Committee [Fig. 17].²⁷ The majority of publications put out by the Academy of Architecture, created in 1933,²⁸ were related to the *history* of architecture. All the treatises of classical architecture, beginning with Vitruvius and ending with Viollet-le-Duc, were translated and lavishly printed precisely at this time. The main task of architecture became the assimilation and mastery of its heritage. Naturally, the judicial procedure for inheritance had, by this time, already been reinstated.²⁹

The mastery of that heritage began with the triad Greece–Rome–Renaissance, that which had been most decisively thrown away by the preceding culture. “The circle of the Greek–Italian, and in a sense, of the European system of thought,” wrote Moisei Ginzburg in 1924, “seems to be complete, and the path of a genuine contemporary architecture will without doubt lie ahead of it. . . . [T]he circles of history are closed, the old cycles are completed, we are starting to plow a new art field. . . .”³⁰ (Ginzburg’s metaphor was literalized by Vladimir Tatlin when he, in the hungry 1920s, broke the asphalt in the courtyard of the Leningrad Academy of Arts with a crowbar and pick to plant potatoes in this art field.)³¹

Culture Two perceived this circle *not* as closed, but that the job of closing it was to fall to the culture itself. Thus began the process of carefully sorting and selecting different styles and artistic schools to see whether or not they would fit to close the circle. The circle itself, at times, was reduced to one point (Rome), then widened endlessly, claiming all the cultures of humanity. Let us follow the dynamics of the changes in this circle of inheritance.

By the time the need for mastery of architectural heritage was established, there already existed a theory that, in principle, could have been used. This was Ivan Fomin’s theory of a *proletarian* (or simplified) classicism:

It is clear to everyone that it is not the Gothic, the Roman, or the Byzantine styles that are recommended to the attention of architects, any more than some Indian, Arab, or Russian styles that forever remain narrowly national, but namely the classical, of all periods, beginning with Greece and Rome and ending with the Russian Empire. . . . We just have to reject the proportions of the classical, the unnecessary details, that is, the capital and base of



17. *History of VKP(b)*, sculpture at VSKhV, 1937. MA, no reference number.

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the column, an unnecessary skinniness of the column and an excessive indulgence in details, that is, we have to reject the lintels and jambs of the windows and doors, the cornices over doors and windows, and in general, all means of overloaded and tawdry ornamentation.³²

Initially, this theory would have found supporters. Lunacharskii, for example, was attracted to the classical architecture of Greece. “With the new construction,” he wrote with regard to the Palace of the Soviets, “to a large degree one must lean on classical architecture rather than bourgeois, or, more precisely, on the achievements of Greek architecture.”³³ Moisei Ginzburg, who was trying to adapt himself to the new conditions, echoed him in 1939: “In the first place, we have to mention Hellenic art, the fifty-year peak of the art of Phidias, Ictinus, and Callicrates.”³⁴

The “Red Count” Aleksei Tolstoy preferred Rome: “Classical architecture (Rome) seems closest of all to us because many of its elements coincide with our needs. Its openness, its purpose – for the masses, an impulse of grandiosity; not threatening, not crushing – but as an expression of a universal world quality, all of this cannot but be used by our builders.”³⁵ Later, at the First Congress of Soviet Architects, Aleksei Shchusev also spoke about the necessity for carrying on the tradition of Rome: “The public and utilitarian constructions of ancient Rome in their scale and artistic quality are unique examples of their kind in the entire history of world architecture. In this realm we are the only direct successors of Rome; only in socialist society and with socialist technology is the construction of even greater dimensions and greater artistic perfection possible.”³⁶

Sometimes the emphasis was placed on the third member of the triad, on the Renaissance. “Some of the features of the Renaissance,” wrote Boris Mikhailov, “the joy of life, the spontaneous development of forms, the classical clarity of the spirit resounding in the harmonic layer of the proportions – all these answer to the strivings of our epoch.”³⁷ One should bear in mind that when Soviet art critics spoke of the Renaissance they meant once again Rome, but of a different epoch.

However, gradually there emerged the conviction that the triad of Greece–Rome–Renaissance (even enriched by the Russian Empire style, as was done in the simplified classicism of Fomin) was too limiting. Nikolai Miliutin had already spoken of this in his polemic with Lunacharskii (who insisted on the Greek paradigm): “We cannot underestimate the achievements of Rome, the Renaissance, the Gothic, Baroque and Art-Nouveau styles, formalism-rationalism, constructivism, functionalism, and so on.”³⁸

Later, rationalism and functionalism were either included in this circle or excluded from it, and this depended primarily on the behavior, at that moment, of some particular rationalists and functionalists. Miliutin himself, although he included them, nevertheless advised not forgetting the “Trotskyist essence” of

rationalism and the “mechanical essence” of functionalism. The harshness of his evaluation was probably because in May 1932, when Miliutin’s article came out – that is, a month before the resolution of the Central Committee “On the Restructuring of Literary-Artistic Organizations”³⁹ – the rationalists and functionalists occupied, perhaps, the strongest positions among all the groups. Both rationalism and functionalism instantly fell out of favor as soon as Viktor Vesnin, at the First Congress of Soviet Architects, having dropped all the preliminarily approved theses, spoke strongly in defense of constructivism. In the journal *Arkhitektura SSSR* there immediately appeared the following lines: “Nothing but social deafness can explain the attempts (they took place at the recent Congress of Soviet Architects) to present the antisocialist tendencies of constructivism, functionalism, and formalism as unavoidable and necessary for our architecture.”⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the circle continued to widen. It assimilated the baroque⁴¹ and the gothic;⁴² with some reservations at the First Congress, the architect E. Levinson also included in this circle art nouveau;⁴³ then the architecture of the East⁴⁴ and folk art⁴⁵ were assimilated as well. Another artistic style included in the list of what Soviet architecture had to master was contemporary, often American, technique. A formula, crystallized by the beginning of World War II, was expressed as follows by Aleksandr Vesnin (who had already learned to speak the language of the new culture):

The mastery of the architectural legacy cannot be restricted to the assimilation of the architecture of any one particular epoch, for example, that of Greece, Rome, or the Italian Renaissance (as many architects do); we have to grasp all architecture as a whole, in its historical development, from its beginning to the progressive architecture of the contemporary West and America. Along with this mastery of the architecture of the ruling classes, it is necessary to study folk architecture (for example, the architecture of small Italian cities, our Russian North, the people’s architecture of Caucasia, the East, etc., often of excellent architectural quality).⁴⁶

By the beginning of World War II, Culture Two already saw itself as the inheritor of all the traditions of all humankind. Ivan Fomin’s simplified classicism was ultimately rejected both because it was only classicism, and because it was simplified; the culture wanted to possess *everything*, and of uncompromising quality. Its chief monument, work on which was conducted from the very beginning to the end of the existence of the culture – the Palace of the Soviets – Culture Two saw in 1940 in this way:

All of the many centuries of the culture of human art will enter into this people’s building. From the golden, glazed tiles of Moorish Spain to the architecture of American glass. From Byzantine mosaics to contemporary plastics. The old art of the tapestry, carving in black oak, the revival of the fresco, the

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lighting engineering achievements of photo-illuminations, the folk craft of Palekh – it is impossible to enumerate the entire wealth of artistic decoration. Amid porphyry, marble, crystal, and jasper, the high technology of comfort of the twentieth century will function imperceptibly.⁴⁷

The circle Culture Two was called on to complete and enclose attained its maximum circumference by the beginning of the war, and then gradually began to change its outlines and to narrow. The center of this circle at first relocated from Greece to Rome; for a time it remained in Rome (ancient Rome, the Italian Renaissance), and then, having moved eastward, it more and more closed in on Moscow. The path to the completion of history now seemed to lie through the Russian past.

In Culture One the word *Rus* was the symbol of a barbarous way of life, wildness, and dirt. In the words of the futurist-poet David Burliuk:

“Rus” is one huge nest of bedbugs. . . .
 Armies of lice crawl through every corner of it.⁴⁸

Lenin, despite his distaste for futurism, was seemingly in complete agreement with these words dictated to Ia. A. Iakovlev: “In our genuinely ‘barbarian’ country,” he asked polemically, “should we make our heads safe from lice and our beds from bedbugs?”⁴⁹ Lenin was horrified by the onslaught of the “true Russian person, the Great Russian chauvinist, in essence a scoundrel and rapist” and at the approaching “sea of chauvinistic Russian trash.”⁵⁰

The architects of Culture One – with certain reservations and exceptions – are generally inclined to share this attitude about Russia. Thus, for example, the deputy chairman of the Petrograd Society of Architects-Artists, G. Kosmachevskii, wrote in 1917: “We, as pupils of Europe, essentially have an advantage . . . our contemporary city in most cases does not have those historical values that . . . play the role of respected and inviolable relics. . . . This issue is now intensely discussed in all the other, more civilized countries.”⁵¹ Echoes of this world view are traceable for a long time, at least until 1934 when, in the very first issue of *Arkhitekturnaia gazeta* (Architectural Gazette) L. Perchik writes: “The old noble-mercantile Moscow was the symbol of Russian backwardness, barbarism, and mercantile debauchery.”⁵²

Such historical relics of the city, the inviolability of which Kosmachevskii disputed, Culture Two treated in a not completely usual way: Their real physical existence did not seem to be inviolable – the culture demolished them without hesitation. In contrast, their role as bearers of tradition became increasingly inviolable to the culture; and the culture most insistently moved the center of the circle of the legacy to the side of Russian art in all its presumed diversity.

In 1937, St. Petersburg’s Anichkov Palace, where Pushkin’s wife Natalia Goncharova used to dance with Czar Nicholas I a century earlier, was turned