

**A Southern Silver Age: Baku, Tiflis, and the Institutions of  
Literary Modernism in War and Revolution**

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis I follow the movements and activities of a group Russian's *fin de siècle* literati as they negotiate the uncertain age of the First World War and Russia's revolutions and civil wars. Like any good case study, the value of the story lies not only in its ability to illuminate a heretofore unknown corner of the history of Russian modernism, but also in the extent to which it provides a reassessment of more transcendent historical questions. By examining how refugee poets migrated from the imperial metropolises to the provincial cities of Tiflis (Tbilisi) and Baku, this effort engages with the historical literature on the connection between World War I and the Russian revolutions, the emergence and subordination of national states in the dissolution of empire, the building of early Soviet institutions, and the relationship between the intelligentsia and the state in the early years of Bolshevik power. At the broadest level, I assert that each of those historical paradigms fall short when asked to account for the biographies of these poets and so must be reexamined. More concretely I show how the material circumstances of survival in a collapsing state, and the opportunities provided in its reconstitution informed the actions of individual artists, and how those decisions, if briefly, determined the shape of early Soviet cultural institutions.

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## **A Note on Names and Transliteration**

The names of many places in the Caucasus have changed frequently over the last century and a half, reflecting shifts in ideology and political power. The situation is further complicated by the fact that many locations have multiple renderings which were current at the time depending on which language was in use. As with any region in a period of ascending nationalism, the labeling of geography has been imbued with a sharp political significance, which leaves the historian at a loss for a compromise which would satisfy all interested parties. I have elected to use the imperial toponym that was current in 1917 and which was retained in the majority of Russian language sources I have consulted. Not all of these are easily identifiable as contemporary cities and for that reason I will give the present day equivalent in parentheses following the first instance of each name.

When it occurs, I have opted to retain the contemporary Azerbaijani spelling of proper nouns. While Azerbaijani is written in a Latin script nearly identical to Turkish, the letter “ə” may give the reader pause. This symbol, a schwa, which represents the most common vowel in the language, is pronounced /æ/, as in the American rendering of the word “bad.”

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## Introduction

In August 1919, Aleksei Kruchenykh made the trip from Tiflis to Baku, the freshly unoccupied capital of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, British troops having decamped that very month. Kruchenykh, an important member of the radical literary avant-garde, had been in the Caucasus since the spring of 1916, but until that point he had been occupied by the steadily growing circle of artists and poets who had been congregating in Tiflis. His move to independent Azerbaijan began a new chapter in the history of Russian émigré art in the Caucasus, a period that, *in toto*, was recognized by Vladimir Markov as “one of the most fascinating, though little-known episodes in the history of Russian futurism.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that Markov made this observation in 1968, and that the artistic activities in the Caucasus stretched beyond the bounds of the avant-garde, the Baku period in particular has remained almost completely unexplored. In fact, the only dedicated treatment of the Russian modernism in Baku is confined to less than twenty pages in Aleksei Krusanov’s *Russkii Avangard: Futuristicheskaia Revoliutsiia, 1917-1921*.<sup>2</sup> More often than not, this chapter of literary history has been dismissed in a few sentences as a brief interlude in the creative life of one or another of the writers it concerns. The implicit evaluation of the Baku period as somehow unfruitful or unworthy of attention is in extreme dissonance with the stature of the artists who called the city home in the years of war and revolution.

Indeed, it was the observation of Professor Harsha Ram that, “given the presence at the time of Aleksei Kruchenykh, Sergei Gorodetsky, Viacheslav Ivanov, Velimir Khlebnikov, and

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 336.

<sup>2</sup> Andrei Krusanov, *Russkii avangard, 1907-1932*, tom 2, kniga 2, *Futuristicheskaia revoliutsiia, 1917-1921* [Russian avant-garde, 1907-1932. Vol. 2, book 2, Futurist revolution, 1917-1921] (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2003), 328-344.

other writers, one wonders if [a] book on Russian literary life in Baku might be in order,” which served as the impetus for this project.<sup>3</sup> In many ways the work that follows is an attempt to chronicle a subsection of the unlikely cultural explosion that occurred in the Caucasus as the region’s cities became the home of Russian silver age intellectuals who found themselves uprooted in the wake of the revolutions of 1917. Indeed the most obvious contribution of this thesis is the narrative which resulted from carefully piecing together the activities of various artists and writers who were often as silent in their own accounts of the period as the literary scholars and historians who followed them.

Throughout this process I have attempted to integrate their narrative into the larger political and social history of the region. This aspect, which is often missing from accounts more obviously concerned with biographic detail or literary analysis, provides essential context for the story and helps to explain the motivations behind the writers, who are often portrayed as operating in a vacuum, cordoned off from the violence of the Russian civil war by the peaks of the Caucasus Mountains. This approach has, in turn, forced me to ask questions about the relationship between the historical development of the cultural field in Tiflis and Baku and the better documented environment of Petrograd and Moscow.

The interplay between this case study and the larger themes of Russian and Soviet historiography, which ultimately provides the theoretical ground work for the rest of the thesis, will be addressed at length in the first chapter. The second chapter will provide an overview of the Tiflis activities of the group of writers I have selected to concentrate on. This section draws heavily on the work of the literary historian Tat’iana Nikol’skaia, whose 2000 examination of Russian cultural life in Tiflis during the period provides an extremely well researched

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<sup>3</sup> Harsha Ram, “Modernism on the Periphery: Literary Live in Post revolutionary Tbilisi,” *Kritika* 5, 2 (2004): 370.

chronology and source base that necessarily forms the starting point for any such study.<sup>4</sup> I have tried to contextualize this account by recourse to the growing body of scholarship which seeks to better understand the place of the South Caucasus in the great power rivalry of WWI and the Russian civil war. The third chapter, which consists of the most substantial original research, is devoted to the relocation of the Tiflis poets to Baku. Here I engage the ways in which artists reacted to the arrival of the Red Army and the city's subsequent integration into the emerging infrastructure of Soviet cultural institutions. This is followed by a close reading of the journal *Iskusstvo*, the official organ of the Arts Section of the Azerbaijani Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros). This journal, which was published over the course of 1921 during an important period of reorganization and centralization within the Soviet cultural apparatus, sheds light on how the Baku cultural institutions, and in particular the journal's chief editor Sergei Gorodetsky, reacted to the changing environment engendered by the end of the civil war and the shift to the era of reconstruction and the New Economic Policy (NEP). In the concluding chapter I will address the ways in which the different actors left the region in the early 1920s and how their story reflects on the main currents of Russian and Soviet historiography.

### **Choosing the *Kruzhok***

In light of the panoply of cultural figures who moved through the displaced communities in Baku and Tiflis, it is difficult to distinguish the central actors of the period. Different people were of differing importance at different times. Their centrality depended on their stature in the pre-war cultural world, but also their position in Tiflis, a product of their creative output, organizational acumen, and ability to secure resources. While aesthetic schools

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<sup>4</sup> Tat'iana Nikol'skaia, *"Fantasticheskii gorod": Russkaia kul'turnaia zhizn' v Tbilisi, 1917-1921* ["Fantastic City": Russian Cultural Life in Tbilisi, 1917-21] (Moscow: Piataia strana, 2000).

occasionally dictated association, much of the factionalism that had developed in Petrograd and Moscow in the years before the war seems to have dissolved in the common experience of dislocation. It would be wrong to assert that artistic styles folded into each other, but it is important to note that the conditions that attached such sharp political meanings, positive or pejorative, to the labels of Futurist, left, and formalist arts were not reproduced in the Caucasus. More than anything, what links together the cast I have assembled is their active participation in the literary life in both Baku and Tiflis, as well as their continued presence across the divide of Soviet intervention.

The South Caucasus were first and foremost a region of transit, of resources and refugees, of soldiers and of states. Oftentimes the most noteworthy figures in the broader context of literary history were the most ephemeral, disappearing from the region as suddenly as they appeared, while those completely unknown in other contexts show up repeatedly. As a result, certain literary celebrities who were present at the time, Vasily Kamensky, Viacheslav Ivanov, and Velimir Khlebnikov to name only the most obvious, play less central roles in the narrative that follows than might be expected.

In search of the biographies behind many of the names I encountered in my research, I have relied heavily on John Bowlt's annotated edition of the salon album of Vera Sudeikin-Stravinsky.<sup>5</sup> While Bowlt occasionally confuses the political chronology, he has supplied this collection with unrivaled details about the life and works of many of the period's minor figures, along an extensive bibliography for those seeking further details. It should be the first point of reference for any scholar dealing with the intricate social networks which developed in the émigré cultural world of revolutionary Baku and Tiflis.

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<sup>5</sup> John E. Bowlt, ed. and trans., *The Salon Album of Vera Sudeikin-Stravinsky* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

## Chapter 1: Lost to the Confluence: Cultural Life at the Intersections of Russian and Soviet Historiography

In August 1915, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Russian Futurism's *enfant terrible* packed up his things and left the Russian capital to become a drawing instructor at a school for girls in the North Caucasian town of Batalpashinsk, present day Cherkessk.<sup>6</sup> At the age of twenty-nine, Kruchenykh was still young enough to have to worry about the draft, and for the time being at least, this job as a teacher in a small town with a population just shy of 20,000 was a feasible, if isolated way to keep himself from being mobilized. As war bled into revolution and again into civil war, Kruchenykh would move repeatedly, first to work as a draftsman on the Russian military railroad in occupied Anatolia, and then to Tiflis and Baku, capitals of the newly independent South Caucasian states of Georgia and Azerbaijan. It was only in Baku, in the spring of 1920, that Kruchenykh would come in contact with the developing Soviet cultural institutions, almost two and a half years after the Bolsheviks had staged their October coup in Petrograd.

Kruchenykh's story is not unique. The First World War dislocated vast sections of Russian society and radically altered the demographic makeup of the empire. In the years leading up to the war, industrialization brought large populations from the countryside into the cities, and once the war began, troop mobilization combined with military advance and retreat set soldiers, prisoners, and refugees caroming across the Russian territory from factories to fronts and back again. For the last decade and a half, this movement and displacement has been

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<sup>6</sup> Alexei Kruchenykh, "*Mir zatreshchit, a golova moia uzhe izriadno*": *Pis'ma A. A. Shemshurinu i M. V. Matiushinu, 1913-1921* ["The world's on the brink, but my head's already gone over": Letters to A. A. Shemhurin and M. V. Matiushin, 1913-1921], ed. Andrei Krusanov (Moscow: Gileia, 2012), 27-28.

the object of extremely fruitful scholarly attention.<sup>7</sup> Very little, however, has been said about its effect on the middle strata of Russian society and on the cultural elite in particular.

One explanation for this may be what Joshua Sanborn has called “the long standing predilection of migration scholars to focus their attention on the disadvantaged.” But as Sanborn goes on to say, “disadvantaged migrants like civilian refugees and ethnically cleansed populations [...] were not the only ones on the move [...] during the war. So too were a wide range of others.”<sup>8</sup> These included draft dodgers like Kruchenykh, but also mobilized members of the intelligentsia like the poet Sergei Gorodetsky, who in a fit of patriotism ran off to cover the Ottoman front as a war correspondent for *Russkoe Slovo*, eventually becoming, like Kruchenykh, a central part of the South Caucasian cultural milieu in Baku and Tiflis.

It should also be noted that many of the civilians who found themselves homeless and mobile were not impoverished peasants, but rather constituted regional elites uprooted by the vicissitudes of war. As Aaron Cohen points out, refugees in the Russian capital played a large role in stimulating the wartime cultural market, accounting for sizeable portion of art sales at auction, and swelling enrolment at local art schools.<sup>9</sup> The consistent focus on the most vulnerable stratum of displacement oversimplifies the phenomenon and obscures the many and far ranging ways it affected Russian society.

In an instructive instance of this gap, even studies one would imagine to be explicitly concerned with the displacement of the cultural intelligentsia, such as examinations of Russian émigré society in Europe in the interwar period, tend to begin with the moment when the

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<sup>7</sup> See, Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Joshua Sanborn, “Unsettling the Empire: Violent Migrations and Social Disaster in Russia during World War I,” *The Journal of Modern History* 77, no. 2 (2005): 294.

<sup>9</sup> Aaron J. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable: World War, Modern Art, and the Politics of Public Culture in Russia, 1914-1917* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 93-94.

nobles, capitalists, writers, White generals, and the nearly three million civilians who made up “Russia abroad,” crossed the borders of the disintegrating empire.<sup>10</sup> This silence as to the changes of social topography *within* Russian territory is the product of an over determined narrative which portrays the reconstitution of Russian lands, and the borders that delineated them, as inevitable. Whatever fundamental merits of this perspective, it obscures the fact that for many at the time, Tiflis seemed as far away from Moscow as Paris. The story that privileges large urban centers at a time of such mercurial populations foregrounds a small cast of characters and settings as paramount to understanding the course of Russian history, effectively excluding a range of diffuse forces which spread across the territory of the crumbling empire, from the western borderlands to the Pacific Ocean.

Already in the mid-1980s it was obvious to many historians that the realities of civil war had deeply conditioned many of the developments within the young Soviet state.<sup>11</sup> Although at first this observation was confined to the way in which policies of War Communism prefigured the so-called great retreat initiated by Stalin towards the end of NEP, over the following decade it became increasingly accepted that the legacy of the civil war was manifest not only in party politics, but broadly throughout Russian society. With this in mind, historians began to reassess the effects of the conflict across the cultural and social spheres of Russian and Soviet life.<sup>12</sup>

Since the beginning of the 2000s, this trend has been coupled with the realization that the civil war is perhaps best understood within a timeline that also includes the First World

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<sup>10</sup> Marc Raeff’s study can be considered representative in this regard, Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> For a summary, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Civil War as a Formative Experience,” in *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution*, ed. Abbot Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 57-76.

<sup>12</sup> For a representative volume of this trend, see Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg, and Ronald G. Suny, eds. *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

War, a chronology that Peter Holquist has dubbed Russia's "continuum of crisis."<sup>13</sup> Only recently however have historians begun to extend that framework to the study of Russian cultural history.<sup>14</sup>

This image of intellectuals as somehow beyond this historical moment is equally present in analyses of the civil war and it is frequently asserted that, while there were artists who cooperated with the regime, most notably the radical avant-garde, they were in the minority.<sup>15</sup> The larger section of the intelligentsia, it is commonly asserted, refused to engage with the Bolshevik administration, instead opting to steadfastly carry on with their cultural pursuits in private amid the desperate material conditions of the revolution. The romantic image of this position is neatly summed up by the philosopher and sociologist Fyodor Stepan, who in 1934, recalled: "When one thinks back [...] to Soviet Russia in the first years, it seems hard to believe that half-starving men could assemble in great numbers several times a week in badly lighted and unheated rooms, to debate philosophical problems for three or four hours and listen to poems."<sup>16</sup> In keeping with a narrative organized around the ebbs and flows of Communist coercion, the cultural pause of the civil war is depicted as followed by the pluralism of NEP, a period dominated by what Sheila Fitzpatrick in 1974 identified as the "soft line on culture."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Holquist, *Making War and Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> For two examples of this new direction see, Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*; and Nina Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Dietrich Beyrau, "Broken Identities: The Intelligentsia in Revolutionary Russia," in *Social Identities in Revolutionary Russia*, ed. Madhavan K. Palat (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 147.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Stuart Finkel, *On the Ideological Front: The Russian Intelligentsia and the Making of the Soviet Public Sphere* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 89.

<sup>17</sup> Fitzpatrick defined the 'soft' line as "the product of a policy of expedient accommodation with the intelligentsia, on non-negotiable terms laid down by the party leadership and without institutional decrees." Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The 'Soft' Line on culture and Its Enemies: Soviet Cultural Policy, 1922-1927," *Slavic Review* 33, no. 2 (1974): 267.

Starting in the 1990s, however, most notably as a result of work of Christopher Read and Katarina Clark, it became clear that this interpretation of NEP was heavily reliant on an implicit comparison with later processes of Stalinization, the cultural revolution, and the 1932 decree “On the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organizations” which liquidated independent artistic organizations in favor of the centralized writers’ union: a continuum conditioned by a steady march towards the total domination of Socialist Realism.<sup>18</sup> This reevaluation was predicated on the assertions that: while there were “elements of ‘pluralism’ to be found in intellectual life during NEP [...] they were not defining of the times,”<sup>19</sup> and that “the essential difference between the civil war and NEP periods in culture was not one of attack followed by relaxation [but] rather the replacement of arbitrariness by greater organization.”<sup>20</sup> In the years since, this new paradigm has led to the assertion that NEP was a period in which the development of new Soviet institutions went hand in hand with an increased centralization and coercive potential within the cultural sphere.<sup>21</sup>

The history of Russia’s avant-garde, on the other hand, has provided a constant counterpoint to this narrative. This was a loosely defined group of artists and writers whose early and enthusiastic engagement with the Soviet state has encouraged the creation of a separate historiographic trend. Paul Wood’s article on the politics of the avant-garde continues to provide the most thorough analysis of the evolution of this trend.<sup>22</sup> Wood argues that the history of the avant-garde has been by turns interpreted as the story of naïve utopians caught up in the

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Read, *Culture and Power in Revolutionary Russia: The Intelligentsia and the Transition from Tsarism to Communism* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Katarina Clark, “The ‘Quiet Revolution’ in Soviet Intellectual Life,” in *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, and Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 210-230.

<sup>19</sup> Clark, “The ‘Quiet Revolution,’” 210.

<sup>20</sup> Read, *Culture and Power*, 168.

<sup>21</sup> See Finkel, *On the Ideological Front*.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Wood, “The Politics of the Avant-Garde,” in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1992), 1-24.

turmoil of revolution; committed artistic revolutionaries brought down by “the monolithic party, the backwards people, and economic dearth”,<sup>23</sup> and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the obvious and complicit precursor totalitarian Socialist Realism.<sup>24</sup>

The question of the politics of the Soviet avant-garde is at its root an issue of continuity between prerevolutionary Russian culture, the legacy of the initial years of the Bolshevik project, and the ultimate form taken by Stalinism. In this sense, the history of interpretation of the avant-garde has been closely related to the fluctuations in temperament towards the Soviet regime, as well as attitudes to the revolution and its later manifestations. Despite this connection, there has been a reluctance to integrate an understanding of the avant-garde into the broader framework of Soviet studies, and even within the field of intellectual history it is generally treated as somehow apart. This is perhaps the result of a feeling that this art was, politically speaking, marginal, “little more than the utopian daydreaming of young artists.”<sup>25</sup>

Previously it could be said that this tendency reflected both limited archival access and the recognition of the very real repression faced by many radical artists. But it should be noted that this has also been the product of what Boris Groys called “a rather naive and ‘rosy’ notion of art that gradually gained currency in twentieth-century aesthetics. According to this view, art is an activity that is independent of power and seeks to assert the autonomy of the individual and the attendant virtues of individual freedom.”<sup>26</sup> In short, as the proverbial foil to a monolithic totalitarianism, there was a tendency to excuse the avant-garde from the type of critical attention leveled at other aspects of the Soviet regime.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>24</sup> The latter was most strongly argued in Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> Iva Glisic, “Caffeinated Avant-Garde: Futurism during the Russian Civil War: 1917-1921,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 58, no. 3 (2012): 355.

<sup>26</sup> Groys, *Total Art of Stalinism*, 7.

Although, in the time since the publication of Wood's essay, several studies have furthered the effort to come to terms with the proximity of the avant-garde to the Soviet government, they have mostly fallen short of placing these developments within the broader context of the foundation of the Soviet state.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the literature of political history has largely ignored the potential significance of contemporaneous artistic developments.<sup>28</sup> The avant-garde has attracted this type of debate specifically because of its much vaunted early collaboration with the Soviet state. Recent scholarship however has challenged the extent to which that relationship was rooted in an absolute ideological congruency, as opposed to historical contingency. The avant-garde artists who were more likely to exist in the margins of the socio-economic field of Russian cultural life were, in Petrograd and to a lesser extent in Moscow, situationally encouraged to seize on a type of administrative power that had never before been within reach. The fact that in the South Caucasus, early Soviet cultural institutions were not dominated by radical modernists suggests that aesthetic principals are a misleading category under which to organize a history of the construction of early Soviet cultural institutions.<sup>29</sup>

The story of Russian modernism in the Caucasian borderlands is one that exists on the margins of the historical narratives outlined above. As such, it has rarely been addressed

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<sup>27</sup> For example, Maria Gouch, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Deven Fore, ed., "Soviet Factography," special issue *October* 118 (2006); Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> As Wood also notes, the most significant exception is Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>29</sup> This is further supported by recent studies which have shown the multiform development of cultural institutions in Petrograd, Vitebsk, and Moscow. See respectively Pamela Kachurin, "Malevich as Soviet Bureaucrat: Ginkhik and the Survival of the Avant-Garde, 1924-1926," in *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth*, ed. Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder (London: Pindar Press, 2007), 121-138; Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); and Gurianova, *Aesthetics of Anarchy*.

directly. For literary and art historians it is frequently viewed as an aberration from the central trajectory of Soviet cultural history, in part because it was so late to engage with the state. The actors concerned were not disadvantaged enough to be considered as refugees, the territory of the Caucasus, as part of the former empire that was reincorporated into the Soviet state, excludes the region from the story of Russia abroad. At the same time, regional histories are inevitably placed within a national framework which is not amenable to the imperial geography observed by these communities in their tendency to move between the cities of Baku and Tiflis without regard for national borders. In an important sense, the history of Russian émigrés in the Caucasus is fractured by the imposition of a national historiography incapable of satisfactorily accounting for cross regional forces.<sup>30</sup>

The story is complicated further by the fact that the period is often also marginalized in the accounts of the artists themselves. Kruchenykh, for example rarely reminisced about the time he spent in Baku. This can partially be explained by the fact that the period could be seen as unremarkable in terms of the practice of Soviet auto-biography, a genre frequently used more to establish revolutionary credentials than document the past.<sup>31</sup> As such, his recollections are uniformly terse as in the 1928 collection *15 Years of Russian Futurism* when he states simply: “I worked at Rosta [the Russian Telegraph Agency] with Velimir Khlebnikov [...] and others; got into disputes with and scandalize Viacheslav Ivanov, Sergei Gorodetsky, and the local poets and professors.”<sup>32</sup> No less tersely, in a 1960 speech at the Central State Archives of Literature

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<sup>30</sup> For two important attempts to move beyond this frame, see Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917-1921* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951); and James Forsyth, *The Caucasus: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). The former, however, predominately seeks to be a political history, while the later has difficulty moving beyond its reliance on nationally framed secondary literature.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Comins-Richmond, “The Polemics of Recollection: Three Russian Futurists Struggle over the Past,” *a/b: Auto/Biography* 12, no. 1 (1997): 22-36.

<sup>32</sup> Alexei Kruchenykh, “Avto biografiia dichaishego” [Autobiography of a savage], in *K istorii russkogo futurizma: Vospominani i dokumenty* [Towards a history of Russian futurism: Recollections and documents], ed. Nina Gurianova (Moscow: Gileia, 2006), 317.

and Art of the USSR, he passed quickly over the period saying, “the international situation was difficult. The White Guards were approaching from the North Caucasus and Rostov-on-Don, there was famine on the Volga. I wrote a couple of gloomy poems about hunger and poison cormorants.”<sup>33</sup> These descriptions attempt either to emphasize the poet’s position as the advance guard of revolutionary Futurism (scandalizing the bourgeois Ivanov and Gorodetsky), or simply dismiss the period as one of prerevolutionary gloom.

This portrayal ignores the fact that prior to the Bolshevik seizure of Baku, Kruchenykh was a major node in a network of poets that had been established in the Caucasus over the course of WWI and the civil war. By reinforcing the traditional chronology of a world bisected by the revolution, or in this case by the Bolshevik ascension in Azerbaijan, Kruchenykh obscures the ways in which he was associated with a network formed in the midst of what Soviet scholarship would portray as counterrevolutionary environments, and the role such networks played in the foundation of the emerging Soviet state. In fact, recent scholarship on the transformation of the cultural intelligentsia during the Russian Revolution, civil war, and early Soviet period has stressed the role of similar networks in securing resources, privileges, and political security during uncertain times. Eventually these networks even went beyond securing the basic elements of physical and professional sustenance, evolving into centers of agency from which the new Soviet citizenry could participate in the development of state structures.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Sergei M. Sukhoparov, *Aleksei Kruchenykh: Sud’ba budetlianina* [Alexei Kruchenykh: The fate of a futurist] (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1992), 103.

<sup>34</sup> For variations of this argument, see Barbara Walker, “Kruzhok Culture: The Meaning of Patronage in the Early-Soviet Literary World,” *Contemporary European History* 11, no. 1 (2002): 107-123; Pamela Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918-1928* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013); and Gerald M. Easter, *Reconstructing the State: Personal Networks and Elite Identity in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Several analytical paradigms have been proposed for the investigation of these networks. Barbara Walker, most notably in her study of the modernist poet Maximilian Voloshin, contends that the networks of patronage which dominated the early Soviet period were an extension of pre-revolutionary *kruzhok* culture; *kruzhok* being a generic term for the small groups of writers, artists, and high culture enthusiasts who gathered in pursuit of intellectual, educational, and cultural development.<sup>35</sup> In her rendition, these groups, originally formed for the purpose of promoting both the abstract and pragmatic business of cultural life, became the central mechanism of survival for artists during the civil war years. As these associations became responsible for providing not only paths to professional development, but the means of sustenance during the civil war, they became hubs for the distribution of the material aid that increasingly replaced a monetary economy under Bolshevik rule. For Walker, the capacity of the intelligentsia to dictate the terms of the ‘social contract’ whereby the Soviet state offered cultural workers an expanding system of welfare in return for political support was predicated on the ability of a *kruzhok* patron to act as an intermediary between his clients and the state.<sup>36</sup>

This account stresses the artistic specificity of the *kruzhok*. In contrast, Pamela Kachurin discusses early Soviet modernist artistic projects in terms of the “family circle,” a term revived from Merle Fainsod’s classic work of early Sovietology, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule*.<sup>37</sup> In doing so, she stresses the continuity between the strategy of artistic groups and the broader Soviet society. Kachurin argues that the Soviet network, as opposed to the silver age *kruzhok*, was a deeply pragmatic phenomenon which became an intrinsic part of Soviet

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<sup>35</sup> Barbara Walker, *Maximilian Voloshin and the Russian Literary Circle: Culture and Survival in Revolutionary Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Walker, “Kruzhok Culture,” 108.

<sup>37</sup> Merle Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).

officialdom. The artistic or literary specificity, according to Kachurin, comes rather from the ability of artists, within the framework of these circles, to instrumentalize the language of Bolshevism, not only to secure material support, but to actively participate in the evolving discourse of Soviet life, particularly as regards the confluence of Communism and the arts.<sup>38</sup>

Neither of these renditions, however, directs sustained attention to the transition from pre- to post-revolutionary institutions. Although Walker takes this chronology into account, during the civil war her analysis is devoted to Voloshin's individual strategies of survival rather exploring how his Crimean home became an artists' institution. This lacuna exists despite the fact that the very networks under analysis constitute a line of continuity between the two periods. The story of Russian émigré writers in Baku at the moment of Bolshevik occupation makes clear that these prerevolutionary informal networks not only persisted in the Soviet period—cemented by relationships of trust build during the civil war—but often themselves *became* the formal cultural institutions of the Soviet state, effectively porting both members and aims from one historical period to the next.

This model of state building is in line with a broader literature that recognizes an increased localism which developed in response to the conditions of civil war. To take just one example, Gerald Easter points out that the period between 1917 and 1921 was characterized by the parcelization of the imperial administrative structure which is at least partially reflected in the fact that during this period saw an increase of provinces (guberniia) from 64 to 93, districts (uzed) from 567 to 701, and counties (volost) from 10,622 to 15,064.”<sup>39</sup> A similar point has

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<sup>38</sup> Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet*, xx.

<sup>39</sup> Easter, *Reconstructing the State*, 76. For the argument that this sort of localism, in the form of voluntary organization, was much more prominent in Russian history than has commonly been assumed, see Joseph Bradley, *Voluntary Associations in Tsarist Russia: Science, Patriotism, and Civil Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

been made by Joshua Sanborn regarding military organization and the rise of small scale “warlordism.”<sup>40</sup>

My assertion is that localism was also the prevailing tendency in the cultural sphere. Although it may seem that the Bolshevik revolution brought a dramatic decrease in the number of independent arts organizations,<sup>41</sup> recent case studies of specific institutions of civil war Soviet culture cited above suggest that many networks found that it behooved them to continue their work under the umbrella of a state infrastructure. The ability of the government to monopolize resources created the appearance of unity long before anything of the sort truly came to pass. This factionalism, which played out on the largest scale between the Arts Department of the Narkompros and the Proletarian Culture organization Proletkult, was part of the justification for what Christopher Read among others has characterized as the centralization program of NEP. By moving away from the familiar dynamics of the capitals, saturated as they are by the heavily entrenched narratives outlined above, this differentiated aspect of the story becomes more visible.

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<sup>40</sup> Joshua Sanborn, “The Genesis of Russian Warlordism: Violence and Governance during the First World War and the Civil War,” *Contemporary European History* 19, no. 3 (2010): 195-213.

<sup>41</sup> The tables provided by Cohen show a dramatic increase in art group in Petersburg and Moscow in 1917, followed by a drop below in 1918 followed by steady decline until 1920 when they are equal to the number registered for 1905. This pattern is mirrored with a lag of 2-3 years in the provinces. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, 189.

## Chapter 2: Tiflis: The Edge of Empire or the Center of the Periphery

People of Russia! Unfortunate wanders!  
Down every road, in ailing crowds,  
You are rushing like all of us, outcasts  
From the Red north to southern lands.  
And now what's chasing you? Some Sovdep decree?  
Some secret order? Or public meeting?  
Or maybe you're dragged down by suspicion?  
Or the poisonous vengeance of comrades?  
No! You've grown sick of freezing apartments,  
Of searches, and prisons, resolutions, and looting,  
Executions, and breadlessness... oh hungry bourgeois!  
It's hard for you to chew the fruits of revolution!<sup>42</sup>

Sergei Gorodetsky, Tiflis, 1919

The First World War came to the Caucasian provinces of the Russian Empire when, in October 1914, an Ottoman naval attack transformed the imperial borderland into a second Russian front. Although the defeat of the Ottoman army at Sarikamish in December 1914, and the subsequent push of Russian forces deep into Eastern Anatolia meant that the South Caucasus would not come under direct military threat until 1918, it would be a mistake to imagine that the area was wholly shielded from the effects of war. In what follows I show how the contingencies of war and revolution initially brought an itinerant population of intellectual elites to the city of Tiflis and how those same political and economic circumstances conditioned their cultural development throughout the Russian civil war.

The most immediate change that coincided with the Russian advance was the large numbers of refugees, over three hundred thousand by some counts, who poured into the region in the wake of the Armenian genocide; thousands making their way to the large Armenian communities established in the cities of Baku and Tiflis.<sup>43</sup> The increased population, which

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<sup>42</sup> Nikol'skaia, *Fantasticheskii gorod*, 142-143.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen F. Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883-1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 240.

included not only refugees but also the military forces in the region, constituted part of the cause of the repeated food shortages in the swollen urban centers. These conditions often heightened pre-existing social tensions which cut along the class, and frequently, ethno-religious lines between Armenians, Georgians, Azeri Turks, Russians, and the many small ethnicities of the North Caucasus.

Baku, for instance, was already reporting food shortages as early as 1914,<sup>44</sup> and rationing was introduced in Tiflis in 1915, after the city had run through its bread reserves.<sup>45</sup> With increasing frequency, these conditions led to bread riots of varying degrees of violence.<sup>46</sup> By 1917, the situation had become so strained that during the final days of the empire, Nikolai Ianushkevich, chief of staff to the Viceroy of the Caucasus, expressed his belief that a “ten percent mortality rate among civilians due to food shortages in the Russian regions of the Caucasus was normal and acceptable.”<sup>47</sup>

All of these factors would seem to make the Caucasus an unlikely destination for migrating cultural elites, and indeed, before 1917, cultural life in Tiflis and Baku fell far short of the energy and variety of Moscow and Petersburg. Each, however, laid claim on a certain type of modernity, Baku by virtue of its booming oil industry, Tiflis through its particular cosmopolitanism and an orientation towards Europe cultivated among some sections of the local intelligentsia.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ronald Suny, *The Baku Commune, 1917-1918: Class and Nationality in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 64.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors*, 240.

<sup>46</sup> Suny, *Baku Commune*, 64.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Holquist, “Forms of Violence during the Russian Occupation of Ottoman Territory and in Northern Persia (Urmia and Astarabad): October 1914 – December 1917” in *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, ed. Omar Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 339.

<sup>48</sup> See Zaur Gasimov, “Baky: Progulki vo vremeni po odnomu ‘Iuzhnom gorodu’” [Baku: Strolls in time around one “southern city”], *Ab Imperio* 1 (2011): 303- 327; Paul Manning, “The Theory of the Café Peripheral: Laghidze’s Waters and Peripheral Urban Modernity,” *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* 7 (2012): 189-210;

The very peripheral nature of the Caucasus was, however, an attraction for someone like Kruchenykh who was largely concerned with earning a living wage, avoiding conscription, and having time to write. In the Caucasus, first in the Kuban and later in Tiflis, the poet was able to capitalize on the anonymity he was allotted as a stranger in a corner of the empire where administrative attention was increasingly monopolized by the war and local politics. Specifically, while in Batalpashinsk, Kruchenykh was taking advantage of the uneven mobilization of the Russian army. Because in November 1915, a second round of drafts had not yet been instituted in the Caucasus, Kruchenykh was exempt as a teacher, although he had not managed to find a position in a state school. This tenuous situation effectively kept him away from Moscow, where he would have been better equipped to look after the publication of the manuscripts he was sending off to friends throughout the autumn and winter. Indeed, the danger of mobilization along with the cost of travel and accommodation scuttled his plans to return for a visit over Christmas.<sup>49</sup> When it eventually became clear that there would be no state position available until the following August, he decided, in February 1916, to head south to Tiflis in hopes of solving his “service issue.”<sup>50</sup>

Upon arriving in Tiflis, Kruchenykh was unemployed for nearly two months. As he wrote to his friend and sometimes-patron, the critic Andrei Shemshurin, “I found myself in a state of indeterminacy [*neopredelenost*] [...] and that indeterminacy continues even now.” As in Batalpashinsk, Kruchenykh spent most of his time writing “like never before,” frequently sending his poetry north to be published. As March drew to a close, he characterized life in

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Harsha Ram, “Decadent Nationalism, ‘Peripheral’ Modernism: The Georgian Literary Manifesto between Symbolism and the Avant-garde,” *Modernism/Modernity* 21, no. 1 (2014): 343-359.

<sup>49</sup> Kruchenykh, *Mir zatreshchit*, 33.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 37, 39.

Tiflis as “free and devoid of distraction.”<sup>51</sup> Although at the time, the literary scene in Tiflis was a mere shadow of what it would become after the revolution, Kruchenykh still managed to find “a few people who were extremely interested [in Futurism],”<sup>52</sup> and these initial contacts would form the core of a community of writers whose work in two cities and across three regimes would constitute what Vladimir Markov called “one of the most fascinating, though little-known episodes in the history of Russian futurism.”<sup>53</sup>

The large social community that would eventually surround Tiflis modernism was, however, slow to develop. For Kruchenykh in particular, his departure in April to work as a draftsman on the Erzurum Military Railroad in occupied Anatolia meant that his literary activities were put on hold. Importantly though, the move solved both his status as a draft dodger and the issue of his dwindling income.<sup>54</sup> Somewhat sarcastically he described his posting to the town of Sarikamish in a letter to Shemshurin:

Dear Andrei Akimovich!

I’m to the service; they’re giving me exemption from military service, although this one is also military as you can see from my address: Sarikamish, Kars region, Office of Erzurum Military railway, etc. Regular mail arrives here extremely slowly. Sarikamish is a real village. The center of spiritual life is the station where we, the intelligentsia, come together to meet and have lunch and dinner, etc.

I serve as a draftsman and get a small salary and am busy all day with no time for creative work, although I manage to read some new stuff [*noven’koe*].

All the same, the work which [we] started in Tiflis will ripen, develop, and get done. If all goes well, I’ll serve here until the winter.<sup>55</sup>

There were, of course, other circumstances under which a Russian poet might turn up in the Caucasus, as the story of Sergei Gorodetsky demonstrates. Gorodetsky was another member of the prerevolutionary intelligentsia and a poet of various stripes. He had published several well received collections of verse in the first decade of the century and in 1911, he, along with

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 39-40, 43.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>53</sup> Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 336.

<sup>54</sup> Tat’iana, Nikol’skaia, *Fantasticheskii gorod*, 22.

<sup>55</sup> Kruchenykh, *Mir zatreshchit*, 45.

the Acmeist Nikolai Gumilev, had been a cofounder of the original Poets' Workshop [*Tsekh poetov*] in Petersburg.<sup>56</sup> At the outbreak of the First World War however, Gorodetsky parted ways with both Acmeism and his friendship to Gumilev, aligning himself with the peasant poets Nikolai Klyuev and Sergei Esenin. As Leonid Strakhovsky puts it rather derisively, after 1914, Gorodetsky became a “jingo patriot.”<sup>57</sup>

Indeed much of Gorodetsky's work from that period, and his journalistic production in particular, fit Strakhovsky's description quite well. Lines from article, “Love for the Germans,” published in 1914, are representative: “The Germans understand only the language of guns. This is the language in which one should converse with them at present, the only language. And the more energetic the fire of guns, the more understandable it will be for the Germans.” These are themes which ultimately carried over into his poetry, such as the hyper patriotic collection *The Year Nineteen Fourteen*, which glorifies Emperor Nicholas II and sings “the Slavophile claims for Constantinople, the ancient Tsargrad.”<sup>58</sup>

Caught up in the wave of war enthusiasm, Gorodetsky arrived in Tiflis as a correspondent for the newspaper *Russkoe Slovo* and stayed there for a brief period, probably in the home of his sister who had moved there after marrying an important city architect.<sup>59</sup> Quickly moving west to cover the Ottoman front, Gorodetsky arrived in the city of Van where he was confronted with the devastation that had accompanied the Ottoman massacre of the

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<sup>56</sup> *Tsekh poetov* has traditionally been translated as the Poets' Guild. However, the purpose and functioning of the group, particularly in the Caucasian period, was much less about exclusivity and much more along the lines of a literary workshop, a meaning which the word *tsekh* in Russian equally invokes.

<sup>57</sup> Lionid I. Strakhovsky, “Three Sojourners in the Acmeist Camp: Sergei Gorodetsky, Vladimir Narbut, Mikhail Zankevich,” *Russian Review* 9, no. 2 (1950): 135. Acmeism was a literary school centered around the journal *Apollon* and practiced by such poets as Osip Mandelstam, Nikolai Gumilev, and Anna Akhmatova. As a reaction to the perceived failures of Symbolism, Acmeism was concerned above all with a compact clarity of form and expression.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-136.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Berberian, “Sergei Gorodetskii: ‘Armeniiia, tebia khchu ia poliubit’” [Sergei Gorodetsky: Armenia, I want to love you], *Kokteil*, no 163, 14-20 January 2000, available at *Nasha Sreda*, <http://nashasreda.ru/sergej-gorodeckij-armeniya-tebya-xochu-ya-polyubit/>.

region's Armenians. By his own account this experience fundamentally altered his perception of the war. It would ultimately find voice in his 1917 collection *Angel of Armenia*, and work he did among refugees after having returned to Tiflis.<sup>60</sup>

The intimate experience of both of the poets with the war effort is worth dwelling on because it runs counter to the generally accepted narrative of intellectuals who, as Kruchenykh put it in his autobiographic account of the period, rather than fight, “preferred to modestly retire to the Caucasus.”<sup>61</sup> The above stories are instead more in line with Aaron Cohen’s assessment of Moscow and Petrograd artists during the war which stresses their early and active involvement in the war effort at multiple levels.<sup>62</sup> The increasing unpopularity of the war, and its outright characterization as imperialist by the Bolshevik state meant that memoirs were likely to downplay mobilization even if, as in the case of Kruchenykh, it amounted to pragmatic rather than political participation.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, this narrative has probably gone unquestioned for as long as it has because it fits into an established pattern of understanding in which the cold and the hungry intelligentsia of the Russian north sought to escapes to the relative calm of the southern imperial borderlands. Before 1917, however, this image seems to be largely anachronistic.

### **The Independence of Abandonment: The Emergence of South Caucasian States**

The February Revolution left the Caucasus even further separated from Petersburg than before. Local administrators in city soviets and the Special Transcaucasian Committee (Ozakom), which had been created to replace tsarist authority, were faced with the challenges

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<sup>60</sup> See Anshavan Zakarian, “Armeniiia i armianskii vopros v publitsistike Sergeia Gorodetskogo” [Armenia and the Armenian question in the *publitsistika* of Sergei Gorodetsky], *Patma-banasirakan handes* 1 (2003): 89-106.

<sup>61</sup> Kruchenykh, “K istorii russkogo futurizma,” 316.

<sup>62</sup> Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Nina Gurianova notes that from 1914 on Kruchenykh had “consistently took an antimilitaristic position” and that he was “nauseated by the manifestations of enthusiasm for the war.” Gurianova, *Aesthetics of Anarchy*, 169-170.

of managing municipal infrastructures and the war effort, while trying to mediate between tense political and ethnic rivalries. The provisional government in Petrograd was of little help. Not only was its authority mitigated by the power sharing scheme of *dvoevlastie* (dual power), which saw much of the advantage go to the city soviets, but its administrators showed a great degree of inexperience with the colonial aspects of imperial administration. This led to the issuing of absurd decrees, such as one mentioned by Stephen Jones directed at limiting the sale of wine in the Caucasus.<sup>64</sup> Not only did wine sales account for a significant portion of peasant income, but the drink was a cultural staple of Georgia, rendering the decree nearly impossible to enforce.

As Charles King has rightly noted, the weak management of the Caucasian front throughout 1917 created a sort of equilibrium in which the Russians were unable to press the advantage they had acquired over the course of 1916, and the Ottomans, who were unable to divert forces from other fronts, failed to exploit the political crises in Petrograd.<sup>65</sup> This situation was only destabilized when, in the winter of 1917, the Bolshevik seizure of power initiated the disintegration of the Caucasian army, encouraging deserting soldiers to return to their villages in central Russia.

The Bolshevik revolution, like the Armenian Genocide, represented a watershed for the demography of Transcaucasia. If before, many of the newcomers to Tiflis had been limited to rural Armenian refugees, soldiers, and members of the imperial war apparatus—Kruchenykh being included in the later group — the scenario was now transformed by the final disappearance of the imperial government and the increased threat to the populations of the capitals posed by Bolshevik politics. It should be noted however that it was actually the fall of

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<sup>64</sup> Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors*, 258.

<sup>65</sup> Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 160.

Riga in September, which brought Petrograd within reach of the rapidly advancing German army, that set intellectuals running for the countryside.<sup>66</sup>

Overall, the war years had seen an increase in the number of artistic groups throughout the empire, but the February Revolution had accelerated the process dramatically as the new political regime allowed independent institutions to organize their without state interference.<sup>67</sup> While this process seems to have been reversed in areas that came under Bolshevik control, the cultural environment created by the provisional government was prolonged in the South Caucasus, first by continued loyalty to the February revolution and then by virtue of the weakness of local governments which lacked the resources and will to effectively impose itself on the cultural sphere.<sup>68</sup>

After the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, nominal administrative authority in Transcaucasia had been transferred to the Ozakom, but the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd left the region in an unenviable predicament: after having rejected the validity of the new Soviet government, the Ozakom was forced to create an interim political body until the promised election of the All-Russian Constituent Assembly. Cut off from Petrograd by events outside of their control, and still at war on the Ottoman front, but with increasingly few troops to hold the line, it was with a great deal of uncertainty and even regret that the Ozakom established the Transcaucasian Commissariat (Zakavkom) on November 18, 1917. Few, if any, at the time viewed the institution as a show of independence, rather it was seen as an unfortunate, though necessary, stopgap.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Read, *Culture and Power*, 45-46.

<sup>67</sup> Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, 169.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 193.

Although the short-lived Commissariat was largely ineffective, it did manage to sign an armistice with the Ottoman Empire in late December that put an end to official hostilities. In spite of this, irregular violence between Armenian militia groups and local populations was still rampant in Anatolia.<sup>70</sup> Baku, however, remained separate from these developments. The city soviet, with its strong Bolshevik contingent, had not joined with Tiflis in rejecting the coup in Petrograd. This dissention culminated in the end of January when the soviet voted to recognize the Sovnarkom's disillusion of the Constituent Assembly, which had been allowed to gather just once at the beginning of the year.<sup>71</sup> The same occurrence prompted the Zakavkom to convene a more permanent body capable, among other things, of negotiating a lasting peace with the Ottomans. This was the genesis of the parliamentary structure that became known as the Transcaucasian Seim.

Following the dissolution of the peace talks in Brest-Litovsk in early February, the Ottomans and Germans resumed hostilities with the territories of the former Russian Empire.<sup>72</sup> The rapid advance of the Ottoman army across the Anatolian countryside created an immediate need for effective authority in Transcaucasia. This, however, was beyond the capabilities of the Seim, which could muster little more than a confused sort of diplomacy when in mid-March a delegation left to conduct peace talks with the Ottomans in Trabzon. Over nearly a month and a half of negotiation, during which the Ottoman military continued its advance, the Transcaucasian delegation did very little other than expose its own fractures. Armenians, Georgians, and Caucasian Turks were all pursuing different policies, and not even the declaration of an independent Transcaucasian state, which the Ottomans insisted on before they

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 193-194.

<sup>71</sup> Tadeusz Swietochovsky, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 108.

<sup>72</sup> Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 196.

would negotiate the terms of a peace, was a unanimous decision.<sup>73</sup> This bid at independent statehood, however, proved equally ineffective, as the split interests that had made the Trabzon talks so unwieldy ultimately proved irreconcilable. In late May, under the continued pressures of war and regional crisis, the union dissolved into the independent states of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, not in crescendo of national enthusiasm, but on the contrary, out of desperation in a rapidly unraveling political environment.<sup>74</sup>

### **Second Exodus: Building Paris in the South Caucasus**

As the Russian military structures that had been tentatively held together by the provisional government began to dissolve at the end of 1917, Kruchenykh started to look for ways to abandon his wartime occupation and return to purely literary pursuits. He wrote to friends that he believed he would be “free” by January or February, and planned to live in either Tiflis or Moscow. It seems that at the time he didn’t know what he would do for money and he wrote to Shemshurin requesting 100-150 rubles a month for four or five months, saying that he could “live freely on that.” By way of explanation he contended that “he had served two years in the war organization and now it [was] terrible to think immediately about new service.”<sup>75</sup> This arrangement seems to not have come together, and from February 1918, until the end of July 1919, Kruchenykh worked as a post office clerk on the construction line of the Georgian Black Sea Railway.<sup>76</sup> Gorodetsky, who was by this time covering the war from northern Iran, made his way back to Tiflis under similar circumstances as part of the general military retreat

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>74</sup> This can be seen in the language of the independence declarations: Georgia’s was passive, citing “Russia’s inability to fulfill its obligation to protect Georgia”; The Armenian declaration spoke of the need to temporarily take charge of political and administrative affairs; Azerbaijan’s independence was also couched in terms of the misfortune of Russia’s collapse. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 212-213.

<sup>75</sup> Kruchenykh, *Mir zatreshchit*, 111.

<sup>76</sup> Sukhoparov, *Sud’ba budetianina*, 103.

from the region. He, however, perhaps operating with a different level of resources as well as the support of his sister, managed to find work teaching courses at a local conservatory and publishing articles in the newspaper *Kavkazskoe Slovo*.<sup>77</sup>

At the same time, large numbers of refugees, many of them from the middle class and the pre-war cultural elite, began to appear in Tiflis. Among these were the modernist poets Iurii Degen and Tat'iana Vechorka.<sup>78</sup> For both of the poets the move south was a sort of homecoming. Iurii Degen was born in Warsaw in 1896, but after his father was killed in 1905, during the Russo-Japanese war, he moved with his mother to Tiflis. Degen spent his childhood in the city, but in 1916 he was admitted to Petrograd University to study law.<sup>79</sup> Although he could not have been in the capital even two years, it seems that Degen immediately fell into the literary scene and joined an offshoot of the original Poets' Workshop which was run by the Acmeists Georgii Adamivich and Georgii Ivanov. Although the group was short lived, it connected Degen to Russian modernism and he could count many of the luminaries of the time among his associates, including Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergei Esenin, and most importantly for

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<sup>77</sup> Sergei Gorodetsky, "Moi Put'" [My path], in *Sovetskie pisateli: Avtobiografii v dvukh tomakh* [Soviet writers: Autobiographies in two volumes], edited by B. Ia. Brainina and E. F. Nikitina (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1959), 1:320-31. Available at *Detskii sad.ru*, [http://www.detskiysad.ru/raznlit/avtobiografia\\_gorodeckiy.html](http://www.detskiysad.ru/raznlit/avtobiografia_gorodeckiy.html).

Strakhovsky makes the claim that, during his time in Tiflis, Gorodetsky was working for the propaganda offices of General Denikin, whose volunteer army was based in the North Caucasus. While this is not completely out of the realm of possibility, I have not found reference to it anywhere else and it seems more likely that the poet was merely promoting his own anti-Bolshevik views in the pages of the several newspapers he worked for. Such sentiments would hardly have bothered the Menshevik and increasingly national minded government of republican Georgia which came to power with the states declaration of independence in 1918. Strakhovsky, "Three Sojourners," 136. For a description of the Persian retreat, see Viktor Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1917).

<sup>78</sup> Tatiana Vechorka is the penname of Tatiana Vladimirovna Tolstoi (born Efimova). For biographic information on Degen and Vechorka, see respectively Bowlt, *Salon Album*, 21 and 58.

<sup>79</sup> Olga Kusnetsova, "Odisseia starshego shtupmana" [Odyssey of a senior navigator], in *Iurii Degen*, edited by Aleksandr Degen, 8. This comes from a biographical sketch of the poet with appears in a collection assembled by Degen's grandson Aleksandr. The collection, which includes extensive facsimile reproductions of manuscripts from the family archive, is available online at [http://degen.ru/?page\\_id=218](http://degen.ru/?page_id=218).

his own poetic development, Mikhail Kuzmin, who acted as a mentor of sorts.<sup>80</sup> These associations meant that Degen was in good stead when he and his wife Keseniiia arrived in Tiflis in the autumn of 1917. Almost immediately he became a central part of the burgeoning literary life of the city.

Tat'iana Vechorka, born in Baku in 1892, had also grown up in Tiflis and had managed to find her way to Petersburg even earlier than Degen, moving with her mother and brother to attend school there in 1913.<sup>81</sup> While in the capital, Vechorka started publishing poetry and regularly attended the Stray Dog, Petrograd's famous artists' cabaret. In September 1917, either fleeing food shortages or going to take care of her sick grandmother, Vechorka, her mother, and her brother all moved back to the Caucasus.<sup>82</sup> When she arrived, she found a city in which literary ventures had already been developing for some time.

Ever since he had arrived in the Transcaucasia, Kruchenykh had been meeting with a group of poets and artists centered around Kirill and Ilia Zdanevich, and beginning in either January or February 1917, had been publishing a long series of poems, *1918*, with illustrations by Kirill.<sup>83</sup> This trio formed the core of what would eventually become one of the earliest Tiflis based literary groups of the period, the Syndicate of Futurists.

The various poetry collectives that were formed in Tiflis and Baku prior to the Sovietization of the Caucasus overwhelmingly followed the model of early nineteenth century literary societies in that they represented, not so much stylistic schools, as writers' workshops.

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<sup>80</sup> Kusnetsova, "Odisseia starshego shtupmana," 9.

<sup>81</sup> Lidiia Libedinskaia, "Vmesto Vstupleniia" [Instead of an introduction] in *Portrety bez retushi: Stikhotvoreniia, stat'i, dnevnikovye, zapisi, vospominania* [Portraits without retouching: Poetry, articles, diaries, recollections], ed. Alexandr Parnis (Moscow: Dom-Muzei Mariny Tsvetaevoi, 2007), 6.

<sup>82</sup> The first is the explanation given by her daughter: Lidiia Libedinskaia, "Vmesto Vstupleniia", 6. The second was the explanation written by Vechorka herself on her application for a state pension in 1951. Tatiana Tolstoi, *Avtobiografiia* in Vechorka, *Portrety*, 18.

<sup>83</sup> Nikol'skaia, *Fantasticheskii gorod*, 223. For biographies of the Zdanevich brothers, Kirill and Ilia, see respectively Bowl, *Salon Album*, 55 and 57.

They were, by and large, modeled on the famous fin de siècle Petersburg groups, such as the Academy of Verse and the Poets Workshop, of which many of the participants had been members. Both of these groups had served an important role in the social world of prerevolutionary Petersburg and it was through their meetings that many of the Russian poets' active in Tiflis and Baku had first come in contact with each other. For this reason it is not particularly surprising that the form should be repeated during the Caucasian years. The announcement, in the form of an editorial letter, which marked the creation of Tat'iana Vechorka's group, the *druzhestvo* (friendly society) Al'fa-Lira, can be taken as representative of the ethos:

The circle which I propose to form is a branch of a Petrograd literary-scholarly fellowship. Its purpose is the development and support (non-material) of young talents, and the search for new poetic paths. The work of the circle, which meets once a week, will be [devoted to] the discussion of selected topics, essays, translations, joint work, mutual criticism, and readings by group members. [...] In order to become a full member, you must submit five poems which will be returned to you after being considered by the executive committee.<sup>84</sup>

Importantly, this didactic mode of literary association also provided a forum to introduce local poets to the literary innovations that had developed in the capitals. Although judging from the lists of attendees often printed in the local press, many of the participants in the literary workshops were from the Russian émigré community, there were also many Russian speaking locals who attended. These were men and women who were either part of preexisting literary movements, such as Grigol Robakidze and his group of Georgian symbolists the Blue Horns, or simply those with literary aspirations. Some of them eventually made a name for themselves, either in the Soviet Union or abroad, though many are remembered solely as an entry in a list of names of attendees.

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<sup>84</sup> Nikol'skaia, *Fantasticheskii gorod*, 223.

## Stylistic and Ethnic Heterogony in a Nationalizing State

The public phase of the Tbilisi activities was announced by the appearance on November 20, 1917, of a 'Night of Futurism' co-organized by Degen and Kruchenykh.<sup>85</sup> Reactions were mixed, but most recount the typical sense of scandal associated with Futurist performances. One particularly critical evaluation was voiced in a review which appeared in the newspaper *Tifliskii listok*. The critic complained that:

“everyone who considers themselves to be part of this movement believes for some reason that it is his duty to be ridiculed by the audience, this is probably the reason why the lyric poet Iu. Degen, deliberating on the poems he had read, began explaining, while puffing on a cigarette, that ‘futurism is not stupidity, it’s not insane, but rather it has an intrinsic value’ and that in the end there will be a time when they will teach futurism in high schools.”<sup>86</sup>

Gorodetsky also took exception to these antics, what he called Degen’s “dilettantish chatter” [*diletantskaia boltovnia*] and his “unnecessary,” “unoriginal,” “rude,” onstage cigarette smoking. However, Gorodetsky’s words are more chastising and less shocked. He seems to be lamenting what he sees as potential being wasted on such trivial bull baiting of the crowd.<sup>87</sup> Gorodetsky had an interesting relationship with futurism. Although he often critiqued the Futurists for their triviality and what he saw as their hackneyed public scandals, he also believed that the movement was a potent weapon in the fight against the banality of everyday life.<sup>88</sup>

An ambiguous relationship to any particular poetic school was typical of the time and largely resulted from the constant intermingling that inevitably took place in such a small town and in such limited society. Both Degen, who practiced a highbred of Acmeism and Kuzmin’s Clarism, and Vechorka who had traditionally written a sort of decadent verse, described by

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

Markov as “filled with backstage dressing-room images [...] in the Ego-Futurist tradition of [the] drawing-room atmosphere,”<sup>89</sup> began to bring elements of *zäum* into their poetry.<sup>90</sup> This never represented a conversion of poetic practice, but rather an openness to experimenting with new poetic forms, likely as a result of intellectual cross pollination.

Degen and Vechorka were not the only poets who came under the influence of their new environs, and Janecek points out how the multilingualism of Tiflis provided Kruchenykh with a new phonetic palate of Georgian and Armenian that “gives his poetry a fresh dimension and presents a new challenge for the analyst” as it becomes increasingly unclear “which words are coinages, and which are borrowed from other languages Kruchenykh picked up on the street.”<sup>91</sup> This mixing and exchange was perhaps best represented in the work that developed in the artists’ café the Fantastic Kabachok [little pub] and the most ambitious almanac produced in that confluence, *Sofii Georgievne Melnikova’s Fantastic Kabachok*, a richly produced collection that combined color illustration with texts in Russian, Georgian, and Armenian.

This heterogony brings us to a largely unexplored aspect of the South Caucasus during the brief period of independent statehood, namely the character of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan as nationalizing states. This quality is thrown into sharp relief by the dissonance present in accounts of the period which characterize the region as either one of national struggle or of cosmopolitan refuge. My assertion is that the tendency to depict the region strictly through one lens or the other significantly distorts the story of émigré society in Tiflis and Baku.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 364.

<sup>90</sup> Clarism never became a movement as such but was rather a variation of Acmeism associated with the personality and poetic practice of Mikhail Kuzmin. *Zäum* “is a Russian Futurist neologism used to describe words or language whose meaning is ‘indefinite’ [*neopredelennoe*] or indeterminate.” Gerald Janecek, *Zäum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>92</sup> Three texts which devote significant attention to the national aspect and form a sort of regional trilogy are Richard G. Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence, 1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

The Georgian state is typically distinguished from Armenia and Azerbaijan by virtue of the fact that it was run by the Menshevik politician Noe Zhordania, whose authority was based on socialist rather than ethnic credentials. As Stephen Jones would have it “the Georgian’s own national revival was cultural,” involving the autocephaly of the Georgian church, university reform, and the “joyous process of changing street names.”<sup>93</sup> This however, was far from an uncontested process, particularly because, as Alfred Rieber points out, the urban centers of the Caucasus were not ethnically homogenous and this fact produced a distinct obstacle to nation-state building.<sup>94</sup> The pressures exerted by the national regimes on populations served to encourage migration as populations sought to take advantage of the opportunities for social mobility promised by the new national institutions, and avoid what characterized by many as ethnic chauvinism.<sup>95</sup>

The particular relationship of ascendant nationalism to the russophonic populations of the Caucasus, a diverse category drawn from across the former empire and one which included the modernist poets, remains, by and large, unexplored. Their position was privileged in the sense that they stood above many of the intercommunal conflicts, but at the same time, because of their high representation in positions within the imperial cultural institutions, local administration, and areas of technical expertise, the nationalization of these fields increasingly threatened the position of the former imperial stratum of society. The ways in which they negotiated these forces by playing regional powers off one another is well demonstrated by the

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1967); Ronald Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); and Swietochovsky, *Russian Azerbaijan*.

<sup>93</sup> Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors*, 260.

<sup>94</sup> Alfred Rieber, *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 592.

<sup>95</sup> This is a charge frequently leveled against the Georgian authorities by C. E. Bechhofer, *In Denikin’s Russia and the Caucasus, 1919-1920* (London: W. Collins and Sons, 1921), 227-253.

case of the Transcaucasian University, an institution, which, after moving to Baku, became central to the Baku artists.

In the beginning of 1918, under the direction of Vasili Razumovskii, the Transcaucasian University opened its doors, declaring itself a Russian language institution which reflected the specific multiethnic character of the South Caucasus, “a mixture of Russian, Georgians, Armenians, and Turks [Azerbaijanis].”<sup>96</sup> The institution quickly ran into trouble however, when in May the national republics were declared, dissolving the Transcaucasian Federation which had until that point supplied its funding. The situation became all the more salient for Razumovskii when in October a Georgian university was founded in Tiflis, prompting him to write that “it has become clear that there is no way for a Russian university to survive on state patronage in Tiflis alongside a Georgian one.” As a result he began to turn to the other Caucasian cities of Yerevan and Baku for support.<sup>97</sup> Negotiations continued into the summer of 1919, and eventually it was decided that the Azerbaijani authorities would provide the necessary resources for the university to relocate, although the staff were not allowed to retain any of the materials from the Tiflis campus which was absorbed into the Georgian institution when they moved in September 1919.

Although this process involved bargaining which ultimately was profitable for much of the Russian speaking faculty, the affair left a bitter taste in their mouth, and when remembering it several years later they blamed the Georgian government for “chasing them out” of Tiflis.<sup>98</sup> Instances like this seem to have been largely limited to public institutions and there is little indication that among the private café societies of Tiflis modernism there was much interethnic

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<sup>96</sup> Aslan Atakişiyev, *M. Ə. Rəsizadə adına Bakı Dövlət Universitetinin Tarixi* [The history of the M. A. Rasulzade Baku State University] (Baku: Universiteti Nəşriyyatı, 1991), 75.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>98</sup> Lidia Ivanova, *Vospominania: Kniga ob otse* [Recollections: A book about father] (Paris: Atheneum, 1990), 91.

rancor. Much the opposite, Russian journals from the period often contain ethnographic discussions of Caucasian cultures or translations of the Georgian epic *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. In 1916, Sergei Gorodetsky and Aleksei Remizov even went so far as to establish a publishing house devoted to ethnic literature.<sup>99</sup> This openness however, did not necessarily extend to work that was published for broader consumption, particularly it seems if was critical of the Georgian government. This point was driven home when, in 1919, Gorodetsky came under pressure after publishing a satirical journal which featured the head of the Georgian president on the body of a goat which was being milked by a worker. According to the poet this prompted the late night visit from “some character [*krasavets*] straight out of a fresco of a Rustaveli epic who presented [him] with an alternative: leave. Either to the Metekhskaiia prison or abroad.” This, Gorodetsky asserts, was the impetus to move to Baku.<sup>100</sup>

While this type of interaction is far from implausible, these recollections need to be understood through prism of the political circumstances under which they were written. In the case of Gorodetsky, who penned this account in the late 50s after successfully transitioning to a career as a Soviet writer, there was a clear interest in positioning himself in opposition to the Georgian Menshevik government, and implicitly as an ally of the forces of Soviet power. This, in short, should be read as a part of a process of self fashioning which will be explored in greater detail in a later chapter. Nonetheless, a tension between Russian émigrés and local nationalists, if not always representatives of the state, is a trope picked up by other memoirists and it is not so easily dismissed as a cause for the decision of a section of the Tiflis poets to relocate to Baku in 1919.

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<sup>99</sup> Evelyn Bristol, *A History of Russian Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 221.

<sup>100</sup> Nikol'skaia, *Fantasticheskii gorod*, 134-135.

### Chapter 3: Baku: From Nation to Empire and Bohemia to Bureaucracy

No, it seems that there isn't even one city less literary than Baku. And all and all this isn't from a lack of literary force. Rather, there is simply some shortcoming in the very manner of life in Baku, it is missing some particular sort of literary fuel [*literaturnaia pruzhinka*], and as a result, even a newcomer to the city suddenly ceases to feel the need for literature. [...] This is a specifically Bakuvian indifference to literature which succeeds, little by little, in killing off all literary life. It is only the freshly arrived and the novices who try to shake, to wake the city, and force it to hear and heed their voices, all in vain.<sup>101</sup>

Iurii Degen, ca. 1920-21

Given the high level of productivity most of the poets recall as characteristic of the Tiflis period, it is difficult to address the question of why, at the end of the summer of 1919, many began to relocate to Baku. Although the nationalizing conditions described in the previous chapter provide some insight, when addressed at all in the secondary literature, the move is attributed vaguely to the better material conditions in the Azerbaijani capital<sup>102</sup> or the belief that a British presence in the city might aid emigration via Iran.<sup>103</sup> Biographic material, in contrast tends to point towards individual circumstance, but these were of course conditioned by the broader socio-political contexts at play.

If in the two years following the October revolution, Tiflis had become, in the words of Diane Koenker, “[a haven] for refugees from the destitution and conflict of revolutionary Russia,” the same cannot be said about Baku.<sup>104</sup> While Tiflis had been spared large scale violence, Baku's oil reserves, which had sparked the city's urban development in the 1870s, were a prize considered worth fighting over, often with devastating effects on the population and landscape.

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<sup>101</sup> Iurii Degen, “Literaturnoe Baku” [Literary Baku], in *Yurii Degen*, 927-929.

<sup>102</sup> Gerald Janecek, *Zaum*, 105.

<sup>103</sup> Bowlt, *Salon Album*, xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>104</sup> Diane Koenker, “Urbanization and Deurbanization in the Russian Revolution and Civil War” in *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History*, ed. Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg, and Ronald Grigor Suny (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989), 81-82.

Unlike Tiflis, where the Menshevik faction of the Socialist Democratic Party held sway in the city soviet, Baku had a strong contingent of Bolsheviks who, under the leadership of Stepan Shaumian, and in part thanks to good representation among the disintegrating Russian army, had managed to maneuver into a position of power in the city.<sup>105</sup> At the beginning of 1918, when Tiflis was in a sovereign limbo due to its declaration of loyalty to a government in Petrograd which no longer existed, the Baku soviet by contrast had thrown its support behind Lenin's government. This decision left Baku an anomalous island of Bolshevism surrounded by competing socialist, liberal, and increasingly national politics.

In early 1918, the soviet's control over the city was tenuous at best, all the more so because of the decision to exclude the popular Muslim Müsavat party from political representation. In a bid to consolidate power through an alliance with the Dashnaktsutyun, the influential and well armed Armenian nationalist revolutionary party, the Baku Bolsheviks ignited a paramilitary action that quickly spiraled into several days of ethnic pogroms which came to be known as the March Days.<sup>106</sup>

Even after this bloodletting, soviet rule remained poorly integrated. Occupied as they were with battling counter revolution, nationalizing the oil industry, and supplying the city with food from a largely hostile countryside, there was little attention paid to cultural activities and what declarations were made seem to have been brushed aside by the local intelligentsia.<sup>107</sup> The Baku Commune, as this period came to be know, was ultimately a short lived experiment and when the city was taken by the combined forces of the Ottoman and independent Azerbaijani armies in September, the operation was accompanied by another wave of violence and

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<sup>105</sup> See Suny, *Baku Commune*.

<sup>106</sup> For a balanced account of this divisive event in Baku's history, see Swietochovsky, *Russian Azerbaijan*, 112-119.

<sup>107</sup> Suny, *Baku Commune*, 255.

destruction that again left thousands dead, tens of thousands displaced, and contributed to the further destruction of the urban landscape.

With the withdrawal of the Ottoman army after the signing of the Mudros armistice on October 30, 1918, Baku came under the British administration of Major General W. M. Thompson until the Paris Peace Conference could come to a decision regarding the status of independent Azerbaijan.<sup>108</sup> The British presence provided a sense of security, committed as they were maintaining regular transportation of oil along the Baku-Tiflis-Batum railway. This pseudo-mandate was, however, relatively short lived and in August 1919, at precisely the time when Kruchenykh was relocating from Tiflis, the city administration was transferred from Thompson to the government of independent Azerbaijan.

Under such circumstances, Baku's "air of luxury" must have been highly relative. Much as in Tiflis, city authorities continually struggled to secure food supplies for the population. Military requisition meant that already in 1914, there were reports of "serious dislocations in [grain] deliveries."<sup>109</sup> In January 1918, fighting in Daghestan along the Baku-Vladikavkaz rail line effectively cut the city, and the rest of the South Caucasus, off from the North Caucasian agricultural regions in a pattern that would continue throughout the civil war.<sup>110</sup> Shortages prompted protests and in some cases locally organized requisition gangs would comb the city for grain hoarders in actions that, following the spirit of the times, took on an increasingly ethnic dimension.<sup>111</sup> In June 1918, the Azerbaijani government, which for the time being was operating out of the western city of Elizavetpol' (Gəncə), prohibited the export of cereals,

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<sup>108</sup> Audrey Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1992), 93.

<sup>109</sup> Suny, *Baku Commune*, 64.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1922* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 199.

<sup>111</sup> Suny, *Baku Commune*, 111.

bread, meat, livestock, and textiles in an attempt to secure food for the county.<sup>112</sup> The self-sufficiency of the region however was crippled by the fact that in 1919 the total amount of cultivated land in Eastern Transcaucasia was less than a fourth of what it had been in 1914.<sup>113</sup> By August 1919, however, the situation was improving, requisition policies were abandoned and grain exports resumed, partially due to the reorientation of trade towards imports from Iran.<sup>114</sup> The revolution, however, had left its mark on the city, and as the British journalist C. E. Bechhofer recalled in 1920, “in nearly every street there were signs of Bolshevik, Turkish, Tatar [Azerbaijani], and Armenian violence. Ruined and gutted houses were a common sight.”<sup>115</sup>

Kruchenykh’s decision to move seems to have been precipitated by the loss of his job at the Georgian railway post office in the end of July 1919.<sup>116</sup> The case of Tat’iana Vechorka is even more definite. In late summer she was married to Boris Tolstoi, the son of a notary in Baku, and together they moved to the Azerbaijani capital.<sup>117</sup> These moves however should be understood as indicative of a certain amount of fluidity that existed cultural spheres of the two cities. Already in January 1919, Iurii Degen’s journal *Feniks* had been mentioned in the Baku journal *Parus*, and in May, the same journal carried a review of two Futurist publications, *Ozhirenie Roz* (probably authored by Kruchenykh under a pseudonym) and Igor Terentev’s *Aleksei Kruchenykh Grandozar*.<sup>118</sup> That being said, the Baku period in many ways paled in comparison with the heady days of the *Fantasticheskii Kabachok*. Perhaps the most immediate effect of the new circumstances would be a consolidation of literary groups. In Baku,

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<sup>112</sup> Harun Yilmaz, “An Unexpected Peace: Azerbaijani-Georgian Relations, 1918-20,” *Revolutionary Russia* 22, no. 1 (2009): 46.

<sup>113</sup> Suny, *Baku Commune*, 207.

<sup>114</sup> Yilmaz “Unexpected Peace,” 46.

<sup>115</sup> Bechhofer, *Denikin’s Russia*, 307.

<sup>116</sup> Sukhoparov, *Sud’ba budetliianina*, 103.

<sup>117</sup> Vechorka, *Avtobiografiia*, 19.

<sup>118</sup> Nikol’skaia, *Fantasticheskii gorod*, 86.

particularly in the months before the Soviet takeover, the mottled artistic groups of the writers moving from Tiflis would be concentrated in a single literary society which was first called the Poets' Studio and which later almost fully transitioned into the Baku branch of the Poets' Workshop.

### **From Studio to Workshop: Setting up Camp on the Caspian**

In the beginning of August 1919, on the initiative of M. Gellershtein, a literary group, the Poets' Studio, was formed with the expressed purpose of working systematically on the technical aspects of poetic creation. Gellershtein, who had previously taken a combative stance toward futurism, seems to have become more accommodating over the previous years, and Kruchenykh was able to actively take part in the group. The Studio held weekly Friday meetings which were announced in the Baku Press. The first open meeting took place on August 8, 1919, and they continued until November 7, changing location several times. The studio quickly opened a versification section which met each Sunday starting on August 17. The subsection took as its task the "systematic examination of rhythm, orchestration, emotion, faktura, architectonics, concept, content, and symbol."<sup>119</sup> The meetings consisted of a combination of practical and theoretical work which often included prepared talks by the participants. By the time of the general meeting held on October 3, both Iurii Degen and Sergei Gorodetsky are listed as in attendance, although because they are not noted as full members, it is difficult to decide whether they were living in Baku full time or had come as guests from Tiflis.<sup>120</sup> This later option is not out of the realm of possibility. Keeping the railways running had been a consistent priority during the period as they provided the outlet for transporting Baku's oil to European markets. As a result, there were trains running almost daily between the

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<sup>119</sup> "K otkrytiiu 'studii poetov'" [On the opening of the "poets' studio"], *Azerbaidzhan*, no. 159, July 30, 1919.

<sup>120</sup> "B studii poetov" [In the poets' studio], *Azerbaidzhan*, no. 204, September 24, 1919.

two cities. Whatever the case, there certainly were instances of the Tbilisi crowd making temporary excursions to Baku such as the theater tour made by Nikolai Evreinov and Vasily Kamensky in early October 1919.

Kamensky's stint in Baku opened on October 8, at the State Theater with a program that included a lecture by Evreinov, "Theater of the Future," a speech by Kamensky, "How One Must Live in Baku," Evreinov's "cabaret-monster" "the Musical Grimace," and finally a reading of poems by Kamensky.<sup>121</sup> The performance was well received and consisted of all of the *épater le bourgeois* rabble rousing one might expect from a Futurist evening, as is evidenced in this excerpt from Kamensky's speech:

We are the East, and yet we shy away from revealing its mighty spirit. We must live victoriously, joyfully, we much pull the sun down to the earth, sear it into our souls which are bleak [*neuiutny*], like a stage without a set [*kak stsena—bez zadnei steny*]. We must write poetry on the walls, sing from the balconies, perform in the squares. We must dress brightly, in a word; we must create the youth of a new world.<sup>122</sup>

As one journalist noted, despite the fact that "the audience honored him with noisy applause, readily listened to his [poetry], and agreed that one may perhaps already admit the truth of futurism," the event was not particularly well attended.<sup>123</sup>

On November 30, there was a meeting in the apartment of Mikhail Struve, at which the Poets' Studio was dissolved and reorganized into a Baku chapter of the Poets' Workshop. By this time it is clear that Vechorka, Degen, Gorodetsky, and the Georgian symbolist Robakidze are all living in Baku as evidenced by the fact that they are named as heads of the organization, along with Kruchenykh and some others. Meetings, it was decided, would take place in the building of Baku State University.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> For biographical information of Evreinov, see Bowlt, *Salon Album*, 60-61.

<sup>122</sup> Krusanov, *Futuristicheskaia revoliutsiia*, 331.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>124</sup> The full list of heads included G. Liberman, A. Melik-Shakh, Ia. Glakhengauz, and A. Selikhanovich. M. Gellershtein was made the Workshop's secretary. Krusanov, *Futuristicheskaia revoliutsiia*, 333.

The first public meeting of the newly founded Poets' Workshop took place on December 5, 1919. The event was opened by Sergei Gorodetsky who delivered a speech entitled "The Poets' Workshop and Its Meaning," which was then followed by readings and group critiques. More interesting perhaps, is the fact that the group sent letters of greeting to Robakidze's Georgian symbolists, the Blue Horns, as well as to an unnamed "circle of Muslim poets in Baku."<sup>125</sup> The Tiflis Poets' Workshop, the leadership of which was taken over by Sergei Rafalovich after the departure of Gorodetsky and Degen, however, is noticeably absent.<sup>126</sup> The attention paid to the ceremony of the opening meeting suggests that the poets were serious, both about staking a claim on the cultural life of Baku, and connecting their activities to a larger Transcaucasian cultural sphere by maintaining ties with their colleagues in Tiflis.

The meetings of the Baku Poets' Workshop were often themed or otherwise led by one of the members. For example, on December 26, there was a special session held under the title "the Night of Sonnets" where Vechorka and Robakidze both read papers about the sonnet form.<sup>127</sup> These presentations were followed, as usual, by group criticism. The night finally ended with Robakidze's recitation of his poems in the original Georgian. Gorodetsky, who was also in attendance, used the opportunity to solicit submissions from the Workshop members for a new journal he was editing called *Menady*. The event lasted until midnight and it was reported that the university auditorium was almost full.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> This announcement was made in two Baku publications, *Azerbaidzhan* and *Golos Rossii*, and although the two phrase the summery in slightly different words, neither names the Muslim poets. "Tsekh poetov" [The poets' workshop], *Azerbaidzhan*, no. 266, December 9, 1919; "Tsekh poetov" [The poets' workshop], *Golos Rossii* (Baku), no. 54, December 9, 1919.

<sup>126</sup> Nikol'skaia, *Fantasticheskii gorod*, 177.

<sup>127</sup> For a discussion of the role of the sonnet in Tiflis modernism, see Harsha Ram, "The Sonnet and the Mukhambazi: Genre Wars on the Edges of the Russian Empire," *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (2007): 1548-1570.

<sup>128</sup> Krusanov, *Futuristicheskaia revoliutsiia*, 334.

In this way the Poets' Workshop became not only the center of the small group of writers who had moved east from Tiflis, but also a point of contact in the city for other groups who wished to gain *entrée* into the cultural world of Baku. One example of this was the meeting of January 9, 1920, which was headed by Kruchenykh and devoted to the theme of Futurism. At this meeting Kruchenykh delivered a speech on the personality and creative output of Vladimir Mayakovsky and introduced a guest speaker, the poet G. Roshal who was visiting from the Soviet Russia. Roshal came to the Baku society with news of the poetic developments that had taken place in Russian since the October revolution. As he described the situation, "art in Russia is currently experiencing a period of exceptional growth. The workers are producing many talented poets. [...] Russian Futurism, which earlier was generally little-understood, has come down [to a level where it has] become understandable to the masses."<sup>129</sup> The last official meeting of the group was held on April 23. After that, their activities were interrupted by arrival in Baku of the Red Army, which would dramatically change the forms of cultural life in the city.<sup>130</sup>

### **Cultural Life and the Commissars**

Cultural life under the Bolsheviks during the civil war was regulated in a number of ways, both by governmental policy and by strained material conditions. Although the central committee stayed relatively aloof from the arts, this was not the case where the press was concerned. The Sovietization of Azerbaijan did not depart from this trend, and one of the first actions of the Azerbaijani Revolutionary Commissariat (Azrevkom) was to dissolve the "British style freedom of the press" that had been the rule under the Azerbaijani Democratic

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<sup>129</sup> "V tsekh poetov" [In the poets' workshop], *Azerbaidzhan*, no. 15, January 23, 1920.

<sup>130</sup> Sobraniia [Meetings], *Azerbaidzhan*, no. 80, April 23, 1920.

Republic.<sup>131</sup> The May 8, 1920, decree nationalizing all polygraph and typographic machinery was the first of its kind to be issued in Baku. By way of contrast, it wasn't until May 24, that the Azrevkom moved to nationalize the all important oil industry.<sup>132</sup>

Although Bolshevik control over newspapers was immediate, at this early stage censorship was mostly restricted to politics rather than aesthetics. As Peter Kenez has noted press networks were frequently integrated both vertically and horizontally, meaning that there were often separate national, provincial, and local newspapers for each important Soviet institution such as the party, government, trade unions, and Komsomol.<sup>133</sup> This network, however, was only fully developed in the years after the civil war and initially it was even more diverse. Kruchenykh, for instance, seems to have worked for the newspapers *Kommunist*, *Azerbaidzhan bednota*, and *Bakinskii rabochii*, each of which had been quickly created in association with new institutions of the party, government, and military. In Baku, however, the Russian Telegraph Agency (Rosta) emerged as a rallying point for the artists.

Rosta had been created in September 1918, as part of consolidating the Petrograd telegraph agency and the press bureau into a single news organization.<sup>134</sup> However, more than information services quickly fell under Rosta jurisdiction and the agency produced a wide variety of agitational material such as newspapers, literary and satirical journals, the agittrains and agitboats which toured the countryside, and, under the name of Windows Rosta, large amounts of political propaganda posters which employed the talents of poets and painters, most

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<sup>131</sup> Nariman Narimonov, "Iz zapisi ustnogo soobshcheniia N. Narimanov v Moskve o polozhenii v Azerbaidzhane" [From the records of N. Narimanov's oral report in Moscow on the situation in Azerbaijan], September 29, 1919, Institute of Armenian Studies, Yerevan State University, [http://www.armin.am/images/menus/1427/A\\_Gharibyan\\_adrbejan\\_skzbnaxbyur.pdf](http://www.armin.am/images/menus/1427/A_Gharibyan_adrbejan_skzbnaxbyur.pdf).

<sup>132</sup> Altstadt, *Azerbaijani Turks*, 112.

<sup>133</sup> Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>134</sup> N. A. Bryliakov, *Rossiiskoe Telegrafnoe* (Moscow: Mysl', 1976), 8.

famously Vladimir Mayakovsky, to create compelling images and captions to spread revolution to the masses.

Regional offices of Rosta began operation in Soviet held territory beginning in the spring of 1919, and in May 1920, the old Bolshevik S. Ia. Bogdat'ev was brought in from Moscow to set up the Baku branch of the organization.<sup>135</sup> The Baku offices took on special importance, and most likely received corresponding resources. Their status derived by virtue of the fact that they were responsible for supplying agitational material, not only to the city's diverse population, but to the as yet unoccupied Caucasian countries of Georgia and Armenia. The city was also expected to export revolutionary literature to the neighboring countries of the East (Turkey and Iran), as the Azrevkom made clear in an August 18, 1920, directive.<sup>136</sup>

Although the Azerbaijani Republican government had supported several cultural initiatives, their scope was limited. While the Russian émigrés occasionally benefited, as they did through their association with Baku State University, this was the exception rather than the rule. Instead they had to rely on the whims of low level administrators who might suddenly and unexpectedly withdraw their support, as was the case when they were forced to stop meeting at the M. A. Kalantarova Commercial College “in the interest of school hygiene.”<sup>137</sup> As noted above, the Poets' Workshop benefitted from the use of the university's auditorium, a privilege which may have been facilitated by Iurii Degen who held a position in the university's literary section.<sup>138</sup>

This involvement, however, paled in comparison to the explosion of opportunity that occurred as institutions such as Rosta began to organize. As evidenced by Roshal's visit to the

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>136</sup> Cəmal Quliyev, ed., *Azərbaycan Tarixi* [The History of Azerbaijan], vol. 6, *April 1920 – İyun 1941* (Baku: Elm, 2008), 6:192-193.

<sup>137</sup> Krusanov, *Russkii avangard*, 333.

<sup>138</sup> Nikol'skaia, *Fantasticheskii gorod*, 151.

Poets' Workshop in January 1920, as well as correspondence with their colleagues in the capitals, the Baku writers were well aware of the cooperation between artists and the Soviet state. Gorodetsky, Kruchenykh, and Vechorka, among others, all quickly found work in the Baku offices of Caucasian branch of Rosta (BakKavRosta) almost immediately after the Soviet army entered the city.<sup>139</sup> This should not however give the impression that agitprop was the only creative medium available. While in Baku, both Degen and Vechorka released books of poetry as well as appearing in collections and Kruchenykh self-published a series of nearly twenty, mostly hand printed books under the mark 41°, which had been the name of one of his Futurist collectives in Tiflis.<sup>140</sup>

### **Visitors from the North**

When the Red Army crossed into the South Caucasus they erased a barrier that had separated the region from the Russian interior since the regrouping of the Denikin's Volunteer Army in the autumn of 1918. While in theory this meant that Russian émigrés in the Caucasus could return to Petrograd and Moscow, for the time being news of the difficult material conditions prevailing in Russia's urban centers kept them in Baku. Instead, many intellectuals, after struggling through two years of hunger in the capitals, sought to make their way south in search of more favorable climates. As part of this trend, in October 1920, two new important additions to the literary milieu arrived in Baku: the venerable symbolist Viacheslav Ivanov and the Futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov. Both of these figures had deep connections to the Baku circle from the prerevolutionary years of Russian modernism in Petersburg and Moscow.

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<sup>139</sup> Other artists working in the offices included Mechislav Dobrokovskii, F. Konstantinov, B. Shatsman, Solomon Telingater, and Emmanuel Mané-Katz. Krusanov, *Futuristicheskaia revoliutsiia*, 336.

<sup>140</sup> For the tabulation of Kruchenykh's literary production throughout the Caucasian period see: Gosudarstvennii Musei V. V. Maiakovskii, *Knigi A. E. Kruchenykh kavkazskogo perioda iz kolleksii Gosudarstvennogo muzeia V. V. Maiakovskogo* [Books from A. E. Kruchenykh's Caucasian period from the collection of the V. V. Mayakovsky State Museum] (Moscow, Gosudarstvennii Musei V. V. Maiakovskii, 2001), 17.

Viacheslav Ivanov is one of the most important figures in Russian symbolism. As Robert Bird points out, “the publication of Ivanov’s debut collection *Pilot Stars* at the end of 1902, was a pivotal event in Russian literary history. It was the first harbinger of the new wave of symbolist poets, which included Ivanov, Alexander Blok, and Andrei Bely.”<sup>141</sup> He was closely connected to most of the writers who made up the Baku circle, many of whom had attended his famous literary salon, the Tower, or his workshop, the Academy of Verse. The later, in fact, was one of the most obvious precursors to the various Caucasian writers’ collectives.

This connection was particularly intimate in the case of Sergei Gorodetsky. In July 1906, Ivanov had begun sending his wife Lidia letters describing his sexual seduction of the young poet.<sup>142</sup> This triangular love affair eventually fell apart, but in the meantime it succeeded in kindling the creative output of both poets. Gorodetsky was published under Ivanov’s own *Horae* imprint, and in January 1907, Ivanov himself published the collection *Eros*, which “consisted mainly of poems dedicated to Gorodetsky and Lidia.”<sup>143</sup>

Ivanov came to Baku with his two children in an attempt to flee from both the privation of Moscow and the grief stemming from the recent death of his third wife, Vere Shvarsalon. At first, in August 1920, the family had received leave to stay at a sanatorium in the North Caucasian town of Kislovodsk as part of a project concocted by the People’s Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky (another former attendee of Ivanov’s salon), to establish the Kuban State University. Throughout the two months they stayed there, however, it seems

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<sup>141</sup> Robert Bird, *The Russian Prospero: The Creative Universe of Viacheslav Ivanov* (Madison, WA: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

that Ivanov did little to fulfill the project, which Bird suggests was merely a pretense.<sup>144</sup> In October, as Ivanov's daughter Lidia recalls, it was announced that the sanatorium was closing and all the patients were given a choice of where they would be moved: Moscow, two towns in central Russia, or Baku. She goes on to explain her father's decision: "Viacheslav was firm in his choice of Baku. 'It's in the south, and the border is close by,' [he said.] 'Who knows, maybe we could manage to cross it.'"<sup>145</sup>

When the Ivanovs arrived in Baku in October 1920, they seem to have had little sense of where they would live or what they would do there. Perhaps the poet was even unaware of the concentration of Russian émigré writers in the city. Fortunately, just hours after having arrived in Baku by train, Ivanov ran into Gorodetsky who managed to put Ivanov and his children up in the hallway of the apartment building where he and his wife lived.<sup>146</sup> In the days that followed, Ivanov visited the Baku Commissariat of Education (Narkompros), the Soviet agency responsible for education and most other cultural issues, from where he was directed to Baku State University, the faculty of which immediately took care of Ivanov and his family.<sup>147</sup> By late November he had been given a position as a professor of classical philology and poetics.<sup>148</sup>

Ivanov's living situation was a good deal less luxurious than in his Petersburg days and he was lodged in the university's smoking room. That inconvenience, however, did little to diminish the salon atmosphere of his quarters. In fact, the room's location, just off one of the university hallways, may have even encouraged students, friends, and writers to drop by. As Lidia Ivanova remembers it, at that point, there was little contact between the university and the

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>145</sup> Ivanova, *Vospominania*, 88.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>147</sup> Bird, *Russian Prospero*, 34.

<sup>148</sup> Robert Louis Jackson and Lowry Nelson, Jr., eds., *Vyacheslav Ivanov: Poet, Critic and Philosopher* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 457.

central government. This insulation bred a strong sense of loyalty among the professors and students who made up the institution. Ivanov, as part of this community, participated in all aspects of university life including “the selection of scholarly personnel, the organization of the library, the purchase of equipments, [administration of] the housing commission, and [...] the organization of the theater and cinema.”<sup>149</sup> So deep was his involvement that he was even nominated to become dean of the university, a position he ultimately declined.<sup>150</sup> It seems that none the less he was able to mobilize his reputation to petition the local government for resources.<sup>151</sup>

At the same time as Viacheslav Ivanov was getting settled at Baku State, the Futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov was starting his work at Rosta, where he had quickly been put to work writing for the wall newspaper *Kavkazskaia kommuna* and producing lines for agitprop posters.<sup>152</sup> Beyond that he also managed to secure a lecture (October 27) at the school library of the Political Education Department of the Volga-Caspian Flotilla.<sup>153</sup> For Khlebnikov, as for many in Baku at the time, there was a difficulty in securing housing. At first he lived right in the offices of BakKavRosta, sleeping at night on the same table they used for work each day. Eventually however, he had the opportunity to move to the sailors’ dormitory on Bailovskaia Street where he shared a room with the graphic artist Dobrokovskii.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 458.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 459.

<sup>151</sup> N. V. Kotrelev reproduces a request to the Azrevkom filed by Ivanov to improve the housing conditions for professors at the University. Kotrelev, “Viach. Ivanov—professor Bakinskogo Universiteta” [Viacheslav Ivanov—Baku University professor], *Trudy russkoi i slavianskoi filologii, literaturovedenie, Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta* 11, no. 209 (1968): 332-333.

<sup>152</sup> None of the posters with Khlebnikov’s captions seem to have survived, but the scholar Aleksandr Parnis has managed to reconstruct several of them: Parnis, “Velimir Khlebnikov v Baku v 1920-1921 gg.,” in *Portrety bez retushi*, 227.

<sup>153</sup> Krusanov, *Futuristicheskaia revoliutsiia*, 337.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

Throughout his stay in Baku, Khlebnikov, whose work and personality had always shown a strong mystical streak, was almost wholly absorbed by his belief that he had discovered what he called “the fundamental Laws of Time.” These laws had been derived from a great deal of mathematical work the poet had invested in calculating the intervals between historical events of differing categories so as to construct the essential, repeating numerical patterns of history. With these in hand, he was convinced that one could predict the future, and so avoid the type of mass suffering that had occurred during the First World War. In this mind set, poetry took second priority and he invested much energy, with little success, in getting his theories into print. This was a sticking point between him and the Baku writers which ultimately led to his living somewhat apart from them. As he tellingly puts it in a letter a friend, the Kharkov painter Vasily Ermilov:

If people don't want to learn my art of predicting the future (and that has already happened in Baku, among local thinkers), I shall teach it to horses. A government of horses may turn out more gifted scientists than a government of men. Horses will be grateful to me. They will have, besides riding, another supplementary source of income: they will be able to predict the fate of human beings and to aid governments that still have ears to hear.<sup>155</sup>

Memoirs of the period overwhelmingly concentrate on the down trodden aspect of Khlebnikov's appearance, his matted hair, his torn cloths, the sack in which he carried around his manuscripts.<sup>156</sup> At the same time however, Khlebnikov was actively trying to engage the new institutions of state culture, lecturing at the ad hoc workers colleges which had sprung up in the wake of the revolution. All the same, his dissatisfaction with the reception of his new work, as well as a romantic attraction to Asia, eventually led the poet to enlist as part of the

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<sup>155</sup> Velimir Khlebnikov, *The Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov*, vol. 1, *Letters and Theoretical Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 127.

<sup>156</sup> See Moisei Al'tman, “Iz togo, chto vspomnilos” [From that which is remembered], *Literaturnaia gazeta* (Moscow), November 13, 1985; Sergei Gorodetsky, “Velimir Khlebnikov,” in *Zhizn' neukrotimaia: Stat'i, ocherki, vospominania* [An indomitable life: Essays, sketches, recollections] (Moscow: Sovremenik, 1984), 203-205; more balanced accounts of Khlebnikov's social life appear in Ol'ga Samorodova, “Poet na Kavkaze” [Poet in the Caucasus], *Zvezda* 6 (1972), <http://ka2.ru/hadisy/olga.html>; and Tatiana Vechorka, “Vospominaniia o Khlebnikove” [Recollections of Khlebnikov] in *Portrety bez retushi*, 233-251.

political office of the Red Army. In April 1921 he was on a boat to Persia as part of an episode of post-war Soviet adventurism to help establish a Communist state in Iran.<sup>157</sup> He would not return to Baku until July 1921, and then only briefly.<sup>158</sup>

Throughout these vicissitudes, literary life in Baku continued. Viacheslav Ivanov's appointment at Baku State allowed the writers access to the facilities there, and the university hosted regular, well attended lectures.<sup>159</sup> In addition, Kruchenykh had established a new literary studio which met Fridays and operated under more or less the same schema as the old Poets' Workshop.<sup>160</sup> However, despite these successes, several of the poets were considering a return to Russia, which had for years seemed inaccessible. Kruchenykh specifically seems to oscillate on the issue. In March 1921 he asks a friend: "let me know if it's possible to set up in Petrograd, to live I mean. How many millions do you need a month? Write me how you're living, what's the news? [...] I would like very much to move to Peter, but I'm afraid of the hunger?!"<sup>161</sup> Whereas in June he writes: "I'm working a lot here [Baku]—that's why I'm not in a big rush to return to the capital!"<sup>162</sup>

While it's true that, as Janecek observes, Baku may have seemed isolated from the creative energy of the capital,<sup>163</sup> it also seems that Kruchenykh's departure was linked to the same reshuffling of the cultural bureaucracy that was pushing his avant-garde colleagues in

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<sup>157</sup> For further information about Khlebnikov's time in Iran, see A. Kosterin, "Russkie dervishi" [Russian dervishes], *Moskva* 9 (1966): 216-221; "Kliuchi k Khlebnikovu" [The keys to Khlebnikov], interview with Aleksandr Parnis, *Neproshedshee vremia: Radio Ekho Moskvy*, April 4, 2013, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/time/1052594-echo/>; and Sofii Starkina, *Velimir Khlebnikov* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 2007), 256-264. For the history of the Soviet actions in Iran, see Cosroe Chaqueri, *The Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran, 1920–1921: Birth of the Trauma* (Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994).

<sup>158</sup> Ronald Vroon, "A Russian Futurist in Asia," in *Writing Travel in Central Asian History*, ed. Nile Green (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 187.

<sup>159</sup> For these lectures occasionally were review in the press: M. D., "Lektsiia o Bloke" [A lecture on Blok], *Bakinskii rabochi*, no. 194, August 25, 1921.

<sup>160</sup> Krusanov, *Futuristicheskaia revoliutsiia*, 338.

<sup>161</sup> Kruchenykh, *Mir zatreshchit*, 149.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>163</sup> Janecek, *Zaum*, 291.

Moscow from the positions of power they had occupied in the aftermath of the revolution. The ways in which these forces played out in the offices of BakKavRosta, and the strategies employed by its organizer Sergei Gorodetsky in an effort to position himself favorably within the Soviet cultural sphere will be the topic of the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: New Art from Old Artists: Sergei Gorodetsky and the Critique of the Past

All the songs sung in the Menshevik paradise, no matter how beautiful they might be, they are all marked as outcasts, they are all stamped by corruption. These documents of a solitary life in a cage will [however] serve as curious material for the historian of literature.<sup>164</sup>

Sergei Gorodetsky

In 1920, the Arts' Offices of BakKavRosta had been a relatively autonomous and idiosyncratic organization. Under the leadership of Gorodetsky and the satirical illustrator Əmin Əminzadə, it had taken on responsibilities that in other areas would have fallen under the authority of Narkompros.<sup>165</sup> In that sense, it is a clear example of the local specificity of the development of early Soviet institutions, and goes a long way in clarifying the charges of parallelism that accompanied the centralization efforts which characterized the 1920s. Although literary and agitational departments were attached to many of the institutions of the young Soviet state, their success was frequently dependent on the energy and organizational acumen of local actors like Gorodetsky. The productivity of the arts department of BakKavRosta and its ability to employ most of the Caucasian poets over the course of 1920-21 is a testament to the extent of Gorodetsky's success within the cultural infrastructure. His central role in the affair is further documented by his position as the head of the organization's many and sundry subdivisions. Finally, the penchant for attaching various pedagogical studios to Rosta demonstrates how prerevolutionary networks were incorporated into the structure of the burgeoning institution.

By 1921, however, support for this brand localism was in decline. The first signs of this change had occurred already in 1918 with the reduction of the avant-garde dominated IZO (artistic) section of the Narkompros which until then had managed to largely dictate the shape

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<sup>164</sup> Review of *Stikhi* [poems], bk. 2, 1916-1920, by Klara Arseneva, *Iskusstvo* 1 (1921): 39.

<sup>165</sup> Quliyev, *Azərbaycan Tarixi*, 6:221.

of government funded cultural work.<sup>166</sup> The definitive moment, however, came in the beginning of 1921, with the reorganization of the Narkompros.

This restructuring was essentially a response of the Central Committee to a power struggle between the Proletkult and the so-called Futurist camp for influence and resources.<sup>167</sup> It was, however, also part of a larger attempt to combat wastefulness and redundancy or “parallelism” among Soviet institutions which had frequently developed in a haphazard way during the civil war, and which were competing amongst themselves for increasingly scarce resources.<sup>168</sup> BakKavRosta, as noted above, was a prime example of this. When it was established in May 1920, BakKavRosta was one of the few such agitational organizations in the South Caucasus to exist autonomously from a branch of the armed forces. Further, because Azerbaijan was the first Bolshevik outpost in the region, the Baku organization held a privileged position as the distribution point for much of the propaganda for the South Caucasus. With the intervention of the Red Army into Armenia and Georgia in December 1920, and February 1921, respectively, Baku surrendered its monopoly on agitational work. The reorganization of the Narkompros was used as an opportunity to excise Gorodetsky’s art department from Rosta and bring it the under the control of Glavpolitprosvet (Central Political Education Committee) which had taken over the Narkompros arts sections after reorganization.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Gurianova, *Aesthetics of Anarchy*, 235.

<sup>167</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Commissariat of Enlightenment*: 162-187. The Proletkult (Proletarian Culture) organization was a Narkompros funded independent organization during the civil war dedicated to the development of a new proletarian culture through education and engagement with workers.

<sup>168</sup> Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 34.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

This restructuring, although not explicitly mentioned as such, was likely the impetus for the first issue of *Iskusstvo* [Art], the organ of the Arts' Office of the ASSR Narkompros.<sup>170</sup> This journal, which ran for two issues and was first published in late February or March and then again in October, covers the period from the Narkompros reorganization to what seems to have been a total restructuring of Baku cultural institutions at the beginning of NEP.<sup>171</sup> Gorodetsky, as chief editor, portrayed this as part of the positive development and expansion of the arts' organs which, as he relates, in less than a year since the Red Army's march on Baku, had established a central Narkompros studio with museum archives, a satir-agit theater, sections for sculpture, graphic arts, and posters, as well as a stencil workshop, [...] poets' workshop, and a whole series of studios for various forms of cultural education.<sup>172</sup> This tally closely mirrors the divisions laid out in an illustration made by Gorodetsky of the hierarchy within the artistic section of BakKavRosta emphasizing the degree to which the poet had imagined Rosta as an idiosyncratic, if not autonomous, organization.<sup>173</sup>

By the final issue however, it is clear that many of the artistic subsections had stopped receiving financial support and were in the process of closing.<sup>174</sup> The articles, reviews, and editorial decisions of the journal all expose in different ways many of the salient debates that occupied Baku artists at the time. They also demonstrate a shift which was taking place from

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<sup>170</sup> Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, sometimes abbreviated as AzSSR. In Azerbaijani sources, Narkompros is rendered as the *Xalq Maarif Komissarlığı*

<sup>171</sup> The first issue of the journal doesn't specify the month but this estimate represents the period between the last theater series reviewed, which began on January 27 and ran for forty-nine performances, and the earliest impending cycle of performances, slated to begin on March 26. "Svobodnyi satiragit-teatr" [Free satir-agit theater], *Iskusstvo* 1 (1921): 37.

<sup>172</sup> Sergei Gorodetsky, "Nashi zadachi" [Our goals], *Iskusstvo* 1 (1921): 5-6.

<sup>173</sup> This undated drawing was obviously composed prior to the incorporation into Narkompros. *Tri ognia: Baku v izobrazitel'nom iskusstve 19-20 vekov* [Three fires: Baku in the graphic art of the 19-20th centuries] (Moscow: Pinakoteka, 2000), 127.

<sup>174</sup> Khronika [Chronicle], *Iskusstvo* 2-3 (1921): 77.

Baku-specific questions to all-Union artistic issues, as well as the interplay between artistic debate and contemporary political developments.

### **New Poems from Past Pens**

If there could be said to be an over arching theme of *Iskusstvo*, it would have to be the question of the direction of development of post-revolutionary art. This generally entailed a prescriptive and critical approach to the subject of art and poetry rather than generating concrete creative output. In other words, the journal devotes relatively little space to publishing works of poetry and prose, instead giving most of its pages over to essays which call for a vaguely defined “new art,” or level criticism against artists who are not seen as responding correctly to the revolution.

The concept of post-revolutionary art is approached variously throughout the journal. The February/March issue, for instance, focuses overwhelmingly on the relationship of new art to the Eastern artistic traditions available in Baku. In his editorial note, “Our goals,” Sergei Gorodetsky asserts that “in Azerbaijan, in Baku—that advance stronghold of the revolutionary East—all the grandiose goals of the new art that have been determined and supplied in Soviet Russia, take on special significance. The East,” he goes on to contend, “still knows the old forms of art which have already been forgotten in the west. [...] It is all of these which create the fruitful soil for the development of art in Baku and Azerbaijan.”<sup>175</sup>

The relationship between East and West, old and new art, and the characteristics of each, make up the grist for the rest of the essays in the issue. These range from P. Chichkanov’s theoretical treatise, “The coming art” [*Griadushchee iskusstvo*] to documentary pieces like A. Akhundov’s “Theater among the Muslims” [*Teatr u musul'man*] and V. Tsilossani’s

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<sup>175</sup> Gorodetsky, “Nashi zadachi,” 5.

“Monuments of Baku’s old town” [*Pamiatniki stariny g. Baku*] which seek to introduce Russian readers to the achievements and shortcomings of theater in Turkey, Persia, and Azerbaijan, as well as the cultural heritage of the city. There is also a concrete prescriptive angle which can be seen most clearly in Uzeyir Hajibeyov’s article, “The Tasks of Musical Education in Azerbaijan.” Here Hajibeyov addresses methods of integrating Muslim students and traditional instruments into a western conservatory system by offering native language sections and adapting standard systems of notation to local instruments.<sup>176</sup>

The general consensus among the articles is that Eastern artistic traditions need to be cultivated with reference to the development of European art. The new art should refine the rich traditions of “miniatures, manuscripts, frescoes, carpets, and engravings,” while eschewing the spent capitalist decadence of “Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism, etc.” all with the goal of forging an art in which “form will be identical with content.”<sup>177</sup> The outlook is future oriented without being iconoclastic.<sup>178</sup>

This rhetoric of the new, of course, presents an immediate problem shared by many such discourses, namely that it is easier to call for something new than to create it. This dilemma is highlighted by the poetry that is featured in the issue. Only one poem, Mikhail Danilov’s “Iron Fairy Tale” [*Zheleznaia skazka*], which sketches a picture of romance among the foundries of an iron works, can be characterized as having a notably revolutionary theme. The others tow a much more traditional line and some of them, like Konstantin Tomashevskii’s

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<sup>176</sup> Uzeyir Hajibeyov, “Muzykal’no-Prosvetitel’nye zadachi Azerbaidjana” [The tasks of musical education in Azerbaijan], *Iskusstvo* 1 (1921): 25-28.

<sup>177</sup> P. Chichkanov, “Griadushchee iskusstvo” [The coming art], *Iskusstvo* 1 (1921): 13, 15.

<sup>178</sup> Iconoclasm is a term used both at the time and in contemporary historiography of the avant-garde to signal a negative and destructive orientation towards the art of the past, particularly realist classics. This attitude is exemplified in the 1912 Futurist manifesto, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” which declared: “Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity.” See “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” in *Words in Revolution: Russian Futurist Manifestos, 1912-1928*, (Washington DC: New Academia, 2005), 151.

“Milestone” [*Etapka*] are even dated long before the revolution, 1912 in this case. None of them, it is worth noting, are written by Azerbaijani or Muslim authors.<sup>179</sup>

The poetry selection of the journal is perhaps most notable for the fact that none of the poets who had worked with Gorodetsky in Tiflis and Baku before the revolution are featured. The Caucasian years do, however, make their appearance in a different way. Of the five works reviewed in the Bibliography section of the journal, two were published in Tiflis between 1916 and 1920, and one in Baku in 1920. All of them are negatively reviewed using heavily ideological language. Although the reviews are not signed, it is safe to assume that they are the work of Gorodetsky by virtue of his position as chief editor, and, more importantly, because of notable stylistic similarities to signed reviews in the following issue of the journal. This attribution is further bolstered by the fact that several of the chapbooks under review were only produced in small runs at a publishing house Gorodetsky had ties to in Tiflis.<sup>180</sup>

These reviews constitute perhaps the most striking section of an otherwise unremarkable journal. After calling for the publication of a manuscript by Il'ia Kremlev, one of the poets featured earlier in the issue, Gorodetsky turns his attention to a handful of 1919 poems by Sergei Rafalovich, one of Gorodetsky's closest collaborators in Tiflis. He helped the poet found the Tiflis branch of the Poets' Workshop, created the publishing house *Kavkazkii Posrednik* [Caucasian Mediator], and ran the journal *Orion* which chronicled literary developments in Georgia and was co-edited with Gorodetsky and the Georgian noble, Salomea Andronikova.<sup>181</sup> Once Gorodetsky left for Baku, Rafalovich even took charge of the Tiflis Poets' Workshop,

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<sup>179</sup> Gorodetsky asserts that the journal was put out in both Azerbaijani and Russian, and while this is often repeated, I have never found citations to the Azeri version and it remains unclear how its content contrasted with the Russian edition. Gorodetsky, “Moi put’.”

<sup>180</sup> The publishing house in question was *Kavkazkii Posrednik*, referred to below.

<sup>181</sup> For biographical details on Rafalovich, see Bowlt, *Salon Album*, 11-12.

reforming it into the Union of Russian Writers in Georgia after the Sovietization of Tiflis.<sup>182</sup> In his review however, Gorodetsky show no sympathy towards the poet, attacking his work from the very first lines:

Sergei Rafalovich, a poet of the symbolist school and an experienced versifier, has released a series of small books in an old style reminiscent of parts of Blok or Sologub. The contemporary reader searching poetry for a reflection of actual occurrences will in no sense be satisfied by these books. Though they will remain pleasant for those with moth-eaten souls [*vetkhaia dusha*].<sup>183</sup>

In some ways this is a surprising criticism given the fact that three of the contributions to *Iskusstvo*'s poetry section came from Gorodetsky's mentor, the prominent symbolist Viacheslav Ivanov, and that Gorodetsky's own contributions to the journal, two meditations on mortality and fate, fit well within the symbolist cannon. Further on however, it becomes clear that it is not so much the poet, or even the content, as the environment that Gorodetsky finds fault with:

It's true that the Georgian landscape, which the author has real feeling for, somewhat redeems these poems. But all the same, they are strange to read in these days when the specific job of the poet has become the representation of the collective psyche. It is only in the isolated conditions of Menshevik Georgia that one could preserve such calcified poems [*sokhranit'sia takaia okamenelost', kak eti stikhi*].<sup>184</sup>

The same belligerence towards Georgia exists in Gorodetsky's review of Akara Arseneva:

Marked by the great years of our age, [these poems] talk about cranberries, red foxes, of Nineveh, of gazelles, bananas, pheasants, peacocks, about that which is cozy, but not about that in which we all now live. And all that is the same swamp where all poets existed in Menshevik Tiflis. [...] All the songs sung in the Menshevik paradise, no matter how beautiful they might be, they are all marked as outcasts, they are all stamped by corruption. These documents of a solitary life in a cage will [however] serve as curious material for the historian of literature.<sup>185</sup>

The reviews also share another aspect of Gorodetsky's polemics, namely a call for the authors to come over to the cause of new art. In both cases he ends the review by praising their poetic acumen and hoping that the "talented author would soon begin to breath with a new life,

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<sup>182</sup> Nikol'skaia, *Fatasticheskii Gorod*, 177.

<sup>183</sup> Review of recent works by Sergei Rafalovich, *Iskusstvo* 1 (1921): 39.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Review of *Stikhi*, 39.

creating new and much needed verse to match his natural and technical gifts.”<sup>186</sup> In the case of a “nothingist” [*nichevok*] poet from Rostov, Gorodetsky even prescribes a regimen of “Komsomol work and physical labor” that might quickly save the young man “from the delights of the Marquis de Sade.”<sup>187</sup>

In these reviews, Gorodetsky is developing a limited iconoclasm which will dominate the tone of the next issue. It combines a dismissal of recent literary trends with the belief that authors still under their thrall can see the light and become productive poets of the new art. This is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a description of Gorodetsky’s own trajectory from symbolist dilettante to card carrying poet of the revolution. The specific ire reserved for Georgia is, however, limited to this issue. It seems likely that this was a result of the time of its publication which must have been within a week or two of the start of the Soviet offensive against independent Georgia which occurred throughout February and March, 1921.

This attitude, however, seems to be complicated by the fact that almost none of the poets Gorodetsky had been working with over the previous years subscribe to his particular vision of what, in the following issue, is dubbed “labor poetry,” a handle which notably avoids the more politically relevant term of “proletarian art.” This, of course, meant that Baku’s greatest literary resources were outside the scope of what was considered worth publishing. This dilemma is addressed by the journal’s decision to both publish Aleksei Kruchenykh’s “Declaration of *Zaum* Language” and to devote space to subjecting Kruchenykh to the same sort of treatment shown to his erstwhile Tiflis colleagues.<sup>188</sup> At first Gorodetsky refers to the declaration, which Gerald Janecek has noted reads like an attempt “to rationalize the irrational,

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Review of *Nichevoka* [Nothingist] by Riurik Rok, *Iskustvo* 1 (1921): 40.

<sup>188</sup> For an English translation of Kruchenykh’s manifesto, see Alexei Kruchenykh, “Declaration of Transrational Language,” in *Words in Revolution*, 182-183.

to spell out the place of *zaum* in poetry in much the same way as [Viktor] Shklovsky already had in his article ‘On the Poetry of *Zaum* Language,’<sup>189</sup> with the statement that: “one can’t contest the usefulness of the philological study of all of these cases. But the possibility of the application of *zaum* in literature and even in everyday life [*byt*] remains doubtful.” He then goes on to say that the poetic work in question, *Mutiny* [*Miatezh*], one of Kruchenykh’s self published hand printed booklets,<sup>190</sup> is “useless and ridiculous. It has meaning only as an exercise in the study of onomatopoeia.”<sup>191</sup> Once again, Gorodetsky rounds out his criticism with a back handed complement: “The descriptions [...] are bright and vital. It just seems that this passion for *zaum* strongly distorts the author’s work.”<sup>192</sup>

This tactic of publishing work along with its condemnation is practiced more fully in the second issue of *Iskusstvo*. Here the poetry section extends for sixteen pages and is organized by poetic school: Labor poetry, Symbolism, Acmeism, Clarism, and Futurism. The broad range of styles reflects the heterogeneous literary atmosphere that had developed in the Caucasus over the previous years, and the authors are familiar from Gorodetsky’s circle, both there and in prerevolutionary Petrograd: Mikhail Kuzmin, Osip Mandelstam, Khlebnikov, Ivanov, Rafalovich, Degen, and Kruchenykh. This time Gorodetsky includes himself among the labor poets. It is not until much later in the issue however, that the intention is made clear. After several documentary articles on Baku architecture and a tract on proletarian art by Nikolai Makridin, the reader encounters the notes from the editor. Here we find a note, signed “Ed.” though again it seems likely that it is Gorodetsky’s hand, which reaffirms that:

The editors of the journal *Iskusstvo* stand by the point of view that all the powers of contemporary art should be given over to the creation of labor poetry whose form should reflect

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<sup>189</sup> Janecek, *Zaum*, 268.

<sup>190</sup> Review of *Miatezh* [Mutiny] by Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Iskusstvo* 1 (1921): 40.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

and clarify the ideology of the working class. This is the opinion held by all of the sections of the journal. All the same, in the current issue the editors of the poetry section felt that there was need to present, beside labor poetry, the creative forms of other literary schools of poetry as objects of study and comparison. In this way it can be considered appropriate to remind ourselves of poetic schools of the recent past, which to a considerable extent are still alive today.<sup>193</sup>

This note is then followed by several book reviews of the same model as the previous issue, emphasizing the shortcomings of “bourgeois” literature in the face of the proletarian ideals of the working class.

### **Self-fashioning and the Language of Revolution**

It is difficult to know what to take away from the sharp polemics of Gorodetsky’s reviews. By all accounts, including his own, Gorodetsky was by this point a committed Communist, though of what sort is less clear. In 1921 Moisei Al’tman recalled Ivanov’s description that “Gorodetsky is now a Bolshevik, though maybe a Bolshevik under the sign of a calf, tail outstretched, mooing pointlessly. Such is Gorodetsky. And he is absolutely a true Bolshevik. Whoever doesn’t believe his sincerity doesn’t know enough of man and the palpitations of the human heart.”<sup>194</sup> This seems to reinforce the evaluation of C. E. Bachhofer when he met with Gorodetsky in Baku in 1920. He found the poet “an ardent pro-Bolshevik,” though he goes on to say that he had “never taken Gorodetsky’s political opinions seriously, and [that] his present pro-Bolshevism seemed only to balance a curiously bad poem celebrating the Tsar that he wrote in 1915, or 1916.”<sup>195</sup>

In the past, however, Gorodetsky’s political and even aesthetic convictions had been little on who he chose to associate himself with, which is why the attacks on friends are striking. Instead, the resonance of these criticisms with larger political events and the author’s

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<sup>193</sup> “Ot redaktsii” [From the editors], *Iskusstvo* 2-3 (1921): 59.

<sup>194</sup> Moisei Al’tman, *Razgovory s Viacheslavom Ivanovym* [Conversations with Viacheslav Ivanov] (Petersburg: Inapress, 1995), 63.

<sup>195</sup> Bachhofer, *Denikin’s Russia*, 311-312.

own biography give the sense of ulterior motives beyond poetic conviction. This certainly seems to be the case with regard to the invasion of Georgia. There is also something to be said in this regard about the neologism of “labor poetry” and the pseudo-iconoclastic line.

The reorganization of the Narkompros which had been approved in February 1921, was at least partially designed to remove the most extreme iconoclastic elements, Futurists and Bogdanovists, from the Narkompros and the Proletkult organizations.<sup>196</sup> Because of his connections to the Petrograd intelligentsia, which he reinforced during a visit in 1919, and his position at the head of the Baku arts’ section during the restructuring, Gorodetsky would have been well aware of the shifting official opinion. The relatively moderate position he seems to take, one which calls for a break with the past while at the same time maintaining old masters as objects of study, was not in fact entirely novel. A very similar model had been proposed by Vasily Kandinsky for organizing Soviet museums in 1918, although at the time it was overruled by more radical members of IZO.<sup>197</sup> Such a stance would have put him in a favorable position to take on new administrative duties, something which became all the more pressing as salaries had stopped being paid for work in the agit-poster department and there were questions as to whether the journal itself would be able to continue.<sup>198</sup>

There was also a personal element to Gorodetsky’s posturing which entailed strongly distancing himself from aspects of his own biography that could be seen as problematic by the new regime. This is apparent enough from the attacks on “Menshevik Georgia” but it comes out even more starkly in his obituary of the poet Nikolai Gumilev. Gumilev was a leading figure of

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<sup>196</sup> The term Bogdanovist became an epithet leveled by the regime against the most uncompromising elements within the Proletkult. It takes its name from one of the movement’s founding members, Alexander Bogdanov, who was an early competitor with Lenin for the leadership of the Bolshevik faction, and as such is imbued with a noticeable political sharpness. Fitzpatrick, *Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 238.

<sup>197</sup> Pamela Kachurin, “Futurist Museology,” *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 2 (2003): 327-348.

<sup>198</sup> *Iskusstvo* 2-3 (1920): 71. In the back matter it is mentioned that the journal was only slated to run three issues. As this had been a double issue (2-3) it was unclear if the contract would be renewed. Indeed it wasn’t. *Ibid.*, 77.

the silver age intelligentsia and his execution by the Soviet government for counter-revolutionary activities was one of the most early and visible instances of the Bolsheviks violently targeting intellectuals. Gorodetsky for his part was closely associated with Gumilev, as in 1911 they had founded the first Poets' Workshop in Petersburg.<sup>199</sup>

At first Gorodetsky pursues a form of argument similar to that which he deployed against his Tiflis colleagues, asserting that “the counter-revolutionary swamp that is the Petrograd intelligentsia had ruined the outstanding talent of a dogged literary worker.” After devoting a few lines to Gumilev's early career, though stopping short of mentioning any involvement in the Poets' Workshop, Gorodetsky begins his assessment of Gumilev's later years:

A soulless formal aesthetic of the aristocracy tightened around him even more. [...] He founded the school of Acmeism, which has given us talented poets such as Mandelstam, but academicism closed his path to the future. He neither saw nor felt the revolution, he turned from a sarcastic European to an Orthodox Christian, and all of these accursed forces drew him into this bit of adventurism. His creations died long ago, and now he too has been killed physically. The singer of the bourgeoisie departs along with him.<sup>200</sup>

As in his earlier reviews, Gorodetsky blames external forces for dragging down Gumilev, almost excusing the poet, but never his poetry or the aesthetics he endorsed.

While Gorodetsky's rhetoric reflects aspects of contemporary politics, it would be a mistake to understand it as the dominant discourse of the period. To take just one example from the pages of the party newspaper *Bakinskii Rabochi*, while the theater collective Grotesque is taken to task in a review for “starting the dangerous decline towards the mediocrity of miniature theater,” its class orientation is never mentioned.<sup>201</sup> Similarly, when a week later the reviewer

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<sup>199</sup> For biographical details, see “Gumilyov, Nikolai Sergeevich (1886-1921),” in *Handbook of Russian Literature*, ed. Victor Terras (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985): 188-189. Gumilev's patronymic is misstated as “Sergeevich.” It is actually Stepanovich.

<sup>200</sup> Sergei Gorodetsky, “Nikolai Gumilev, 1887-1921,” *Iskusstvo* 2-3 (1921): 59.

<sup>201</sup> Per Baot, ““Grotesk’ – 2-oi tsikl” [“Gortsek” – the 2nd cycle], *Bakinskii Rabochi*, no. 197, August 30, 1921.

praises the collective's new repertoire, it is for its rejection of café chantant-ism [*kafeshantannost'*] rather than for championing art of the proletariat.<sup>202</sup>

This realization further stresses the specificity of Gorodetsky's situation and his relationship to what are increasingly portrayed as reactionary counter-revolutionary regimes in Baku and Tiflis. I would suggest that Gorodetsky's attitude to his fellow writers is self reflexive. While it would be difficult for him to deny the tsarist and anti-Bolshevik sentiments he published during the war, by repudiating the environment of Menshevik Tiflis or contemporary Petrograd as corrupting, he creates a paradigm of ideological redemption of which he himself is the prime example. In the case of Gorodetsky, this seems to have been a strategy predicated at least in part on real, if naïve ideological belief, but it was also an effective tool of professional advancement, one frequently employed by the poets who lived through the period as they sought to justify, excuse, or more often, gloss over their pre-revolutionary activities.

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<sup>202</sup> Per Baot, “‘Grotesk’ – 3-i tsikl” [“Gortsek” – the 3rd cycle], *Bakinskii Rabochi*, no. 203, September 7, 1921.

## Conclusion

It is often said that ‘the germ of all Stalinism was in Bolshevism at its beginning.’ Well, I have no objection. Only, Bolshevism also contained many other germs—a mass of germs—and those who lived through the enthusiasm of the first years of the first victorious revolution ought not to forget it. To judge the living man by the death germs which the autopsy reveals in a corpse—and which he may have carried with him since his birth—is this very sensible?<sup>203</sup>

Victor Serge

As the autonomy of BakKavRosta was curtailed, and the calls of Gorodetsky for ideological uniformity became shriller, the Caucasian poets began eschew the organization in favor of other systems of support. By October 1921, the situation had gotten so bad that Gorodetsky openly complained in the pages of *Iskusstvo* that:

A literary section of Narkompros still doesn’t exist, regardless of the fact that Baku now possesses huge literary talents who could contribute much to the fields of theater, ethnography, and the history of the revolution, if it only occurred to them. [...] We have the talent, and the work is limitless, but they all stick to their own corners and it is absolutely incomprehensible how Narkompros will make do without a literary department.<sup>204</sup>

This attitude, however, was to prove indicative of the changing role that Baku was playing in the relationship between artists and the Soviet state. Whereas during the civil war, the disconnect between the South Caucasus and central Russia had highlighted the potential of Baku and Tiflis as cultural centers, the reemergence of Moscow and Petrograd from difficult wartime conditions meant that they again became viable options for the refugee artists. Indeed, for those who wished to engage directly with the new Soviet cultural institutions, the center provided significantly more opportunities than Baku, which had reverted to its status as a peripheral city. For those artists who remained after 1921, the value of Baku was specifically in

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<sup>203</sup> Quoted in Wood, “Politics of the Avant-Garde,” 8.

<sup>204</sup> “Lito,” Otdel iskusstv [Artistic section], *Iskusstvo*, 2-3 (1921):75.

its distance from the center, and the opportunity this afforded them to sequester themselves in an institution, Baku State University, which had preserved a striking amount of autonomy.

Aleksei Kruchenykh left in August 1921,<sup>205</sup> and Sergei Gorodetsky followed several months after. Tat'iana Vechorka remained at Baku State as a student of Viacheslav Ivanov until she was accepted to the V. Ia. Briusova Institute of Literature and the Arts in 1924.<sup>206</sup> The activities of Iurii Degen in the 1920s are unclear, but on June 1, 1923, he was executed by the Azerbaijani Cheka for supposedly planning to set fire to the oil fields as part of a secret organization called the Order of the Burning Hearts.<sup>207</sup> The veracity of these charges is suspicious, in part because the group's name, which is perhaps a literary reference to an Ivanov's book *Cor Ardens*, seems an unlikely designation for an arsonist association. Tat'iana Nikol'skaia, for one, contends that it was really a mystical society.<sup>208</sup> Lastly, Ivanov, who had integrated so well into the university community, jumped at the opportunity to go abroad to Italy in the wake of a well-received lecture on the Pushkin anniversary in May 1924. Hurriedly sending for his children, in June he crossed border of the Soviet Union, never to return.<sup>209</sup>

The rapid development of cultural life in the South Caucasus was the result of a particular set of circumstances that evolved out of the realities of Russia's continuum of crisis. While the revolution played an essential role in that evolution, it would be wrong to set October as the sole axis around which it rotated. This is demonstrated both by the activities of Kruchenykh and Gorodetsky in Tiflis before 1917, and the continued operation of prerevolutionary groups throughout the first year after the Bolshevik occupation. This case

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<sup>205</sup> Janecek, *Zaum*, 291.

<sup>206</sup> Nikol'skaia, *Fantasticheskii gorod*, 159.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>208</sup> "Iz istorii poeticheskogo avangarda: Iurii Degen," [From the history of the poetic avant-garde: Iurii Degen], interview with Tat'iana Nikol'skaia, *Radio svoboda*, December 13, 2003, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/24200211.html>.

<sup>209</sup> Bird, *Russian Prospero*, 35.

study from the Caucasian borderlands also emphasizes the ways in which the process of centralization which characterized cultural life during much of the 1920s was a manifestation, not only of a desire to concentrate power for power's sake, but also to negotiate the many localisms which had developed. In part, these were a result of the disintegration of the empire, but also of the process of social mobilization, which was accelerated, though not created, during the war years. Although the period in which local actors like Gorodetsky could be the main force in shaping the form and directives of an organization like BakKavRosta was brief, the fact that the Nakompros office into which his workshops were dissolved retained the organizational structure he set out shows how decisions made during the initial encounters with Soviet cultural institutions were inherited by their later manifestations.

Organizationally speaking, it seems clear that by monopolizing the role of patron, Soviet institutions introduced a fundamental change to the cultural landscape, an observation which supports Nina Gurianova's distinction between the pre- and postrevolutionary avant-gardes as a matter of the movement's "governmentalization."<sup>210</sup> Localism, however, created a more pluralized environment than is generally assumed and provided artists like Khlebnikov the opportunity to choose, for example, the literary department of the Caspian Flotilla over Gorodetsky's Rosta. In short, governmentalization made it increasingly clear that art was to be Communist, but what exactly Communist art entailed remained disputed until the doctrine of socialist realism was introduced in 1934.

In this case study, aspects of the traditional narrative of intelligentsia-state collaboration during the civil war are brought into question. Most notably, it encourages a reassessment of the absolute connection between aesthetics and political strategy. Artistic collaboration with Soviet

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<sup>210</sup> Gurianova, *Aesthetics of Anarchy*, 276.

institutions in Baku was extensive, but, unlike in Petrograd, it would be misleading to characterize it as “avant-garde.” This suggests that the statist turn identified by Gurianova may have been a much broader phenomenon better examined outside the framework of any one artistic school. One part of that project would be the willingness to move beyond explorations of the politics of the avant-garde as elaborated by Paul Wood, i.e. the ideological intersection between political and aesthetic projects, and instead to elaborate the *political strategies* of the cultural intelligentsia. This is a category which would necessarily bring the story of Russian modernism back into conversation with the political, economic, and social history of the period, a shift which, as this thesis has shown, goes a long way towards elucidating developments which have traditionally been seen as cordoned off from one another.

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