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The 'Belgrade Circle': Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol and Tolstoy in Serbian Interwar Comics

Written by Michel De Dobbeleer


Image Gallery

As not everyone knows, the 'Belgrade Circle', the collective of comics authors who ushered in the so-called 'Golden Age of Serbian comics' (from the 1930s until WW II), had many Russian émigrés among its members. This contribution mainly deals with their practice of adapting the nineteenth-century literary classics of their home country into the comics medium.

Article References

Apart from the name of a group of intellectuals who opposed the nationalist Milošević regime in the 1990s, the term 'Belgrade Circle' (Beogradski krug) indeed also points to the collective of comics authors who, centred in Belgrade, wrote a strikingly intercultural episode in Europe's interwar comics history. Given the fact that several of them were artists (from families) that had fled Russia due to the regime change there, it does not come as a complete surprise that a substantial part of the Circle's comics production during these years consisted of adaptations of literary works by 'classic' Russian authors.

As is widely known, twentieth-century Eastern Europe has – in general – not been friendly to the medium of comics. Not only during communist times, but even in the often short-lived regimes before, comics were usually considered suspicious. Educationally speaking, they would ruin the hard and conscientious work of parents and teachers, and more (geo)politically, they were associated with capitalist and



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As is widely known, twentieth-century Eastern Europe has – in general – not been friendly to the medium of comics. Not only during communist times, but even in the often short-lived regimes before, comics were usually considered suspicious. Educationally speaking, they would ruin the hard and conscientious work of parents and teachers, and more (geo)politically, they were associated with the capitalist and 'depraved' West (where for a long time, many educators had the same ideas about the bad influences of the medium). Leaving aside the highly turbulent 1940s, most probably the best and definitely the most vibrant place to make a living as a comics artist in Eastern Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall was Yugoslavia. It was soon after the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918-1929) had changed its name in 'Kingdom of Yugoslavia' ('yug' meaning 'south', whereas '-slavia' obviously refers to the predominantly Slavic population of the kingdom), that comics quickly grew popular among Serbian newspaper and magazine readers. First, the target audience of the still balloon-less comics almost exclusively consisted of children, as the drawings and the texts beneath them, often in verse, were intended to entertain and educate the young(est) Serbs.

The appearance in 1932, in the pioneering but short-lived *Merry Thursday* (*Veseli četvrtak*, 1932-1933) magazine of *The Adventures of Mika Mouse* (*Doživljaji Mike Miša*) is symptomatic for the mix between the international and the local throughout Serbia's 'golden' comics age. Of course, the Mika Mouse from the title was Walt Disney's famous Mickey Mouse (created in the US four years before), but already in his first appearance in Serbian Mika experienced original Yugoslav adventures. The international character of Serbian comics in the thirties manifested itself also in another way. The man who had drawn *The Adventures of Mika Mouse* was Ivan Šenšin (1897-1944), one of a dozen comics-drawing Russian émigrés who – whether alone or with their families – had fled Russia because of the 1917 communist assumption of power, and who finally ended up in Belgrade, where they became the key figures of what would be called the 'Belgrade Circle' (*Beogradski krug*). It goes without saying that all of their drawing styles displayed individual traits, but in general they owe a visual debt to (Canadian-)American artists such as *Prince Valiant's* Hal Foster, *Flash Gordon's* Alex Raymond and other early masters of the adventure genre.

In the years to come, the average age of the target audience would rise, whereas the number of newspapers and magazines featuring comics would grow as well. Of key importance among these was certainly *Mika Miš* (Mickey Mouse had soon become a – if not *the* – ‘symbol’ of the medium), launched in 1936 by Aleksandar Ivković (Aleksandr Ivkovich, 1894-1969), himself an (Odessa-born) emigrant as well, who had adopted his Serbian wife’s surname. *Mika Miš* soon developed into a renowned comics magazine partially thanks to the North American comics series it featured: the above-mentioned *Prince Valiant* and *Flash Gordon*, but also, a.o., Lee Falk and Phil Davis’s *Mandrake the Magician*. Far more European, however, were the story lines and themes of the original Serbian comics in the magazine, many of which – as we have seen – from the pencil and/or pen of Russian émigrés.

A remarkably large share of the non-American stories in *Mika Miš* and other contemporary magazines consisted of adaptations into the comics medium of classics of (mostly) European literature on the one hand, and of local Serbian folk legends and fairy tales on the other. Regarding the latter, especially Đorđe Lobačev (Yuri Lobachev, 1909-2002) – with titles such as *Baš Čelik* and *Tsar Dušan’s Wedding* – deserves to be mentioned. The only member of the Circle who during his life – albeit decades after his contributions to Serbia’s Golden Age – would become a respected artist in Russian comics too, Lobačev also adapted a work of Russian literature: Aleksandr Pushkin’s (1799-1837) unfinished *Dubrovsky*, a novel about the revenge of a nobleman-robber. Other works of Pushkin that were adapted by Russians in Belgrade were his eerie story *Queen of Spades*, by Konstantin Kuznjecov (Kuznetsov, 1895-1980), as well as the tragic story *The Station Master* – as *Poštareva kći* (*The Postman’s Daughter*) – and the historical novel *The Captain’s Daughter*, both by Aleksije Rankhner (Aleksey Rankhner, 1897-1942).

Works of Russia’s two other canonical authors between – and belonging to both – Romanticism and Realism, Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) and Nikolay Gogol (1809-1852), were adapted too. From Lermontov’s influential *Hero of Our Time*, a successful frame story experiment about the depressing adventures and personality of a Byronic hero, Pechorin, against the stunning background of the Caucasus mountains, two of the five more or less separate stories were adapted as *The Rose from the Caucasus* (*Ruža sa Kavkaza*). The identity of the artist remains uncertain, but it is clear, also from the choice of the two stories (‘Bela’ – the name of a local beauty – and ‘Princess Mary’) that the adaptation thematically focuses on the loves of Pechorin. From Gogol’s oeuvre, three very different works were adapted: the devil story *Christmas Eve*, by Kuznjecov; the (pseudo-)historical, highly romantic novel

Taras Bulba, by Nikola Navojev (Nikolay Navoyev, 1913-1940; he made two versions of it); and the comedy of errors *The Government Inspector (Revizor)*, by Rahnner.

Apart from works by Pushkin and Gogol, the prolific Rahnner also adapted *Resurrection* (1899), the third and last of the three voluminous novels by Lev Tolstoy (1828-1910). The second one, the more than twenty years older, better-known *Anna Karenina* was adapted too, probably by the same artist who adapted Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time*. The comics version of Tolstoy's multi-layered masterpiece largely limits itself to the protagonist Anna's problematic relationship with her son Seryozha; hence the telling subtitle of the adaptation: "tragedy of a mother". Two other, much shorter Tolstoy novels, conclude this list of adapted Russian classics, both of them war-themed: his early *The Cossacks*, by Sergej Solovjev (1901-1975), and the late *Khadzhi-Murat*, by the already twice mentioned Kuznjecov.

To get a well-balanced picture of their activity, it should be emphasized that on top of these works, these artists also created original and/or American-inspired (cf. supra) comics. As for their comics adaptations, moreover, they did not limit themselves to Russian originals. Hence, we have, for example, adaptations of *Baron von Münchhausen* by Lobačev, of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* by Solovjev, and of Victor Hugo's *Les misérables* and Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* by Rahnner, whereas Šenšin adapted a (West) Slavic classic: Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*.

As a worldwide phenomenon, the practice of adapting literary classics into comics existed before the Belgrade Circle. The 1920s already saw several serialized comics adaptations of (children's/adventure) classics such as Johann David Wyss's *Swiss Family Robinson* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, but it would really boom in the 1940s, in the United States, after Albert Kanter (1897-1973) – himself also a Russian(-Jewish) émigré – had launched the *Classic Comics* series (1941-1947), better known as *Classics Illustrated*, its name since 1947. Its main goal was making the works of the literary canon available to school-age children by means of self-contained condensations in the form of comic books.

When comparing the long *Classics Illustrated* list of adapted literary works to the enumeration above of Russian works adapted earlier by the Belgrade Circle, it is striking that *Classics Illustrated* clearly focused on the adaptation of what could be considered 'boys' books', full of adventure and (fighting) action, whereas the Belgrade-based adapters of Russian literature certainly drew their inspiration from a larger variety of (sub)genres. Admittedly, historical novels such as Gogol's *Taras Bulba* or Tolstoy's *Khadzhi-Murat* could

be labelled (at least in their comics version) as adventure stories, but this does not apply at all to works such as Pushkin's *The Station Master*, Gogol's *The Government Inspector* or Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and *Resurrection*. This undoubtedly has to do with the fact that the intended audience of the Russian comics artists was larger, and also more sophisticated than the American schoolchildren (apparently most of them boys) who had to be literarily 'educated' by *Classics Illustrated*. Of course, one of the goals of the Russian artists' adaptation practices must certainly have been the literary education of their younger readers, especially the émigré children, in their new fatherland, Yugoslavia. At the same time, however, they acquainted the authentic Serbian/Yugoslav adult comics audience as well with the 'classic' literature of their country of origin. We can conclude that the diversity of (sub)genres and themes – apart from adventure and action, also social, romantic or humorous topics – of the adapted literary works offered them a fairly representative overview of the literary achievements of pre-revolutionary Russia, although Dostoevsky and Chekhov indeed remained absent.

This remarkably prosperous episode of European comics history came to an abrupt ending with the Nazi bombardment of Belgrade in the spring of 1941. The surviving Circle members (Navojev had died from tuberculosis) once again had to flee or even worse, some of them were executed (Šenšin, by the communists) or deported (Lobačev, to Romania). It would take at least a decade before the Yugoslav climate, after the Tito-Stalin split, was again favourable for comics. Within the medium, the intercultural communication between East and South Slavs would never again be so direct and fruitful as in the thirties, but it has indisputably left its mark on Yugoslavia's rich comics history.

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image captions

- 1 Panel from Lobačev's adaptation of Pushkin's *Dubrovsky*
- 2 Panel from Kuznjecov's adaptation of Pushkin's *Queen of Spades*
- 3 Panel from an unknown artist's adaptation of Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time*
- 4 Final panel from Navojev's adaptation (2nd version) of Gogol's *Taras Bulba*
- 5 Two panels from Rahnner's adaptation of Gogol's *The Government Inspector*
- 6 Page from Rahnner's adaptation of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*
- 7 Panel from Solovjev's adaptation of Tolstoy's *The Cossacks*