

Introduction

This is a book about minorities drawn to Soviet communism and the avant-garde. The initial focus is the 1920s and early 1930s and the allure of Moscow for the world's downtrodden and oppressed. The Bolsheviks, it seemed, had eliminated racism in the USSR while supporting anti-imperial struggles around the world. At roughly the same time, a loose grouping of artists and writers sympathetic to the revolution—retrospectively labeled the Soviet avant-garde—emerged at the forefront of modernist experimentation. Through such distinct but overlapping movements as futurism and constructivism, they enacted an unprecedented alignment of political and artistic vanguards—the artist as bona fide revolutionary.

I am linking here two phenomena that have each been thoroughly studied but rarely in tandem: the Soviet Union of the interwar years as a site of cultural innovation and the Soviet Union as a beacon of racial, ethnic, and national equality. These two sources of allure help to explain what, in hindsight, might seem strange: that the USSR of the 1920s and early 1930s had a magical, even religious significance for many minority and non-Western artists and writers. For reasons discussed in the following, my focus is primarily (though not exclusively) on those from the United States. The Jamaican American poet Claude McKay described his 1922 journey to Moscow as a “magic pilgrimage.” Likewise, the Jewish American poet

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Moishe Nadir called his 1926 visit a “pilgrimage” to the “holy land of the Soviets,” and in 1932 Langston Hughes wired the organizer of an African American delegation to the USSR, about to set sail from New York, “YOU HOLD THAT BOAT CAUSE ITS AN ARK TO ME.”¹

As indicated by Jacques Derrida after his own 1990 visit, such descriptions can be seen as part of a “rich, brief, intense, and dense tradition” of Western travelogues casting the USSR as a “mythic (ahistoric, *in illo tempore*) and eschatological (mosaic or messianic) space.”² My task is to connect this tradition to questions of race and ethnicity—something that makes little sense in our postsocialist present, accustomed as we are to dismissing the Soviet Union as a monolith that failed to accommodate difference. Moscow’s attempts to do so can be summarized by the official prescription that culture be “national in form, socialist in content,” which blandly meant that Bolshevik decrees were to be published in multiple languages and propaganda posters were to feature minority costumes. Thus, one basic aim of this book is to recapture the magic behind the “magic pilgrimage,” more specifically, to explain how, via the Soviet Union of the 1920s and early 1930s, marginalized minorities could suddenly envision themselves at the forefront of both modernism and revolution. As a growing number of scholars have shown, these pilgrims and would-be pilgrims were certainly looking for Moscow’s brand of multiculturalism and Leninist critiques of imperialism.³ However, they were also seeking the creative possibilities opened by the likes of Sergei Eisenstein, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Vsevolod Meyerhold—this lionized branch of the international avant-garde that, as Slavists well know, had itself long been fascinated by minority and non-Western cultures. From the alignment of art and revolution emerged many striking, eccentric ways of expressing cultural difference—visions of political and artistic vanguardism that deepened rather than erased ethnic particularism; visions of world revolution in which the ethnic Other took the lead. These visions, I argue, enable us to unlock the suppressed utopian potential of minority and avant-garde cultures alike—the former as revolutionary and experimental; the latter as inclusive and decolonizing.

To be sure, this is a counterintuitive pairing. Ethnic, minority cultures connote tradition and descent—one’s inheritance from the past. Avant-garde, on the other hand, is a military term (the vanguard of a unit) with political and aesthetic connotations—the revolutionary vanguard

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and artistic avant-garde each progressing toward a liberated future.⁴ Suffice it to say for now, the historical avant-garde employed montage for the sake of creating new meanings, and this book employs precisely this technique, beginning with the pairing of ethnic and avant-garde—the goal being to estrange and renew both terms. I do so through a new grouping that I call the ethnic avant-garde, which on one level refers simply to the many diverse artists and writers—figures like McKay, Nadir, and Hughes—who were drawn to and often visited interwar Moscow. Through the variety of translations and cultural productions emerging from these encounters, they became active participants in Soviet efforts to transform perception and to decenter the West—in experiments with art and equality that opened radical, forgotten horizons for American ethnic minorities. The ethnic avant-garde encompasses, for instance, Mayakovsky’s “Afro-Cuban” poems and Hughes’s translations of them; Nadir’s accounts of the USSR as a “red-haired bride”; and a Soviet futurist play about China that became Broadway’s first major production with a predominantly Asian American cast.

However, beyond these concrete cultural encounters, I also present the ethnic avant-garde as a largely unrealized utopian aspiration, one that ultimately exceeds the Soviet Union of the interwar years. It is the dream of advancing simultaneously ethnic particularism, political radicalism, and artistic experimentation, debunking the notion that particularism yields provincialism. More to the point, though, the ethnic avant-garde foregrounds a distinct way of seeing—a “transnational optic” that, for the contemporary reader, makes it possible to discern unexpected connections among radical artists and writers from many different countries.⁵ The figures covered here themselves cultivated such an optic, motivated by the similar potential of avant-garde and minority cultures to level hierarchies and bring art into life—that is, to shatter or open exclusive canons and to dismantle the divide between high and low. Techniques like cinematic montage enabled not only these ends but also alliances across racial, ethnic, and national lines. Blacks, Jews, Asians, Latinos, and Russians could see themselves as part of a collaborative effort to harness both perceptual estrangement and minority cultures for a Soviet-centered world revolution. Of course, such utopian aspirations were arguably doomed to be suppressed and forgotten—crushed by Stalinist terror and overshadowed by socialist realism—but remnants of this interwar ethnic avant-garde nonetheless survive into the present day.



FIGURE 1.2 Vladimir Tatlin beside his *Monument to the Third International* (1920).

Courtesy of HIP/Art Resource, New York.

To lay this grouping's historical and conceptual foundation, this introduction begins with an overview of the Soviet Union's political and artistic allure for minorities and non-Westerners around the world. I illustrate this through various interpretations of Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*—the famous protoconstructivist icon now best known as Tatlin's Tower, first displayed in Petrograd in 1920. Consisting of two intertwined iron spirals that cut through the heavens like a telescope or a cannon, the never-built tower positions the Soviet Union of the interwar

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years at the forefront of both world revolution and global modernism, of both the Third Communist International (Comintern) and the international avant-garde. In the first part of this introduction I make use of the tower to rethink notions of both revolution and avant-gardism—to impart to them a variegated temporality that encompasses past as well as future. The task here is to articulate that distinct way of seeing that is central to the ethnic avant-garde—more specifically, an ability to see both the political vanguard and artistic avant-garde as compatible with the past and descent. In the second part of this introduction I apply this way of seeing to notions of race, ethnicity, and nationality. Here I will juxtapose American and Soviet efforts to overcome biological racism and to come to terms with the two countries' respective, exceptionally diverse populations. This will take us on an excursion to Soviet nationalities policy, linguistics, and ethnography, which will lead us back, in a roundabout fashion, to Tatlin's Tower. Its telescope design opens an estranging lens on avant-gardism, world revolution, and minority cultures alike. Its spirals provide the scaffolding for the ethnic avant-garde.

Moscow—Capital of Now-Time

This book builds on recent efforts by both Americanists and Slavists to center Moscow in the study of global and ethnic modernisms. Katerina Clark's *Moscow, the Fourth Rome* reveals that, even amid the Stalinist 1930s, Moscow remained a cosmopolitan city in dialogue with cultural figures and developments around the world. Likewise, Kate Baldwin's *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain* shows how journeys to the Soviet Union enabled African American activists and intellectuals to rethink race, class, and gender. In both works, one explicit aim is to decenter Western Europe—in the case of Clark, to open Pascale Casanova's "world republic of letters" to Stalinist culture; in the case of Baldwin, to open an affirmative, Marxist horizon for the Black Atlantic.⁶

More specifically, the aim has been to decenter Paris, which even during the interwar years could be considered passé. Walter Benjamin named it, in 1935, the capital of the nineteenth century, the city's revolutionary ambitions having long given way to urban redevelopment and "monuments of the bourgeoisie." He hinted that the twentieth century demand-

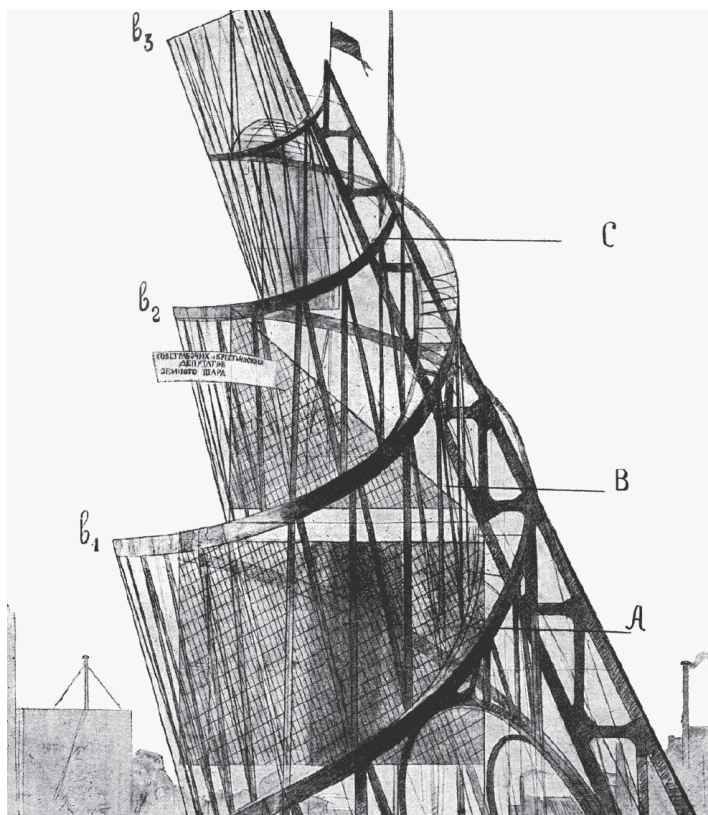


FIGURE 1.3 Sketch included in Nikolai Punin, *Pamiatnik III Internatsionala*
(Petrograd: Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv NKP, 1920).

ed new, radical alternatives to build on the ruins of the Paris Commune, and as Clark has shown, he himself felt Moscow's pull as a new potential center. And so we turn from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, from Paris to Moscow, from the iron and glass of shopping arcades to the iron and glass of Tatlin's Tower. Indeed, the tower's 400 meters were explicitly intended to overshadow Paris (the Eiffel's mere 324). This was Tatlin's shot across the bow of Western Europe—his assertion of Russia, not France, as the center of cutting-edge modernism. The key ingredient was revolution—the Soviet avant-garde's union of artistic and political rupture, its ill-fated embrace of the Bolshevik vanguard.⁸

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The tower, again, marked the alignment of two internationals—the Communist International and international avant-garde. In 1920 these were still in brief harmony: many still hoped that the avant-garde’s project of perceptual estrangement could serve the revolution, and the tower was intended not just as a monument to but also headquarters for the Comintern—founded in 1919 by Vladimir Lenin to coordinate radical movements around the world. Accordingly, the tower was to have been a machine for making revolution, with communist radio emanating from the top and agitational slogans projected onto the surrounding clouds. Within the iron spirals, Tatlin planned three glass structures, each spinning at different speeds. A large cube at the base was to have rotated once a year and hosted the organization’s polyglot congresses, with representatives from all corners and races. A pyramid in the middle was to have rotated once a month and housed the Comintern’s executive committee. In the early 1920s it included M. N. Roy, the Indian anti-imperialist who helped found the Mexican Communist Party, and Sen Katayama, a founder of communist parties in Japan and the United States. A cylinder at the top was to have rotated once a day and housed the editorial offices for the organization’s many publications, published in multiple languages.⁹ In short, the scores of seemingly random trusses gathered into a coherent movement would have reflected the Comintern’s diverse yet coordinated activists. This monument to artistic experimentation and world revolution was to have tripled as multicultural center.

Understanding this requires stripping the tower to its two constituent spirals, which chase each other but never touch, starting and ending at different points. One spiral, call it the vanguard spiral, evokes the tensions of forging world revolution: its balance of centripetal and centrifugal movements evokes the push and pull between Soviet center and non-Soviet peripheries, as well as between different societies caught in different stages of development. The other spiral, call it the avant-garde spiral, also twists time and space, but for more formal ends—for “the creation of a new world of sensations,” as Viktor Shklovskii put it in a review of Tatlin.¹⁰ These sensations opened the way for ever more varied understandings of revolution. Nikolai Punin described the spiral as the “classical form of dynamics,” promising liberation from “all animal, earthly, and reptile [*presmykaiushchikhsia*] interests”—the tower as escaping the bounds of time and space and leaping into a socialist future. However, the

tower also gestured to the distant past: Punin noted too Tatlin's use of iron and glass, the "two most primitive [*prosteishikh*] materials, for which fire was, to the same degree, the giver of life"—materials that concealed a "severe and red-hot simplicity" evoking the "birth of an ocean." From this perspective, the two spirals evoked not simply a socialist future but also a sleeping giant from time immemorial. The result, according to Punin, was "an ideal, live, and classic expression . . . of the international union of the workers of the globe."¹¹

All this points to a vision of revolution sweeping back and forth between future and past and becoming ever more inclusive as a result. On the one hand, the tower anticipated a liberated, unified humanity. Unlike traditional monuments, it eschewed a single heroic type and, in line with Soviet constructivism, advanced a world free of hierarchy and superfluity. Trotsky praised its exclusion of "national styles," its transcendence of past division and prejudices.¹² However, as indicated by Punin, the "classic" tower also gestured to the distant past and, from the moment of its unveiling, was seen as a vestige of premodernity. Several have noted its likeness to the Great Mosque of Samarra (ca. 846–861) in present-day Iraq, which Tatlin may have visited during his youth as a sailor. He certainly visited Syria, Turkey, and Egypt, and some have seen the tower as a composite of ruins from those places.¹³ The suprematist painter El Lissitzky called it a reworking of ancient Assyria's Sargon Pyramid. In turn, as Svetlana Boym has emphasized, "the Sargon monument was considered an inspiration for the Tower of Babel, which was in itself an unfinished utopian monument turned mythical ruin." Accordingly, just as Nimrod's tower glorified a united humanity speaking a single divine tongue, Tatlin's was to have joined all peoples in a shared, liberated society; and arguably the result of both failed enterprises was the scattering of nations.¹⁴

The tower was thus read as advancing a universal form, but one with vaguely Middle Eastern forebears; it evoked a single world civilization, but one drawing from every people and culture. This flight of fancy enables us to broaden revolution beyond modern bounds to its original, astronomical connotations—revolution as, in Hannah Arendt's words, the "recurring, cyclical movement" of stars. This makes the notion of the tower as telescope all the more apt, with the different rotation speeds (day, month, year) corresponding to the "celestial rhythms" of earth and moon.¹⁵ Reinhart Koselleck similarly expands revolution by linking it to premodern

eschatology—both marked by expectations of salvation and efforts to accelerate time.¹⁶ In short, while revolution is typically understood as a distinctly modern leap into the new, it can also refer to a perspective outside time and history. Indeed, many Russians viewed the 1917 Revolution as “an apocalyptic moment, as a time not of forward linear progress but of a sacred break in temporality.”¹⁷

It is understandable, even predictable that an avant-gardist like Tatlin would evoke such iconoclastic views of revolution, opening the term to a Pandora’s box of myths and legends. Remarkably, though, at least in the early 1920s, the political vanguard found it necessary to do something similar, that is, to articulate a vision of revolution able to accommodate all the world’s peoples. If the tower referenced both a liberated future and ancient civilization, under Lenin’s guidance, the Comintern finessed the stagism (i.e., from feudalism to capitalism to socialism) typically associated with Marx. That is, at least in its earliest years, the Comintern evinced a flexible, open-ended approach to history and revolution—similar to but to a lesser degree than its planned monument. According to Lenin and Leon Trotsky, democratic revolution could immediately give way to socialist revolution (Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution); “backward” nations could combine and leap over historical stages (Trotsky’s theory of combined and uneven development); and countries where capitalism was not fully developed (e.g., Russia itself) offered the best opportunities for undermining the global capitalist system (Lenin’s “weakest link” theory).¹⁸ In short, the last could become first. A “backward” nation could serve as the vanguard of world revolution without having to advance through capitalism—Russia providing the key case in point. For Trotsky, the fact that the country had been “backward” (i.e., predominantly agrarian) on the eve of revolution was a virtue; Russia’s “amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” made possible the Bolsheviks’ success.¹⁹ Accordingly, in advance of the Comintern’s Second Congress in 1920, Lenin famously called for communists to support “revolutionary movements among the dependent and underprivileged nations (for example, Ireland, the American Negroes, etc.) and in the colonies.” This meant that the Comintern would organize not only the “advanced” Western proletariat but also “backward” minority and colonized groups around the world—what Lenin called “oppressed nations,” suffering under the rule of developed, imperialist “oppressor nations.”²⁰

My detour from artistic avant-garde to political vanguard points once again to a basic congruence between the two, and indeed, Tatlin took pride in combining “purely artistic forms with utilitarian goals.”²¹ This is not to say that Tatlin’s design was a crude reflection of Leninist policy, but rather that this policy enables a better appreciation of the design. It enables us to see Tatlin’s interweaving of the modern and premodern not simply as an instance of abstract, universal form but also as an expression of the way and how of world revolution—of the need to attract revolutionaries of all stripes, colors, and stages of development. More to the point, already at the time of its November 1920 unveiling, the *Monument to the Third International* was a monument to a world revolutionary movement increasingly oriented toward Asia and Africa. That August, the Red Cavalry’s assault of Poland—monitored throughout the Second Congress and later immortalized by Isaac Babel—had been narrowly repelled, shattering hopes of a European revolution.²² This prompted the Bolsheviks to turn their attention elsewhere: in September 1920, the Comintern convened the “First Congress of the Peoples of the East” in Baku, Azerbaijan, drawing thousands of predominantly Muslim delegates from a broad swath of land, from Turkey to India to Korea. There Comintern chairman Grigory Zinoviev pledged Soviet support for all the world’s “oppressed peoples” in a “holy war” against Western imperialism²³—one that was, again, to have emanated from a recast Tower of Babel. The political vanguard (Zinoviev) and artistic avant-garde (Tatlin) here close in on each other, both expressing similarly expansive, indeed premodern visions of revolution.

Admittedly, my interweaving of vanguard and avant-garde has been a bit heavy-handed, especially considering that Tatlin likely envisioned his tower for Petrograd, not Moscow, and originally as a commemoration of the Bolshevik Revolution, not the Communist International.²⁴ Indeed, it may be for the best that his design was never realized given the Comintern’s much-maligned subservience to Soviet state interests, the frequent accusations of world revolution betrayed.²⁵ Functioning as that organization’s administrative center would likely have diminished the tower’s nostalgic appeal, and I do not care to crush the monument under the Third International’s weight. Rather, having noted the momentary, complementary congruence of vanguard and avant-garde, I will now separate them again, or keep them separate à la Tatlin’s two spirals—again, chasing each other but never quite touching. I will use the tower as a springboard to

yet more eccentric, inclusive visions of world revolution, related but not bound to the Bolshevik vanguard.

This formulation—related but not bound, encircling but not touching—allows us to see the vanguard and avant-garde neither as synonymous nor as completely at odds. More specifically, it enables us to salvage the avant-garde’s “utopian surplus” from the abortive histories of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Communist International. At the same time, it enables us to draw from these histories a revolutionary political horizon that bolstered the Soviet avant-garde’s long-standing interest in other peoples and cultures. The avant-garde was obviously tied to the catastrophic history of the Bolshevik vanguard. However, as evinced by Tatlin’s Tower, the avant-garde also “side shadows” alternative possible histories—indeed, alternative ways of imagining the flow of history.²⁶

My contention is that through works like the tower, Soviet avant-gardists unseated the Hegelian notion of historical development, which had long posed Western Europeans at the lead of “World Spirit,” Russians lagging, and Africans excluded altogether.²⁷ Again, the Bolshevik vanguard had complicated this stagist view just by sparking socialist revolution in Russia, but the avant-garde went much further. Wedding perceptual estrangement and romantic anticapitalism, it articulated visions of revolution in which even lost civilizations and ancient religions could play a role.²⁸ The writings of one of Tatlin’s close friends, the futurist Velimir Khlebnikov—now most famous for his *zaum* (transrational) poetry—are here exemplary. Many have discussed Khlebnikov’s eccentric approach to time, namely, his effort to predict the future by measuring the intervals between past historic events, as well as to find through *zaum* the common origin of all languages. However, as Harsha Ram has shown, such efforts also led him to embrace non-Western cultures and, specifically, to imagine the Bolshevik Revolution as an Asian revolution. “We know that the bell that sounds for Russia’s freedom will not touch European ears,” Khlebnikov declares in his 1918 manifesto, “An Indo-Russian Union.” As a result, Russia must embrace its Asianness: “We, the citizens of the new world, liberated and united by Asia, parade triumphantly before you. . . . Our path leads from the unity of Asia to the unity of the Stars, and through the freedom of the continent to the freedom of the entire planet.” For Khlebnikov, Asia serves as the key to making the revolution global as well as timeless: the manifesto credits “the will of Fate” for the union’s creation and proclaims the unity of “three worlds—the

Aryan, the Indian, and the Caspian, the triangle of Christ, the Buddha and Muhammad. . . . We have plunged into the depths of past ages and collected the signatures of the Buddha, Confucius and Tolstoi." Imparting to the revolution an eternal, religious quality, this call for an "Indo-Russian Union" exceeds what Ram describes as the Bolsheviks' "gestural solidarity" toward Asia, for instance, Zinoviev's "holy war" at the Congress of the Peoples of the East. Unlike Zinoviev, Khlebnikov actually identifies with Asia, which opens the way for a more inclusive vision of revolution—resonant with, but not limited to, Comintern outreach.²⁹

This is to distinguish once again the Soviet avant-garde from the Bolshevik vanguard but also to distinguish the Soviets from their Western counterparts and competitors, many of whom also happened to be drawn to minority and non-Western cultures. Khlebnikov's manifesto seems to anticipate Ezra Pound's *Cantos LII-LXXI* (1940), which connected Confucian China to the American Revolution and, in turn, fascist Italy. Of course, such efforts to harness non-Western cultures for modernist innovation often bore a racism and Eurocentrism that ultimately kept these cultures at a distance—a distance that Khlebnikov sought to overcome.³⁰ Indeed, the anti-imperialist underpinnings of his Indo-Russian Union seem to align him more closely to James Clifford's Paris-based "ethnographic surrealists," who in the 1920s used "cultural impurities and disturbing syncretisms" to destabilize received notions of the "real," "normal," and "beautiful." Drawing inspiration from works like Pablo Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), this group sought to unlock "the full human potential for cultural expression" through the sense that "something new was occurring in the presence of something exotic." Such experimentation—this taste for the exotic—of course helped make interwar Paris a vibrant cultural hub, including for many artists and writers of color.³¹ However, in contrast to Tatlin and Khlebnikov, the ethnographic surrealists lacked the Comintern's revolutionary politics, directed against the very forces that made African artifacts so readily available in Paris. As Clifford writes, the ethnographic surrealists sought to decenter Europe and offered "resistance to oppression and a necessary counsel of tolerance, comprehension, and mercy" (145). But this group stopped short of both world revolution and of identifying with (rather than just embracing) the Other.³²

Khlebnikov, in contrast, was part of a long Russian tradition of identifying with the Other—a tradition that bears elaboration given the handle

it provides on the Soviet avant-garde's relation to minority and non-Western cultures. That is, we must follow Khlebnikov down the rabbit hole of Russian modernists and avant-gardists identifying in particular with Asia. This will take us to the prerevolutionary years, then to the alignment of this tradition with the Bolshevik Revolution, followed by its resonance with pilgrims like Claude McKay. My starting point for this brief excursion is an influential group of painters from the second decade of the twentieth century who called themselves the neoprimitivists and who counted Khlebnikov and Tatlin among their many allies. At first glance, this group's works and writings seem to mimic Western chinoiserie in claiming "the beautiful East" as the key to disrupting perception and continuity: "We are striving to seek new paths for our art, but we do not reject the old completely, and of its previous forms we rec-



FIGURE 1.4 Russian neoprimitivism and "the Beautiful East," Aleksandr Shevchenko, *Laudresses* (1913).



FIGURE I.5 Natal'ia Goncharova, *Peasants* (1911).

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ognize above all—the primitive, the magic fable of the old East,” wrote the painter Aleksandr Shevchenko in 1913.³³ Accordingly, the Asian faces in his painting *Laundresses* from the same year evoke the angled African masks of Picasso’s *Les demoiselles*. However, as art historian Jane Sharp has emphasized, the “neo” of this primitivism lay in its avowedly anti-Western stance. In the words of another of its leaders, Natal’ia Goncharova, “I turn away from the West because for me personally it has dried up and because my sympathies lie with the East. The West has shown me one thing: everything it has is from the East.” Thus, if the West had long cast Russia as laggard in world historical development—Russia as “Byzantine” and “semi-Oriental” in the Enlightenment imagination—

the neoprimitivists (akin to the nineteenth-century Slavophiles) turned this into a source of defiance and pride.³⁴ “We are daily in the most direct contact with Asia,” Shevchenko boasted. “We are called barbarians, Asians. Yes, we are Asia, and are proud of this, because ‘Asia is the cradle of nations,’ a good half of our blood is Tatar, and we hail the East to come, the source and cradle of all culture, of all arts.”³⁵ In short, just as with Khlebnikov, the neoprimitivists not only drew from but also identified with the premodern and non-Western. They claimed to regard *themselves* as Other and Asian—Russia as, in the words of one member, “the avant-garde country of the East.”³⁶ By this view, Russia itself was, according to Sharp, “colonized by the West, economically and culturally dependent on the prior ‘civilizing’ accomplishments” of England, Germany, Italy, and France. This means that in contrast to Western chinoiserie, neoprimitivism can be seen as something of an anticolonial discourse, with a “devotion, even subordination” to Asia that hinders any conflation with Saidian “Orientalism.”³⁷

However, though Russian artists and writers may have considered themselves “Asian” vis-à-vis Western Europe, they were most certainly European vis-à-vis the empire’s non-Russian peoples. This is to say that Russians could be just as distant and condescending toward the czar’s non-Russian subjects as Westerners could be toward African peoples and cultures.³⁸ Here again, though, the key distinction was revolution, with 1917 imparting an anti-imperialist edge to Russian identifications with Asia. That is, after the Bolshevik Revolution, Russian-turned-Soviet artists and writers came not only to identify with but also to mobilize the Other: Asia became a rallying point for revolution. Perhaps the most striking and famous example of this is the symbolist Aleksandr Blok’s 1918 poem “Scythians”—a 1920 edition of which Goncharova illustrated in Paris. It cast the Bolsheviks as the eponymous nomadic tribe from the Black Sea steppes, reigniting an age-old battle between Asia and Europe:

Mil’ony—vas. Nas—t’my, i t’my, i t’my.	You are mere millions. While we are hordes, and hordes, and hordes.
Poprobuite, srazites’ s nami!	Try and fight with us!
Da, skify—my! Da, aziaty—my,	Yes, we are Scythians! Yes, we are Asians,
S raskosymi i zhadnymi ochami!	With slanted and greedy eyes!

Though far more crude and violent than Khlebnikov's manifesto, these lines once again cast the Bolshevik Revolution as an Asian revolution. Here the Bolsheviks-as-Scythians leap from premodern tribe to revolutionary vanguard, intent on decentering the West through force and terror:

My liubim plot'—i vkus ee, i tsvet,	We love the flesh—its taste, and color,
I dushnyi, smertnyi ploti zapakh . . .	And the sultry, deathly scent of flesh . . .
Vinovny l' my, kol' khrustnet vash skelet	Are we to blame if we crush your skeleton
V tiazhelykh, nezhnnykh nashikh	In our heavy, tender paws? ³⁹
lapakh?	

As Ram notes, in the often empire-inflected tradition of Russian writing about Asia, this poem marks the inward collapse of East and West—“no longer dichotomies but perspectival thresholds through which Russia could contemplate the crisis of her imperial destiny.” Indeed, by casting the revolutionary masses as Asians, Blok came not only to contemplate this crisis—namely, a revolution proclaiming the Russian Empire's end—but also to endorse it, to self-identify as “Scythian.”⁴⁰ This is despite the poem's prophetic anticipation that efforts to forge world revolution, to bridge East and West, would yield orgiastic bloodshed—the devouring of partisans and enemies alike. As the poem ends, Europe can escape certain doom only by uniting with this cannibal tribe: in a flip side rendition of the hymn “The International” (“. . . unites the human race”), Blok invites “the old world” to heed “the barbarian lyre” and join “the brotherly feast of labor and peace.”⁴¹

Again, these lines—along with the works by Khlebnikov, Shevchenko, and Goncharova—emerged from a long tradition in Russian art and letters of using Asia as a means of self-definition. Russian symbolists like Blok had a particular predilection for looking eastward for apocalyptic renewal.⁴² The distinctness of this tradition makes all the more remarkable the fact that outsiders latched on to it as well, for instance, Claude McKay. Though he apparently had limited prior exposure to Russian literature, he writes in his memoir that during his 1922 visit to address the Comintern's Fourth Congress his “senses were stirred by the semi-oriental splendor and movement of Moscow even before my intellect was touched by the forces of revolution.” While there, he composed a sonnet titled “Moscow” to try to capture this splendor. It can be read as an affirmative, though

probably unintended, response to Blok's "barbarian lyre"—a reading reinforced by the regular use of rhymes and iambs found in both "Scythians" and the sonnet:

Moscow for many loving her was dead . . .
And yet I saw a bright Byzantine fair,
Of jewelled buildings, pillars, domes and spires
Of hues prismatic dazzling to the sight;
A glory painted on the Eastern air,
Of amorous sounding tones like passionate lyres;
All colours laughing richly their delight
And reigning over all the colour red.

My memory bears engraved the high-walled Kremlin,
Of halls symbolic of the tiger will,
Of Czarist instruments of mindless law . . .
And often now my nerves throb with the thrill
When, in that gilded place, I felt and saw
The presence and the simple voice of Lenin.⁴³

Blok's "barbarian lyre" here harmonizes into McKay's "amorous sounding tones": once again the Bolshevik Revolution is cast as an Asian revolution, with the Soviet capital here becoming something from *Arabian Nights*—dazzling colors mixing with communist red, and Lenin holding court in a golden fortress. To be sure, just as "Scythians" emerges from a distinctly Russian literary tradition, "Moscow" evokes Western romantic Orientalism, and accordingly, McKay's rhymes and iambs as well as (characteristic) choice of the sonnet form impart to his poem a lulling, retrograde quality. But not just Orientalism: "Moscow" also exemplifies what Bill Mullen has termed Afro-Orientalism—black appropriations of Asia that serve to sidestep the "crushing oppositional hierarchies" of American racism.⁴⁴

Taking a step back, we can say that Khlebnikov, Blok, and McKay wrote from quite different contexts and yet arrived at similarly strange, counter-intuitive visions of the Bolshevik Revolution. Each cast it as an expression of archaic desires and passions, and about the clash of cultures (East versus West) rather than classes. Though not necessarily bound to the party or

Comintern, these estranging views, I would like to suggest, served to extend the revolution's reach—to make it more appealing to non-Europeans, McKay here providing a case in point. Again, he was in Moscow to address the Comintern, specifically on the plight of African Americans, and as others have shown, he helped shape the organization's views on the so-called Negro question. However, far more poignant than his participation in the Fourth Congress is McKay's very enchantment with Moscow. As he recalls in his memoir,

Never in my life did I feel prouder of being an African, a black, and no mistake about it. Unforgettable that first occasion upon which I was physically uplifted. . . . As I tried to get through along the Tverskaya I was suddenly surrounded by a crowd, tossed into the air, and caught a number of times and carried a block on their friendly shoulders. The civilians started it. The soldiers imitated them. And the sailors followed the soldiers, tossing me higher than ever.

From Moscow to Petrograd and from Petrograd to Moscow I went triumphantly from surprise to surprise, extravagantly fêted on every side. I was carried along on a crest of sweet excitement. I was like a black ikon in the flesh. The famine had ended, the Nep was flourishing, the people were simply happy. I was the first Negro to arrive in Russia since the revolution, and perhaps I was generally regarded as an omen of good luck! Yes, that was exactly what it was. I was like a black ikon. (168)

As others have noted, this passage combines racial pride on the one hand and a willingness to become an "ikon"—that is, to accept the Comintern's latent essentialism, the role of "stand-in African" assigned to him.⁴⁵ But I would also like to emphasize a more subtle allure operating here: his spelling of "ikon" (as opposed to "icon") suggests that, as he was being foisted above Moscow's streets, he imagined himself as a religious icon (*ikona*) and, hence, "omen of good luck"—Jamaican American poet as Russian Orthodox saint, painted on wood, kissed by parishioners.⁴⁶ In other words, not only did McKay admire the "Byzantine" qualities of Moscow's "jewelled buildings, pillars, domes and spires," that is, Orthodox churches, but also, in a sense, he himself became "Byzantine," identifying with Russia just as Khlebnikov and Blok identified with Asia.⁴⁷ McKay was not alone

in doing so: the Soviet Union's perceived exoticness also impressed Lovett Fort-Whiteman, who in 1924 became the first African American to receive Comintern training in Moscow. Upon his return to Chicago as a communist organizer, he "affected a Russian style of dress, sporting a *robochka* (a man's long belted shirt) which came almost to his knees, ornamental belt, high boots and a fur hat." By one account he resembled a "Buddhist monk"; by another, a "veritable Black Cossack" whose "high cheekbones gave him somewhat of an Oriental look."⁴⁸

All this is to present Moscow and the revolution as uncannily inclusive, as promoting not only class-based equality but also unexpected cross-cultural encounters. These encounters had the power to transform perception, giving rise to these feverish visions of the Bolsheviks as Asian and blackness blurring with Russianness. (Indeed, to boost recruitment in the early 1930s, black communists in New York distributed busts of Aleksandr Pushkin and flaunted his Ethiopian ancestry.⁴⁹) To be sure, not all minority visitors to interwar Moscow found the city so welcoming: incidents of racism were reported to and punished by Soviet authorities.⁵⁰ However, the point here is not to gauge the extent to which such visions corresponded with reality but to pursue the imaginative possibilities that they opened. These visions are particularly useful in undercutting received notions of the Soviet Union as "cold, stern, rational"—as a gray place where utopian dreams went to die.⁵¹ Tatlin, Khlebnikov, Blok, and McKay highlight instead the colorful allure of revolution, the "magic" behind the "magic pilgrimage."

Such visions were widespread enough—both in the USSR and beyond—that at least one prominent Soviet official felt compelled to weigh in. Clearly these artists and writers had gone too far: in 1926 Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky asserted, "Yes, we shall rise at the head of Asia. We shall even arm Asia with European thought, but not for the purpose of 'crushing her skeleton' with our Scythian embrace." Contra Blok, Lunacharsky insisted that the Bolsheviks were "by no means opposed to European civilization" and that the world revolution would fulfill, not destroy this civilization. According to him, too many Western communists—disenchanted with modernity after World War I—had given in to "decadent mysticisms and passivities." This led them to place "much less hope in their own proletariat than in those phantom hordes which their imaginations invoke out of Asia." In addition to being anti-Marxist,

the problem with such fantasies was that they were stifling revolution in Europe, strengthening the resolve of the Bolsheviks' opponents. Thus, Lunacharsky declared, "we must absolutely establish our position in this question and destroy the myth that we are the banner-bearers of a new religion."⁵² In short, visions of the Bolshevik Revolution as premodern and Asian were to cease, but this was far from the final word on the matter. Just two years later, the director Vsevolod Pudovkin released his own "phantom hordes" to the world in his stunning film *The Heir of Genghis Khan* (1928, released in English as *Storm Over Asia*). Set in Mongolia during the Russian Civil War, it shows British expeditionary forces capturing what they believe to be Genghis Khan's heir, but their efforts to turn this modest hunter into a puppet ruler end with him tearing down their headquarters with his bare hands, riding on horseback with sword raised, and leading a horde that literally blows the British across the steppe. "O, my people, rise in your ancient strength and free yourselves!" read the film's final intertitles. Lunacharsky's declaration notwithstanding, notions of the Bolshevik Revolution as an Asian revolution persisted.⁵³



Nonetheless, Lunacharsky raised an important objection. While they clearly exceeded party politics and pragmatism—that is, the Kremlin's "gestural solidarity" to oppressed nations—what political function did these iconoclastic visions serve? Were they progressive or regressive—innovative harbingers of a liberated culture that would unite the human race, or violent echoes of a Western primitivism that had long reinforced racial hierarchies? We can respond to these questions and situate these visions within a legibly Marxist tradition with the aid of Walter Benjamin—and, in particular, his own impressions of the Soviet Union during his 1926–1927 visit to Moscow. His goals there were to witness Russia firsthand and explore future writing collaborations, but primarily to pursue a fruitless romance with his Latvian communist muse, Asja Lacis. Unlike McKay, he was not there in an official capacity and interacted mostly with fringe, predominantly Jewish cultural figures. (McKay, in contrast, met the cream of Moscow's political and cultural elite—Trotsky, Zinoviev, Lunacharsky, Mayakovsky.⁵⁴) Nonetheless, Benjamin's experience was similar to McKay's in that he found a city filled with strange and unexpected enchantments, which he also linked to its supposed Asianness. Benjamin's writings add to such descriptions a