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7 Classics, crisis and the Soviet experiment to 1939

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In his third *Prison Notebook* written in 1930 Antonio Gramsci located crisis at the point at which ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born’. ‘In this interregnum’, he continued, ‘morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass’ (Gramsci & Buttigieg 2011: 2.32).¹ Early twentieth-century Russia perhaps experienced the archetypal crisis, in the Gramscian sense, since the *ancien régime* of Tsarist Russia was in its death throes and the new world of global socialism was yet struggling to be born. This chapter focuses on some of the key classical and classicising cultural manifestations of Revolutionary Russia’s ‘morbid phenomena’ in the nascent Soviet Union.

While the academic discipline of Classics, as the bourgeois citadel of Tsarist education, was severely threatened by the revolutionary desire to cut away the old, its influence had already soaked into the core of popular culture. We therefore simultaneously witness the rapid marginalisation of a learned discipline and the democratic flowering of an intimately related cultural phenomenon. For the era bore witness to a colossal stirring of the national psyche, which was so fast-moving, unprecedented and ‘other-worldly’ that the impulse of many of the vocal and socially dominant minority of classically educated writers and artists was to triangulate their uncharted present with reference to events found within their common cultural experience, i.e. the classical world. Through the cultural practice of such members of the Russian metropolitan elite, many thousands of people experienced, engaged in and even, as we shall see, embodied a distinctively revolutionary classicism. The presence of classics in the overlapping realms of popular, educational, performance and visual cultures can become obscured by the narrative of the decline and (almost) fall of the academic discipline ‘Classics’.²

At moments of crisis a people can of a sudden become *historically* aware, which might trigger recourse to historical precedent, but also *ideologically* aware, for which formulations such as that found between the Dionysian and the Apollonian in Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and his classical sources can pave the way for society’s advance into the unknown.³ In early twentieth-century Russia we find the uncertain present being played out in the cultural realm. The major revolutionary engagements with the classical tend to fall into one of two categories. First, we have the direct mapping of the present onto

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critical moments of ancient history and mythology. These can, as we shall see, take the form of an ideological reinterpretation or creative hijacking of ancient sources. Other revolutionary engagements with the classical attempt to ‘rediscover’ so-called proto-revolutionary ancient ideas and practices, as in the case of Dionysian *plyaska* (freely expressive/folk dance).

While we can point to numerous revolutionary individuals ‘going with the [radical revolutionary] flow’ – charging around like so many bacchantes to the dithyrambic tune of the times – we ought also to remember the many non-chalant *minyades*, who responded to crisis in another way. They used the classical (especially classical philology and translation) as something of a safe haven from the winds of change. Like those mythic sisters who resisted Dionysus and continued their labour during his festival (Ovid *Met* 4), for which crime they were transformed into nocturnal fowl, some scholars managed to keep the philological hearths in various universities burning in spite of the harshest suppression of their subject and at considerable personal risk. To these scholars, the post-revolutionary marginalisation of Classics as an academic discipline was something of a blessing, in times when it was safest to be invisible (Fayer 2016).⁴

Since the activities of such scholars have been well documented in recent years,⁵ we intend to bring into sharpest focus the Bolshevik bacchantes, whose classicising work often took them beyond the confines of the shrinking classical academy and into the bright light of popular culture. When we assess revolutionary Russian engagements with the classical in the popular realm, the narrative of decline under Communism no longer holds. Indeed, access to classical culture increases exponentially with the proliferation of classical translations, mass spectacles which drew on ancient theatre, and interpreting myth through dance.

The material will be largely unfamiliar to many readers, so we begin with a brief description of the reception context and a short summary of pre-Revolutionary Russian Classics.⁶ We shall then embark on a tour of early Soviet classics in which our guide will be our first bacchic reveller, the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, who supported various classically-infused initiatives including classicising dance (formalised into the Institute of the Living Word), classical translation (in Maxim Gorky’s *World Literature* series), theatre (in, e.g. Adrian Piotrovsky and Sergei Radlov’s open-air classical productions), and finally the poetry of the gentleman satyr, Alexander Blok.

Russia’s industrial revolution

The fall of Tsarism, catalysed by the combination of rapid state-sponsored industrialisation and trenchant political reaction, brought about severe conflict in the cultural as well as the social realm. Industrialisation, with its concomitant urbanisation and manifold improvements to nationwide communication and travel, created a spike in basic education and necessitated the growth of an educated professional class to oversee the work done in the new factories and a proto-bourgeoisie to cater for their needs.

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The gradient of progress was so steep that existing social structures simply could not manage. Huge strains on the state (only partly assuaged by the mushrooming of charitable organisations) were exacerbated by a growing panic at being overrun by the influx of peasants as industrial workers. Add to this rapid urbanisation a dramatic increase in the commercialisation of culture – further threatening the cultural hegemony of the ruling elite – and a picture of Russia in acute social crisis emerges.

The development of popular culture, driven by commerce, was combatted by attempts to acculturate the new populace to the ‘high’ culture of the intellectual elite. The short-lived association of Classics with revolution, following the 1848 revolts in Europe,⁷ was challenged by a new reactionary approach to its provision. Classical culture became an important part of a Eurocentric ‘high’ culture, to which the uneducated workers were supposed to aspire, instead of gorging themselves merrily on the pabulum of popular culture (Smith & Kelly 1998: 106–55).

Pre-revolutionary Russian classics

Challenges to civic order in late-Imperial Russia were answered with a number of reactionary counter measures. The one crucial to us came in the field of secondary education. After decades of educational reform – more or less in line with the Western European bias towards the natural sciences – a reform was introduced that sought to counter a perceived cultural backwardness by exposing its wealthy youth to dangerously high levels of classical language learning, in the Prussian *gymnasium* style.⁸ The reforms of the Minister for Education Count Dmitry A. Tolstoy (1823–89) have subsequently gained prominent advocates as well as detractors. The politically reactionary Tolstoy believed that study of the sciences fostered ‘materialism, nihilism, and the most pernicious self-importance’, not to mention subversive political views (McReynolds & Popkin 1998: 83; Tait 1984: 9; Kelly 2007). He combatted this with heavy doses of Classics, making both ancient Greek and Latin a requirement for entrance to university, thus intensifying the classical focus in the *gimnazii* (classical high schools).⁹

It is widely attested that the classical education experienced during this period was extremely disagreeable for pupils.¹⁰ As in the ‘grammar grind’ of Victorian Britain, precedence was given to language learning over ancient literature and culture (Maksimova 2005: 31, Nosov 1996: 220), in order to increase obedience to law by studying ‘immutable grammatical rules and their equally indisputable exceptions’.¹¹ Additionally, Tolstoy downgraded the *realnye gimnazii* (‘real gymnasia’, or technical grammar schools) – which offered a wider range of practical and scientific subjects – to *realnye uchilishcha* (‘real schools’, like the German *Realschule*), which could now prepare their pupils only for technical colleges, rather than university.

Although the system appears for a time to have allowed *gymnasium* access for certain extraordinary urban domestic workers (Alston 1969: 128), Tolstoy’s

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1871 reforms effectively created a classical bottleneck to progress, restricting meritocratic social mobility by the institutionalised misuse of the classical languages. Without accessible and affordable translations, the cultural tradition conveyed predominantly via those languages acquired associations with elitism, as they have throughout much of the world.¹² Yet the reforms also created generations of highly-drilled classicists and thus established the favourable cultural conditions that supported the flowering of the Russian Silver Age (c.1890–c.1930).

Zieliński

One vociferous advocate of Tolstoy's educational policy was the Polish-born classical scholar Tadeusz Stefan Zieliński (1859–1944),¹³ who approved of the severity of the classical *gimnazii*, referring to it wryly as the 'slaughter of the innocents'. He lamented the decline of the Russian gymnasium under Andrey Saburov (Minister for Education from 1880), commenting that 'only the worst fool could fail nowadays' (Olechowska 2016: 226).

Irrespective of his predilection for rigorous (even lethal) elitism, Zieliński's passion for the classics reached well beyond pedagogy, and the influence of his scholarship extended beyond the academy. Under his tutelage and that of, for example, the celebrated ancient historian Michael Rostovtzeff (1870–1952), students at St. Petersburg University thrived. Several became famous authors, artists and scholars in their own rights.¹⁴ His lectures attracted crowds of admiring students (Zelinsky 2012). Zieliński was a public figure, who not only advocated for classical education at secondary level, but also became a key figure in the putative third renaissance, prophesying that 'some time in the future European culture will be marked by a Slavic renaissance, so long as something like the end of the world does not happen.' (Zelinsky 2002: 270–1)

The idea of a Slavic renaissance portended a great role for the Slavic nations, especially Russia, in the forthcoming rebirth of antiquity. The first renaissance was, of course, the Renaissance, and the second was considered by Zieliński and his circle to be that of German neo-Hellenism. The concept, minted by Zieliński as early as 1899, won its chief proponents in the symbolist poets and classicists Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949) and Innokenty Annensky (1855–1909).¹⁵ It was also, as Katherine Lahti argues, specifically aligned with the Russian 'dithyramb movement' and 'a return to Dionysus', whose godhead was vociferously claimed by the Silver-Age Russian intelligentsia as 'our own' (2018: 16–22). All it took for Dionysus to become a native Russian was some creative philology by Nietzsche's contemporary, the German classicist Erwin Rohde (1890 and 1894) and its energetic popularising by the likes of Zieliński and Yulian Kulakovsky (1899).

The hope for a great role for Russia in this new renaissance was undoubtedly connected with its prior lack of historical connections with classical antiquity, and a concomitant longing for a fuller participation in the European tradition (Kondakov 2016). But the arguments for it were steeped in the perceived

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exceptional qualities of Russian culture, including importantly its close affinity to nature and its longing for eternity. For these reasons the so-called Slavic soul was considered uniquely receptive to Dionysian, pre-Socratic antiquity. As Catriona Kelly put it ‘the slogan of the new renaissance was to be “nationalism, Christianity, antiquity”’ (1989: 238).

Zieliński perceived himself as a Hellene and saw the new renaissance as the solution for Russia and Europe. But the classical revival was not only a desideratum of the academy. Large swathes of the metropolitan elite succumbed to *grecomania*. Some wore Greek dress, hosted Platonic symposia and had multiple partners of both sexes in emulation of the Greek cult of Eros (Davidson 2009: 2). Such behavior is most strongly associated with the group who gathered around the central figures of Viacheslav Ivanov and his wife Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal. They included many of the leading lights of Silver-Age Petrograd salon culture, e.g. the symbolist poet and forerunner of the acmeists Mikhail Kuzmin.¹⁶ Classical literature was not only central to their creative activity but to the way they lived their lives.

A clean break?

As opposed to the February Revolution, the October Revolution was less widely welcomed by the intelligentsia; the Bolshevik seizure of government wrested the people’s movement away from many of its staunchest advocates.¹⁷ This said, as events were unfolding, the situation was anything but clear. There certainly *were* intellectuals and artists who enthusiastically supported the coming changes, even if many would later become disillusioned. In late 1917 and throughout 1918, public debates were organized among representatives from both sides of the barricades to reconcile the intelligentsia and define its role in the new world (Read 1990: 46–51). Yet plurality of opinion did not last long. Even these democratic endeavours were quickly used to bring uniformity to the cultural and educational policy of the future USSR.¹⁸

The study of Soviet antiquity has diversified over the past decade, but the general consensus is one of a decline. Following the October Revolution the classical languages were dropped from secondary education; teachers of Classics at both secondary and university level were persecuted as class enemies, due to the ‘bourgeois’ and ‘counter-revolutionary’ associations of the subject.¹⁹ Many cold war narratives of Soviet culture on both sides of the ideological divide show 1917 as a point of rupture, a clean break with ‘bourgeois’ tradition, all effort being poured into universal education, the creation of a new, proletarian culture, and eventually the development of socialist realism (on which Classics, at first glance, has little bearing). These are fed by, and do to some extent capture the atmosphere of the ideologically charged cultural debate of the late 1910s and 1920s.

The trouble with this formulation, however, is that it is too clean; it shrouds the democratising continuums – especially in the realms of culture and education – that were already intensifying dramatically in the pre-Revolutionary era and were inherited from the old intelligentsia by the Bolsheviks.²⁰ It diminishes

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the contested nature of the debate on what should happen to culture under socialism. There were advocates for as well as adversaries of classical culture. Their association with the Tsarist order and the immediate response to it is well captured in the poster encouraging citizens, in the face of their revolutionary enthusiasm for iconoclasm, to curb their verve for vandalism and ‘Protect the monuments of art’ (Figure 5). It is no accident that the picture, commissioned by I.E. Grabar and approved by Lenin, is predominantly classical. The most iconic monuments of Imperial Russia were, as in other European nations, classical in style.

The poster was mass-produced and sent across the whole of Russia (Stites 1989: 78–89). The state-sanctioned movement to preserve the cultural treasures



Figure 7.1 “Citizens! Protect the monuments of art!”. Bolshevik poster from the Russian Civil War (1919) by Nikolai Kuprianov. Public domain. Source: <http://www.plakaty.ru/i/plakats/medium/630.jpg>.

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of the old order prevailed and the process of ‘preservationism’ was overseen by the Department for Museums and the Preservation of the Historical Heritage. As opposed to the *damnatio memoriae* practiced liberally under Stalin (see e.g., King 1997), the process of ‘deromanovisation’ was achieved through the construction of new socialist monuments, and, where possible, the old monuments were placed inside museum complexes, where they could be viewed as part of the history of the new Republic, instead of symbols of the stability of the status quo. The shift was subtle but powerful: a shift in the ‘way of seeing’ rather than the ‘what is seen’.

The ‘clean break’ narrative also draws a problematic veil over the widespread and baffling inconsistency of communist policy and its erratic enforcement in the early Soviet Union. For example, while the teaching of Latin was forbidden in secondary schools, there were certain schools in rural regions that continued to offer Latin classes to pupils, and even harboured known, or at least suspected, dissidents to teach them (Isaievych 2002: 346). This shows how marginality could be a blessing. On the obverse of this coin, a critical mass of ‘old intelligentsia’ could also serve as protection. In Petrograd and Moscow, classical departments were to a degree tolerated – even if that meant that they no longer officially existed in the case of Petrograd – so as to enable Soviet scholars to hold their own in the international arena (Isaievych 2002: 349).

Lunacharsky

During ‘War Communism’ (1918 to 1921), the major goal of Soviet Russia was to keep the nation fed and the Red Army stocked with arms and ammunition. Yet even in this time of crisis, cultural life in the metropolises of Moscow and Petrograd did not grind to a halt. It was in this time (and indeed until 1928) that the newly appointed People’s Commissar of Education (Narkompros), Lunacharsky (1875–1933) fought for the continuation of the classics, and Gorky oversaw the publication of scores of translations of world literature, including several classical texts.

As head of Narkompros, Lunacharsky has been regarded as ‘protector of Russia’s cultural heritage from revolutionary vandalism’.²¹ In one of its most visible manifestations, he championed the preservation of old St. Petersburg, in all its neoclassical glory, against the aforementioned iconoclasm and fervour of the revolution’s programmes for architectural reconstruction. Like so many of his generation, Lunacharsky both benefitted from and bitterly resented the Tolstoyan educational reforms (Tait 1984: 15 and n15). One need only read a line or two of his revolutionary *Dithyramb to Dionysos* (1901) to see how deeply the Silver-Age classical spirit had taken hold of the young scholar:

Evoc! Give me your hands, my

Brothers

And forget that you are only

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You –

Let us be We: and in a sea of

Misery

Create great beauty for an instant too.

(reproduced in Tait 1984: 48)

In classic post-Nietzschean dithyrambic style, the young poet conjures a ‘mystical oneness’ and ‘collective unity’. There is also a strong political urgency. Lunacharsky’s dithyramb shows just how easily Silver-Age reactions against Tsarism and the encroaching individualism and alienation of the Western modern world could be adopted by Bolshevik revolutionaries and used, with only minor conceptual tweaks, to power early communist cultural policy.

Bourgeois and proletarian culture

Lunacharsky was at once a passionate champion of culture and a committed revolutionary. He enthusiastically encouraged the establishment of Proletkult, the association of proletarian cultural organisations which Narkompros sponsored and subsidised. But the two organisations soon came into conflict: the romantic revolutionaries of the intelligentsia on one side, the proletarian delegates to Proletkult, on the other. In 1918 the Petrograd Proletkult was already arguing that ‘all culture of the past might be called bourgeois’. ‘The proletariat would begin to destroy the old culture and create the new immediately after the revolution’ (Quoted in Fitzpatrick 1970: 92). Proletkult wanted, for example, a whole new proletarian theatre with an entirely new repertoire and new companies of non-professional actors.

Lenin himself intuitively sided with the innovators: his own view was intolerant of high culture insofar as it tended to neglect the suffering of the vast majority of the people, and he expressed this view with a suggestive allusion to Marie-Antoinette’s alleged response to the oppressed before a previous revolution:

Art belongs to the people. ... It should be understood and loved by the [labouring] masses. It must unite and elevate their feelings, thoughts and will. ... Must we serve sweet cakes to a small minority while the workers and peasants are in need of black bread?’

(Lenin, first quoted in Zetkin 1934: 13)

Then, as now, the literary products of the classical world were unhelpfully conflated with elite education and their ideologically and aesthetically unpalatable former receptions. Lunacharsky attempted to deal with this problem publicly amid the iconoclasm of the early 1920s by attempting to disentangle the perceived unity of what he referred to as the ‘original baby’ of the classical

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texts and the ‘epigonous’ bathwater of bourgeois neoclassicisms (Lunacharsky 1965: 75). In advising his correspondents against dispensing of both at the same time, he paved the way – over the rockiest terrain – for a new proletarian classicism, marginalized but not forgotten. At a moment of acute and highly politicised cultural crisis he straddled the apparent rifts between Romanticism and Realism, and Silver-Age classicism and Proletkult. Of course his ideas evolved (e.g. Medzhibovskaya 2013: 227–8), but in the polarisation chamber of War Communism and the New Economic Policy years (1921–24), he maintained a stalwartly neutral presence.²²

Plyaska – classicising dance

In 1908 Lunacharsky prophesied the arrival of a great dance of ‘monumental symbolic figures’, the archetypes of the proletariat’s ‘collective soul’ to a musical accompaniment unheard before. Like many of his generation’s thinkers, Lunacharsky looked to modern choric dance as the art form that might express most forcefully the spirit of the age. Lunacharsky encouraged many initiatives towards this goal, including the experimental school of the pioneering American dancer Isadora Duncan. In 1921, when Duncan pitched the idea of founding a children’s dancing school in Moscow, he responded succinctly: ‘Come to Moscow. We will give you a school and a thousand children. You may carry out your big idea on a big scale’ (Duncan & Macdougall 1929: 24–5).²³ In fact, Lunacharsky never expected her to arrive, and was totally unprepared when she did. The school, once founded, swiftly had its funding cut. It was a constant financial struggle for Duncan to keep it open.

In the mill of governmental reality, the Silver Age theories of art and culture were slowly ground down by the drive towards socialist realism. Before the Great Patriotic War, the ideas had not disappeared but undergone serious rebranding. For every activity (especially if state funded) a credible Marxist justification was expected. For example, Narkompros promoted education in musical movement and improvisational dance *because* music and dance were primitive forerunners to verbal expression. The dance form promoted at this time was the *plyaska*, or wild, passionate, unchoreographed, folk dance. It had formerly been considered that peasants *plyashut* – dance in a crude and uninhibited manner – while aristocrats *tantsuiut* – dance with refinement and usually in ballrooms. Once this class-based concept was intellectualised and valorised according to the Nietzschean formulations of such radical thinkers as Ivanov, Lunacharsky and Zieliński, it became an obsession of the revolutionary intelligentsia, which was subsequently inherited by Bolshevik policymakers. It is therefore no wonder that it was central in the cultural debates of Revolutionary Russia.

While the *minyadic* philologists of the old school sedulously ignored them, the theories of Nietzsche were imbibed and then domesticated by the Bolshevik *bacchantes*. Ivanov explained how the *maenads*, *bacchantes* and *Erinyes* of classical literature had been driven to their frenzied states by *plyaska*, and thus

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the Dionysiac ecstasy of improvised modern dance became fused with the revolutionary fervour of the progressive intelligentsia (Sirotkina 2010: 136). The new idiom encouraged the belief that it was the mass social movements occurring in their native land (no longer the ‘Slavic soul’) that created the perfect conditions for the rebirth of tragedy; the anticipated Slavic renaissance would be a Soviet renaissance. Adrian Piotrovsky, for example, one of Zieliński’s sons and, as we shall see, a committed revolutionary classicist, stated in 1920 that ‘The twenty-fifth of October has given the world back Aeschylus and the Renaissance. It has given birth to a generation with Aeschylus’ fiery soul’ (Piotrovsky 1920: 1).

Lunacharsky’s Narkompros oversaw the foundation of the Institute of the Living Word. Early on in their course of study, students at the Institute were encouraged to embody classical myths. Later they would improvise with singing, movements, and declamation. One of the Institute’s major protagonists, Stefanida Rudneva (1890–1989) was committed to the ideological accretions *plyaska* had gained at the turn of the century. Her group, *Heptachor*, taught at the Institute of the Living Word and the affiliated Institute of Rhythm. Like Duncan’s dance school, *Heptachor* was initially supported by the State, but when their funding was withdrawn, they registered as a private studio and made money through performances, touring with compositions including ‘The Odyssey’, ‘Calydonian Sin’, and ‘New Greek Songs’ (Sirotkina 2010: 143–4).

The studio’s last performance was in Leningrad in 1934, 20 years after their first educational trip to Greece with Zieliński and Vsevolod Meyerhold. It was modelled on the Silver-Age utopia of a theatre commune, keeping the flame of Hellas burning years after their prophet Zieliński repatriated to Poland. The *plyaska* of the 1910s, however, was barely recognisable in the later 1920s. It had been tamed beyond recognition, by increasing ideological claustrophobia and a tendency towards more mechanistic and choreographed styles of dance. In the 1930s Dionysian *plyaska* was put out to pasture.

World literature – classical translation

In 1918 Lunacharsky approached the internationally famous writer Maxim Gorky to head up a translation project of epic proportions. He had three aims in doing this; the first was to provide a good number of the largely anti-Bolshevik intelligentsia, including minyadic classicists, with a means of making a living in the new communist state, and therefore some reason not to emigrate. His second aim was to begin the job of spreading literacy and the best of world culture across the USSR, thus hurrying on the advent of communism. His third aim was to declare to the world that the new Soviet Union, even in the throes of civil war and economic crisis, was not only functioning but capable of vast cultural achievements.

Gorky had formerly been a vociferous critic of Tsarist Russia, which made him ideologically compatible with Lenin’s fledgling leading party. He quickly found himself at the helm of a cultural flagship of the new Soviet state. In 1918

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he founded the World Literature publishing venture (Khotimsky 2013: 119–54; Lazzarin 2013), which H.G. Wells would call ‘a sort of Russian encyclopedia of the literature of the world’. Wells continued: ‘In this strange Russia of conflict, cold, famine and pitiful privations there is actually going on now a literary task that would be inconceivable in the rich England and the rich America of today’ (1920: 47).

In 1919, a prospectus was produced for the World Literature series (*Vsemirnaya Literatura*). In its Preface Gorky states that the chief focus was international literature ‘from the beginning of the Great French Revolution until the Great Russian Revolution’. The aim was to give citizens access to every literary ‘treasure’ that had been created by the ‘European spirit’. He explains that in subsequent phases World Literature would move onto the literature of the Middle Ages, Slavic countries and ‘the picturesque thought and word painting of the East’ (Gorky 1919: 20).²⁴ Sadly, of the hundreds of literary works translated and edited in those years, only 112 World Literature books were actually published.

Curiously, not a single classical text was mentioned in Gorky’s catalogue. But the translation series was no classics-free-zone. The first two classical translations published were ancient novels: Petronius’s *Satyricon* (1924) and Achilles Tatius’s *Leucippe and Clitophon* (1925). The *Satyricon* is now generally acknowledged to be the work of Vladimir Amfiteatrov-Kadashev, who emigrated in August 1921 with his father, the world famous writer and anti-Bolshevik journalist, Aleksandr Amfiteatrov. *Leucippe and Clitophon* was the collaborative creation of an informal collective of translators in Leningrad, called ABDEM. The minyadic scholars Aleksandr Boldyrev, Aristid Dovatur, Andrei Jegunov and Andrei Mikhankov met weekly for eight years, and also produced in 1932 a translation of Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica* (Budaragina 2013: 13–14). ABDEM’s translation intended, in a similar manner to the Petronius edition, to preserve for the reader all the diversity of the Alexandrian author’s extraordinary and strange text. GosIzdat considered both translated editions to be works of scholarship, suitable only for ‘large central libraries’ (*Vsemirnaia literatura* 1927: 5).

ABDEM’s translation activity was brought to an abrupt end after the Heliodorus translation, when Stalin’s increasingly repressive measures began to affect the lives and work of classicists. Boldyrev and Jegunov were both exiled and Dovatur was sentenced to 10 years in labour camps for the common charge of ‘contra-revolutionary propaganda’. Unlike many accused of the same crime, Dovatur was not executed, but lived to become Head of Leningrad Classics Department during what is now considered the department’s ‘golden age’ (1957–71) (Budaragina 2013: 17).

After World Literature folded in 1924, several of its protagonists continued their work at the Academia publishing house, which had moved from Petrograd University, where it was founded in 1921, to Moscow, where from 1932 it was run by Gorky. Academia issued Piotrovsky’s *The Lyrics of Catullus* in 1928 and Kuzmin’s Apuleius’s *Golden Ass* in 1929. Both were extremely

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popular, and between 1922 and 1938 Academia published 35 books of classical translation (20 Greek, 15 Latin) with more than 230 thousand copies on classical antiquity topics (Ratz 1980: 17, 19–22).

The translator of Catullus, Aristophanes and Aeschylus, Adrian Piotrovsky (1898–1937) is perhaps best remembered now as a film and theatre director, but his first calling was as a classicist and translator. In his preface to Catullus's *Lyrics* he shows a passionate determination for the book to avoid the Scylla of becoming nothing more than a 'museum relic' and the Charybdis of fate as an ephemeral modern fad (Katull & Piotrovsky 1929: 35). Piotrovsky's translation managed not only to activate Catullus's lyric in its new reception context, but to recast it as a collection of contemporary poetry. The first edition of 2100 copies sold out immediately and a second edition of 3000 copies followed (Ratz 1980: 29).

A second generation *bachante*, Piotrovsky managed to contribute to nearly all of the early Soviet classical translations, in the role of translator, editor or introductory essayist. Such industry, however, was cut brutally short, when in 1937 he was arrested on charges of espionage and sabotage, and shot by the NKVD (the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or interior ministry). Every inch the committed revolutionary classicist, Piotrovsky became too well-known to stay safe during Stalin's purges.

Ancient theatre – classical productions

As seen in the case of *plyaska*, when we examine the Soviet reception of the classical in the performance and visual arts, a considerably more colourful and energetic picture of a living classics emerges than when we read the history of the discipline of Classics. This more or less conforms to our binary division between *bachantes* and *minyades*, but in the realm of classical translation there is some crossover. Two key contributors to the translation venture were also two of the most committed revolutionaries, who in the 1920s would certainly have fit the bacchic mould. Those were Piotrovsky and Radlov.

Lunacharsky had long been an advocate for freely accessible theatre in Russia, and after the 1917 revolution he did his best to make this possible.²⁵ In the 1920s, Maria Andreeva, Alexander Blok and Gorky, with Lunacharsky's support, produced a series of mass spectacles in Petrograd, many of which engaged with classical culture. They wanted to turn the theatre into a *gimnasium* for the people (Clark 1995: 110). The Russian architect and educationalist Ivan Fomin (1872–1936) was commissioned to design and build an amphitheater specifically for the purpose, styled along Greek lines. A 1000-seat theatre was built on Kamenny Ostrov (Stone Island), in which Piotrovsky and Radlov staged mass outdoor spectacles. As Katerina Clark has observed, the two directors 'believed they were getting closer to the spirit of their beloved Hellenic Greece with their work on the mass spectacles than they could with any translation of actual Greek texts' (Clark 1995: 136–7).

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Not all their classical productions were staged outdoors. To mark the May-Day festivities in 1920 Radlov and Piotrovsky directed actors from the Theatrical and Dramatic Arts Workshop in a production based on the Aeschylean tragedy *Prometheus Bound*. *Promethean Fire* played in the Opera Hall of the Narodny Dom (People's House) and was attended exclusively by soldiers of the Red Army who, according to one review, received the show 'with stormy applause' (Zolotnitsky 1998: 6–7).

Their play for schoolchildren *The Battle of Salamis* (1919) drew on sources from Herodotus, Thucydides, and Aeschylus. The authors declared that they were working towards a theatre of the future. Clark has seen the play as a reversal of the Bolshevik order of priorities as it showed 'the triumph of spiritual forces over the material' (1995: 137). This certainly evidences the relative plurality of opinion and artistic freedom of its day. In 1924 Radlov, who was directing their version of *Lysistrata*, called Aristophanes's play 'a unique specimen of political comedy' and saw in its central concept 'war against war' a slogan uniquely in keeping with their own time of crisis.

In 1932 Radlov – who a year later was awarded the title of Honoured Artist and in 1939 would be decorated with the Order of the Red Labour Banner – embarked on a version of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* for production in the garden of the Narodny Dom.²⁶ He appears to have added a class-struggle element foreign to the original play. Critics detected and praised what Zolotnitsky terms 'directorial sociological interference', which resulted in the theme of social inequality (Tsar versus the people denied of their rights) dominating the story. An eyewitness recorded that due to the dry summer the play attracted 'large numbers of spectators who watched the performance free of charge and standing' (Arkady Minchkovsky cited in Zolotnitsky 1998: 71). A more aggressive presentism in the reception of the classical was rewarded. In the public library and university corridor, the classics may have been a haven from dominant ideology, it was not so on the stage.

Russia is a Sphinx – classical poetry

Writing in his 1932 *On Literature and Art*, Lunacharsky argued that Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921), the revolutionary poet of aristocratic origin, was attempting to forget himself in the Bacchic 'musical storm' of the October Revolution, 'to wash away all memory of the unclean and tormenting experiences which he had undergone in the degenerate rotten life of the last years of the Old World' (1965: 197). One of Blok's most famous poems, 'The Scythians' (January 1918), figures the Russian revolutionaries as the descendants of the ancient Scythians, the barbarian hordes at the gates of Greece and Rome.²⁷

O, old world! While you still survive,
While you still suffer your sweet torture,
Come to a halt, sage as Oedipus,

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Before the ancient riddle of the Sphinx!

Russia is a Sphinx. ...

(lines 21–5)

Come to your senses for the last time, old world!

Our barbaric lyre is calling you

One final time, to a joyous brotherly feast

To a brotherly feast of labor and of peace!

(lines 73–6)²⁸

The Scythians, the ‘we’ of the poem, menacingly invite the ‘old world’ Europeans to a ‘brotherly feast’. Should Europe choose to refuse, the Scythians will remember their old role as barbaric warriors and destroy their western neighbours. The appropriation of the Scythian hordes gives Blok the opportunity to pitch the blood-curdling Dionysian savagery of the East against the Apollonian rationality and stagnant civilisation of old Europe. In his poem, the revolutionary Russians occupy the territory between, perfectly positioned to affect a cataclysmic reconciliation of opposites, by overseeing the savage but necessary destruction of the entrenched rationalism of the status quo (see Rosenthal 2002: 152). Or, as Lunacharsky put it, he ‘contrasted the immensity and worldwide significance of what was going on in the Eurasian plains of Russia to the narrow reaches of bourgeois ideology’ (1965: 197).

Another hijacking of antiquity takes place in Blok’s essay ‘Catiline’ (1918), a seminal comparison of the Tsarist regime and the Roman regime from the fall of the Republic to the time of Jesus Christ in which Catiline had been figured as a Roman Bolshevik.²⁹ Blok began not with Catiline but Ovid, finding in Ovid’s rapidly changing Rome as expressed in *Metamorphoses* a precursor of his own century and environment. Referring to Ovidian metamorphosis in an attempt to explicate the extraordinary nature of one transformed by the spirit of his times from passive observer to engaged poet, Blok went on to situate Russia’s recent revolution in a chain of transformative rebellions stretching back not only to ‘the Roman Bolshevik’ Catiline’s abortive uprising against the Roman government but also to the ‘revolution’ several decades later of Jesus Christ, pitted against the Roman state (1919: 69–70, 86). In a stunning cognitive leap, Blok then linked these events to the Roman poet Catullus’s poem 63, ‘Attis’, a lasting, artistic response to the same ‘revolutionary wind’ that had inspired Catiline (1919: 71). In so doing, he asserted a symbolist view of history, characterized above all by its mythological thrust, its focus on individual, personal transformation, and its linkage of life and art.

Blok’s ‘Scythians’ is a powerful poem that responds directly to the revolutions of 1917, and the poet’s head, filled as it was with Silver-Age classicism, is clearly bent back in trance. But even so Blok’s poetry soon fell out of favour. Lunacharsky later reflected that the aristocratic poet was dancing on his own

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and to the wrong music. He was unable, Lunacharsky argues, to appreciate the truly revolutionary music of Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership because in it he could detect ‘elements of a great and reasonable spirit of organisation’, which was ‘a spirit utterly alien to that past in which Blok’s whole nature was so deeply rooted’ (1965: 169). Blok’s utopian, mystic and apocalyptic verses, however much they smoked with hatred of the bourgeoisie and revolutionary fire, were considered by Bolshevik custodians of proletarian culture to be romanticising, Christian ravings, and quite divorced from the ‘iron logic’ of the class struggle (Lunacharsky 1965: 197).

Conclusion

The majority of accounts of how the discipline of Classics fared in the wake of the Russian Revolution have tended to show classicism in crisis. The brave *minyades*’ diligent tenure of a lifeline for classical philology, in particular, through an era where it was held in the highest suspicion, was a feat for which Russian and world classics will be eternally grateful. Yet the tale of early Soviet classics features as many revolutionary *bacchantes* as there were ideologically indifferent *minyades*. When we assess revolutionary Russian engagements with the classical, in a broader sense, i.e. beyond the realm of the academy and the discipline of classical philology, an entirely different picture emerges.

In Tsarist Russia, engagement with classical culture was the preserve of the expensively educated intelligentsia.³⁰ The confluence of the outstanding (if painful) classical *gimnasium* education of later nineteenth-century Russia and the advent of Modernist classicism sweeping in from Western Europe gave rise to an extraordinarily passionate and creative classicism, which appeared to herald a third renaissance. But the passion for classics and the depth of scholarship – for a generation at least – made its presence felt in revolutionary and Soviet Russia.

The publication of the classical authors in unprecedentedly high numbers and their distribution across the Soviet Union might have cleansed them of their former Tsarist/bourgeois class associations. By the mid 1930s, however, due to the harder cultural line enforced under Stalin, the publishing house Academia and similar cultural enterprises came under heightened suspicion. Those books that attempted to democratise classical culture became markers of recalcitrant bourgeois values (X s’ezd 1938: 41).

Piotrovsky and Radlov’s experiments in adapting classical theatre to mass spectacle belie a widespread contemporary ambition to resuscitate old Greece in the new Soviet Union. The classical spirit tore across early twentieth-century Russia like a Bacchic entourage in *plyaska*-ecstasy. Before the Stalinist suppression of culture, and the homogenisation resulting from the enforcement of Zhdanovist realism, there was a third renaissance in the wings, and through the revolutionary emphasis on democratisation and mass culture, it had the potential – for a time – to burst its banks and flood a socially and culturally stratified society in crisis.

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Notes

- 1 We would like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for supporting the research undertaken in preparation for this paper.
- 2 The popular experience of the classical via art galleries and museums, not included in this paper, is a promising area for further research.
- 3 On Nietzsche's influence in Russia see Lahti 2018, esp. 7–12 and Rosenthal 2002. On the complex interplay of Christianity in Russian modernist receptions of the classical, see Kalb 2018.
- 4 See also Gavrillov on Jakov M. Borovsky 2013: 19–36.
- 5 E.g. Karsai et al. 2013, Movrin & Olechowska 2016, *Drevnii mir i my* 1997–2014.
- 6 Classics (capitalised) refers to the academic/educational discipline.
- 7 Starikovskiy 2017: 458; Maksimova 2005: 23; Nosov 1996: 206.
- 8 On pre-revolutionary classics see Kalb 2008: 7–13; Gavrillov 2013: 19–24; Maksimova 2005; Nosov 1996; Frolov 2006: 115–436; Kelly 1989: 237; Aleshintsev 1912; Grigoriev 1900: 294–587.
- 9 The requirement of a qualification in Greek for university entrance lasted until 1902, that of Latin until the Revolution of 1917.
- 10 In 1979 Mikhail Gasparov even referred to the odious phenomenon as *gimnazicheskoye otrashcheniye* ('gymnasium disgust'), which matches to some degree the 'grammar grind' of high Victorian British classical education. See Gasparov 1979/2018: 171. For the 'grammar grind' see Stray 1998: 48.
- 11 From the memoirs of Vladimir Shimkevich (1858–1923), a Russian zoologist and academic, in Maksimova 2005: 270–1.
- 12 Hall & Stead 2019; Waquet 2002; Stray 1998; Stray 2018; Vasunia 2013; Stead and Hall 2015.
- 13 In Russian Фаддей Зелинский, Faddey Zelinsky.
- 14 On Classics at St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad University during the period see Budaragina 2013: 3–18, Gavrillov 2013: 19–36; Novikov & Perfilova 2011: 8–12. For an overview see Braginskaya 2016: 35–49.
- 15 For the Slavic renaissance in the context of Silver Age Russia see: Braginskaya 2004: 51–8; Braginskaya 2018; Nikolaev 2004: 259–68; Kelly 1989: 236–40.
- 16 On this group and the 'cult of Eros', see, e.g. Bullock 2016: 260ff with full bibliography.
- 17 Kemp-Welch 1991: 3; Read 1990: 47–51; Gavrillov 2013: 24.
- 18 Read 1990; Finkel 2007: 3, 240–1; Kemp-Welch 1991: 1–2.
- 19 N.B. After WW2 Stalin reintroduced Latin to some secondary schools, see Gavrillov 2013: 28, Lurie 1997: 187, and Davidson 2009: 17–18.
- 20 McReynolds and Popkin 1998: 66–71; Davidson 2009.
- 21 Tait 1984: 1; for the importance of Lunacharsky for revolutionary classics see Hall in Stead & Hall 2015: 254.
- 22 On Lunacharsky's influence on Lenin's address to the First All-Russia Congress of Proletkult (Moscow in October 1920) see Hall in Stead & Hall 2015: 254–5.
- 23 See also Chambers 2006: 74.
- 24 Quoted from the English version of the Preface.
- 25 Clark 1995: 110. On the Russian Popular Theatre Movement see Thurston 1998.
- 26 N.B. The titular role was played by the famous tragic actor Yuri Yuryev (1872–1948) and the designer was the artist Valentina Khodasevich.
- 27 On Blok's Scythianism see Rosenthal 2002: 151–3.
- 28 *From the Ends to the Beginning: A Bilingual Anthology of Russian Poetry*, http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/mdenner/Demo/texts/scythians_blok.html – accessed 08/06/2019. Translated by Wachtel, Tulchinsky & Wilbur 2001.
- 29 See Kalb 2008: 106–28; Greco 2015: 222–70; Tolmachiou 2016; Magomedova 1980.

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30 While this is generally true, the study of Tsarist popular classics is yet to be undertaken. The educational drives of the late nineteenth century might well have precipitated some unexpected working-class engagements with classical culture like those documented by Hall and Stead 2019 and at classicsandclass.info.

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