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The Russian Avant-garde Children's Book and the Ecology of Art Historical Enquiry

Sara PANKENIER WELD

An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook

Amsterdam – Philadelphia : John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2018, 236 p.

Working on the review of this book by Sara Pankenier Weld, I found it very interesting not only because of its fascinating subject matter and a promising theoretical framework of the author's discourse (ecological principle), but also because, here and there, in the text I met infusions of certain concepts, popular these days, with some schools of thought. I tried to look at how valid they were to our material. Therefore, the following text is not only about Weld's book.

The study of early Soviet children's books has gained momentum in recent years. Scholars use this material for many reasons: demonstration of the new facets of the Russian Avant-garde, investigation of peculiarities of the Soviet childhood,¹ or for deconstruction of the subtle way of indoctrination of the first generation of the Soviet kids and construction of the New Man (as in my own book which happened to be the first English-language monograph on the subject of Soviet picturebooks).² Weld's book continues this tide by bringing some new ideas into the field and is interesting just because of this. However, this book is worthy of attention because it invites much broader considerations: about the usage of trendy theories (or their buzzwords – like “disempowerment”) for writing on the material which, unfortunately, cannot be easily matched with these theories. In other words, this book looks like a telling case for discussion of broader methodological issues: the applicability of fashionable theories to a given subject matter and where-when-how the popular agenda turns into tendentiousness and a distortion of facts.

Ecology of picturebooks: on mice and bullies, or display of power structure

Weld's book is well-written and well-composed. It has its cleverly worded descriptions and insights, and it has its usual share of insignificant errors and typos. But what is more important is that it offers a new holistic approach to the phenomenon of Russian children's books produced within approximately a decade and a half after the October Revolution of 1917. The children's book, as a genre, has been but a part, albeit the most spectacular and most visible, of the total production of prerevolutionary and early Soviet avant-garde books, therefore, one should bear in mind that the subject of the book under review is somehow more narrow than a general corpus of illustrated publications within the avant-garde (Futurist, Suprematist, Constructivist, etc.) aesthetics.³

The word ‘ecology’ in the title, looks novel and promising. It is a relatively new approach for scholars in the humanities to borrow the ecological principle – a study

of interdependency and interaction of biotic and abiotic systems in nature – for the interpretation of cultural phenomena. In the Introduction, Sara Weld writes:

I employ ecology to conceptualize the complex interaction of the Russian avant-garde picturebook with its literary, artistic, historical, and political environment and the dynamic interplay of beneficent and detrimental forces. (p. 4)

This approach is tangibly more subtle and effective than various one-dimensional tools whether it would be old teachings of class struggle or aesthetic formalism or new theories, say, for example, post-colonialism.

I tend to agree with the further statement:

I argue that straightforward historical or teleological models fail to describe the complex dynamics that arose from the fraught interactions of word and image, political and art, and creativity and censorship evident in the Russian avant-garde picturebook, or Russian literature and art more generally. (p. 5)

As one of the very important, if not vital systemic, factors of the whole ecosystem of the children's avant-garde picturebooks, the author designates censorship. Yes, by all means, it is a very significant element of the whole system of children's book inception, production, and distribution.⁴ However, trying to explain many salient features of these books by the writers' attempts to outmaneuver the censorship with the help of Aesopian language, Weld sometimes overdoes it. Often it is done in a political context or rather, in contemporary parlance, a display of power structure. For example, in the short poem of Vladislav Khodasevich⁵ "Conversation of a Man with the Mouse that is Eating his Books," a man, i.e. "a figure of power and privilege," offers a cookie to the "disempowered" mouse who eats his books, in "the hope that the legacy of the intelligentsia, in the form of his beloved books, be preserved" (p. 48). Well, this poem was published in the book *Ėlka* [Christmas Tree] in 1918 – in the time when the Red Terror began to gain momentum and incidents with proletarian hoodlums plundering bourgeois houses and burning libraries in country estates were not seldom. However, this poem was written before the revolution, in 1916, when the intelligentsia did not have to beg the "disempowered" working class not to destroy their books and other possessions. Khodasevich evidently liked the mice and composed a cycle of poems "Mice" for the book *Schastlivyi Domik* [Happy Little House].⁶

The story of the circumstances around composing of this poem is known from the memoirs of Khodasevich's second wife Anna. She remembered as once she sang a song about a merry mousekin to her little son, and Khodasevich enjoyed it. When, soon after that, they had their wedding, they cut a piece of their wedding cake and put it behind the sideboard to treat the mice. The poet recalled this act of benevolence in this poem. I can say that it was quite ecological on his part (the house mice cannot subsist without men's purveyance, and he exerted commendable

tolerance for their symbiotic cohabitation), but it had nothing to do with trendy Foucauldian or post-Foucauldian theories of power or disempowerment.⁷

These concepts (with a recurring interest in disempowerment) go through the whole book. Children are disempowered vis-à-vis adults, and preschoolers are “sensitive to their disempowerment, even as compared to schoolchildren” (p. 186). But, to follow the logic of the author’s sympathies is sometimes rather difficult. Reasoning in her interesting subchapter “Omission points, ellipsis, and the existence of a taboo” (p. 95-97 and once again p. 177-178) Weld chose one single example: Maiakovskii’s *Chto takoe khorosho i chto takoe plokho* [What is Good and What is Bad, 1925] and did it in a rather unusual way. Commenting on the lines “If a nasty bully / beats up / a weak little kid, / I don’t even want / to put him / in this book” and the illustration of this beating, covered by a huge blot of ink, cleverly made by the artist Nikolai Denisovskii, she surprisingly defends the “erring boy.” In doing so, she mobilizes Freud with his *Totem and Taboo* and David King with *The Commissar Vanishes* (about the falsification of photographs and art in Stalin’s Russia, 1997) and writes that “blotting out is the act of censorship that blackens out what once was there and still evidently remains in the faint signs of disjointed limbs splayed out of protest” (p. 97). This is a very unexpected interpretation because, what evidently remains is one foot and the neat head of a falling boy who is being attacked and the uncombed hair of the hooligan above his victim. To interpret this as “the staged blotting out of the transgressive body’s depiction performs an act of violence upon him” is stretching thing too far. By the way, not a word is mentioned about the other body: the brutalized body of the little boy under attack.

Avant-garde as a punctuated equilibrium

The main idea of the author, which she declares in the first lines of her book, is worthy of close interest. This is the theory of “punctuated equilibrium” proposed by two evolutionary biologists, Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould, in 1972. This is a model, writes Weld,

for a kind of evolutionary change, whereby evolutionary development is marked by isolated episodes or rapid species formation, or speciation, between long periods of little or no change. [...] I argue that naturalistic models of the complex interactions of dynamic systems offer effective tools for describing and understanding the sophisticated interrelations of politics and art, as well as censorship and creativity, in the early Soviet period. The concept of punctuated equilibrium [...] also might be applied to the sudden and rapid flourishing of the Russian avant-garde picturebook in the 1920s and 1930s, as disparate forces converged around the shaded goal of producing formative picturebooks for children in a time bookended by long periods of stasis (p. 1).

Perhaps here, especially given the fact that the historical moment of the artistic and cultural phenomenon under discussion is the time of the Russian revolution, it is safe to substitute the word “evolutionary” with “revolutionary” or, possibly, if we are to continue naturalistic metaphors, even with “mutation” (of the ways of seeing, reflection, and representation). Anyhow, the analogy with a biotic model of change is interesting because it offers a broader, more systemic survey of the explosive appearance and the rocket trajectory of the Russian children’s avant-garde picturebooks.

On the other hand, this phenomenon (and the art avant-garde of the early 20th century as such) can possibly be better understood in its historical significance if seen in the context of international modernism which began with Impressionism and Japonisme and exponentially progressed into radical non-objective movements of the last antebellum (the Great War) years. Poetically speaking, it can be likened to Stefan Zweig’s *Sternstunden der Menschheit* or, perhaps, as a *sui generis* approximation of the Jaspers’ notion of Axial time. And to round up my art-historiosophical musings, the avant-garde short and intense period of blooming can be compared with similar pivotal epochs as the Golden Age of Athens or Early Italian Renaissance.

Concluding this part, I’d like to add that the idea of punctuated equilibrium in evolutionary biology was extended at the end of the 20th century into a social theory where it is employed to serve as a conceptual framework for mapping the interconnectivity in complex social systems. It could have possibly been mentioned in the book to beef up its methodological base. All in all, it is commendable (and convincing) that Weld seeks to problematize (or, as she puts it herself, to “complicate”) the famous idea of Boris Groys about the straightforward development of Russian art in the first third of the 20th century from the Avant-garde to Socialist Realism with her concept of punctuated equilibrium. “If the surviving strain was socialist realism, then this does not argue for its organic evolution, but rather for its unnatural selection” (p. 5). I, myself, do not agree with Groys, that the role of avant-garde artists under the Soviet regime was basically to create “Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin.” From the prerevolutionary Futurist rebellion to, metaphorically speaking, the magazine *USSR in Construction* (1930-41) was a huge distance to go – and this distance was covered, in its own meandering and radical way, by the children’s picturebooks too.⁸ The “unnatural selection,” promulgated by the censorship and other forms of ideological and social pressure, was only part of the reasons of the extinction of Avant-garde. It was waning around that time in the West too.

At the end of the Introduction, Weld concludes: “The conventional view of Soviet picturebooks as a form of reluctant refuge amounts to a gross oversimplification and suffers from a mistaken logic on many levels” (p. 28). I am not sure whom this conventional view belongs to. My own books on this subject argue for a rather different etiology of the phenomenon of early Soviet children’s books, with the censorship being but one amongst the whole gamut of reasons (the ruined art market; the destruction of the artist-critic-dealer-collector network; the welcoming playground for formal – and paid for, at that – experiments; and, last

but not least, the determined willingness to participate in the forging of a new book and the New Man).

With all those statements prone for discussion, the Introduction (“A natural history of the Russian avant-garde picturebook” p. 1-30) is one of the most interesting parts of the book. As for the overall composition of *An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook*, it is well-thought-out and logical. It consists of four parts (in a brief rendering: evolution, selection, re-orienting, and survival). Each part includes three chapters which, in their totality, embrace the whole multifaceted phenomenon of the children’s avant-garde picturebooks in its life in aesthetics, pedagogy, censorship, and politics – from inception to extinction.

The diversity of forerunners

Chapter 1, “Precursors of the avant-garde picturebook,” serves the purpose to demonstrate the prerevolutionary point of departure for the early Soviet avant-garde children’s books. It is a natural beginning, and it is good that the chapter discusses Alexandre Benois’ *Azbuka v kartinakh* [Alphabet in pictures].⁹ However, one can regret that other books and prominent artists are not mentioned: for instance, Elisabeth Boehm (1843-1914, with her lavish *Azbuka*, published in 1913-1914); Elena Polenova (1850-1898, the progenitor of the Style Moderne in children’s books); and Ivan Bilibin (1876-1942, with his iconic illustrations and book design). Sure enough, the young revolutionary artists spurned all of them (especially Boehm for her “style Boiar”), but similar, if not stronger, feelings they harbored towards Alexandre Benois. In March 1917 they even plotted against him and his ‘benoites’ in order not to allow him to be elected in a new art institution, the Ministry of Arts, which was not, as a result, established. Yet, these other artists were, at least, the proponents of the modern Russian style, exquisitely creating it from the typical fin de siècle mix of pseudo-Byzantine (Boehm) or Russian folklore, Art Nouveau and Japonisme (Polenova, Bilibin), whereas Benois’ *Azbuka* has very little of anything Russian, besides the Cyrillic letters, of course.

His book is an excellent example of the mannerist and passeistic art for the westernized upper-level bourgeoisie and gentry classes, a gorgeous thing that was designed, not only to model a privileged child’s world, hermetic and theatrical, but also to enter as a stylish accessory in the world of a child’s playroom. In other words, Benois’ style, in *Azbuka*, became totally obsolete after the revolution. Therefore, I think if the idea was to demonstrate the paragon of what the early Soviet avant-garde was not, it was a wise choice.

At the same time, surprisingly, Benois’ *Azbuka* served the author as a rich material for postcolonial, feminist, and anti-orientalist criticism:

Alphabet in Pictures offers ideologically charged presentations [...] that indoctrinate an impressionable audience according to exclusive categories such as class, gender, race, and ethnicity that empower one group at the expense of another. (p. 35-36).

To find, in the enlightened cosmopolitan and liberal Alexandre Benois, a constructor of a “racist, colonial, and primitivist framework” (p. 38) by means of depicting an *Arap* [dark-skinned] boy is, with all due respect, like using heavy artillery for tiny (and mismatched, at that) targets. The illustration represents a kind of theatrical prologue with a soot-faced boy actor who is broadly smiling, clad in a lush histrionic garb and heavily armed with prop sabers. He stands in front of a half-closed curtain and invites little readers into an exciting play in the exotic lands of literacy. Benois here is not only a skillful scenographer but a deft mimicker of *performances galantes* in the manner of his beloved Watteau.¹⁰

The second and the last book designated in this chapter, as a precursor, is *Ėlka*.¹¹ This book can be hardly considered as a Soviet, or even a revolutionary-inspired, production: it was envisioned in 1916 and ready for print in 1917. Most probably, the author chose it as a total juxtaposition to Benois’ *Azbuka*. *Ėlka* is a hodgepodge of different authors and genres, artists and styles without any governing idea or compositional unity. Weld makes an interesting comparison of styles of two depictions of a Christmas tree: Vladimir Lebedev’s on the cover and Benois’ on p. 4 (in *An Ecology...* respectively p. 43 and p. 45). She likens Lebedev’s composition with Tat’iana’s dream, full of ominous bestiality, in *Eugene Onegin*. It is a thought-provoking observation, although, perhaps, benign and smiling cubs, pups, and a bunny, all holding paws and dancing around the Christmas tree, do not look exactly like a vision of “dark and frightening... bestial bacchanale.” Anyhow, back then, and now, stuffed animals such as *mishki* [teddy bears] or *zaichiki* [little bunnies], were usual bed companions for young children and coexisted peacefully on their toy shelves and in boxes. And, in 1918, there was still a long way to go to the suppression of Christmas celebration. In 1923, there was a famous Christmas party, hosted by Lenin, for the village kids in the Gorky country estate, and, until 1929, Christmas was an official day-off in the Soviet state). But Weld is right assuming that winged cherubs (I think, they are rather angels or putti) on Benois’ *Ėlka* soon would fall out of fashion.

There is one more interesting detail, seemingly insignificant but quite telling, about the transformation that a writer’s image can pass through an artist’s vision (or misunderstanding). In the poem by Natan Vengrov “How the [sun] bunny jumped” (*Ėlka*, p. 10 – Weld gives “How the Hare Jumped,” p. 46) Lebedev illustrated the text with numerous depictions of quite realistic hares (he also, for some reason, changed the poem’s teddy bear to a doll). Whether he wanted to show the visualization of a metaphor or just could not contrive with the image of a sun bunny, it could have been interesting to discuss this. Natan Altman, in the illustration of the same poem that he drew three years later, has been more inventive and avant-garde.¹²

The intricacies of vilification

While reading this book, which I often liked and found well-informed, I, nevertheless, could not help thinking that the author sometimes felt obliged to use

certain buzzwords that became virtually de rigueur in the recent writings (and not necessarily scholarship) in humanities, irrespective of a particular area: racism, colonialism, orientalism, feminism... Sometimes, it looks quite heuristic, but in others, it might be rather hard to reconcile the theory and the facts.

Chapter 2 is interesting and important for its subject (“Origins of the revolutionary picturebooks”) but it begins from a rather strange, in this context, subchapter “Underrepresented figures: An Excursus”). On this, I feel compelled to comment in some detail. The author talks about “the notable absence of women” (p. 50) and mentions only – as an exception “to the general pattern in early twentieth-century Russian children’s literature,” the popular pre-revolutionary writer Lidiia Charskaia (1875-1937). Actually, the most popular Charskaia’s novelettes have been written for teenagers or, at least, for girls after ten (not the picturebook audience), but this is not the major point. Charskaia was extremely popular, but she was far from being alone in the field of children’s literature at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. For a fuller background, other authors could’ve been mentioned such as the well-known female writers: Anna Khvolson (1868-1934, who invented characters Murzilka and Neznaika, enormously popular during the Soviet time); Maria Beketova; Poliksena Solov’eva and her sister Mariia, who wrote under the penname Bezobrazova; Al. Altaev (Margarita Iamshchikova); Varvara Andreevskaia; Serafima Bazhina; Olga Beliaevskaia; Aleksandra Bostrom, mother of Aleksei N. Tolstoi; Klavdia Lukashevich, Charskaia counterpart in the stories from the peasants’ life; Sofia Lavrent’eva; Elizaveta Kondrashova; Anna Doganovich; Mariia Lialina; Mariia L’vova; Aleksandra Kovalenskaia, grand-aunt of Alexander Blok and mother of Alexander Kovalenskii, author of popular children’s books too; Raisa Kudasheva (“V lesu rodilas ëlochka”); Vera Zhelikhovskaia; Nadezhda Likhmanova; Mariia Moravskaia and many more.¹³

After the revolution, the number of women in children’s literature increased even more. Weld evidently disagrees with this, when she claims that “in its underrepresentation of women, the spheres of the Russian avant-garde picturebook resembled the Russian avant-garde more generally” (p. 52). Well, the extraordinary significant presence of female artists in radical art movements is universally acknowledged by the honorable designation “The Amazons of the Russian Avant-garde” and the exhibitions, under this name, in the biggest museums of the world. As for the children’s books, the sheer number of women in this field was unprecedented and incompatible with other country or historical period. To name but the most popular authors: Agniia Barto, Elena Blaginina, Elena Dan’ko, Ésfir Émden, Rashel Éngel, Sofiia Fedorchenko, Vera Inber, Varvara Mirovich, Nadezhda Pavlovich, Nina Sakonskaia, Mariia Shkapskaia, Sara Shor, Elizaveta Tarakhovskaia, Sofiia Zak et al. To prove that this is the “underrepresentation,” we possibly need to methodically count all authors by gender and calculate the percentage. I would not be surprised if it appears to be close to fifty-fifty.¹⁴ At any rate, nothing even approaching this has ever been attested in other countries.

If we turn to artists, the count would be even more spectacular. Weld mentions the luxurious, privately published album which Lemmens and Stommels compiled from the books of their collection (2009).¹⁵ They “laudably include multiple instances of striking avant-garde work by many women artists, such as Vera Yermolaeva, Maria Siniakova, Anna Borovskaia, Natalia Ushakova, Tatiana Pravosudovich, Maria Pashchenko, and Olga Deineko” (p. 50-51). I am not sure why the author chose to quote Lemmens and Stommels, while the bibliography of Françoise Lévêque and Serge Plantureux¹⁶ gives more names, as does Mariia Chapkina¹⁷ too. (These books are not in Weld’s bibliography.) Here we can add the names of women artists, crucial for the existence of picturebooks (and the avant-garde culture and atmosphere in post-revolutionary Russian capitals in general): the Chichagovs sisters, Evgeniia Evenbach, Sofiia Vishnevetskaia and Elena Fradkina (they mostly worked together), Nina Gegello, Natal’ia Gembitskaia, Vera Ivanova, Alisa Poret, Ekaterina Zonnenshtal, Nina Kashina, Tat’iana Lebedeva-Mavrina, Tat’iana Zvonarëva, Margarita Mikhaelis, Vera Mukhina, Liubov Popova, Lidiia Popova, Anna Pravdina, Marianna Purgold, Elena Safonova, Nina Simonovich-Efimova, Irena Sunderland, Mariia Shatalova-Rakhmanina, Ekaterina Turova, Lidiia Zholtkevich, et al (like artists of the previous generation, for instance, Elizaveta Kruglikova, who continued to work).

Weld justly attests the significant role of Vera Ermolaeva¹⁸ in the artistic process (although she does not mention her leading role in a number of artistic groups, including *Segodnja*, her highest post of the rector in the Vibesksk Art Institute, her crucial involvement into the foundation of Unovis, or her being the Head of the Laboratory of Color in the Institute for Artistic Culture in Petrograd). Surprisingly, she writes that “Ermolaeva’s work no doubt deserves more attention than it heretofore has garnered, a few exceptions notwithstanding (Kovtun 1975; Rosenfeld 1999b)” (p. 51). Of course, Ermolaeva deserves the unending interest of scholars, but it is she exactly, who is steadily under the limelight of exhibitions and serious publications: monographs and dissertations.¹⁹

Yet, the strangest utterance of this excursus, which I found, was in its second paragraph. While reading it, I first thought that, possibly, something was lost or misplaced in the process of typesetting. It reads: “Also vilified... was Vladimir Lenin’s widow Nadezhda Krupskaia” (p. 50). Krupskaia? Vilified? By whom? Where? When? Actually, it was she who vilified traditional fairy tales in general and Kornei Chukovskii in particular in her aggressive attack in the *Pravda* newspaper, in 1928: “What does this nonsense mean? What political sense does it have?”²⁰ This gave the go-ahead to the violent baiting campaign akin to a pogrom. “All principal discussions about fairy tales, anthropomorphism, Chukovskii, and *marshachniki* (a derogatory neologism for those who worked under the aegis of Samuil Marshak – E.S.) were provoked by her.”²¹ In the forefront, there was another party widow, Klavdiia Sverdlova, who published an article “About chukovshchina” (yet another derogatory neologism made up from Chukovskii’s surname).²² Next to them were Zlata Lilina, a top official in Narkompros and the wife of the then-powerful Zinov’ev, and Liubov Menzhinskaia, a vice-rector of the Krupskaia Academy of

Communist Education and the sister of OGPU chief Menzhinskii (she expressed her negative opinion on Chukovskii in 1929). Their lieutenants were well-known and influential critics: E. Ianovskaia, E. Stanchinskaia, E. Flerina, D. Kalm et al. The first two, Kornei Chukovskii labeled as ferocious hysterics (*svirepye klikushi*), many years after the campaign (as he could do nothing but repent during the campaign). All in all, I possibly missed something that justified labeling their gang leader, Krupskaia, vilified for her position in regards to children literature. More than that, I tend to agree, rather, with other scholars who posit that Krupskaia was not the fountain-head in the reform of the school education and children's literature. She, using her matrimonial clout, just pushed the ideas proclaimed by others, like E. Ianovskaia.²³

Yet another assertion in the same paragraph looks a little ungrounded: "The derisive attitude towards these figures [Krupskaia's followers-pedologists – E.S.] and the movement of pedology might also be critiqued from a feminist perspective." I can only regret that this pronouncement is not supported by further elaborations and references. The movement of pedology that tried to combine psychology, psychoanalysis, and pedagogy, was very popular in the 1920s, at the heyday of Avant-garde, and fell out of official favor concurrently with it. "The derisive attitude" began only after the publication of the Decree of the Central Committee of VKP(b) "On pedological distortions in the system of People's Commissariat of Education" (1936) – in the same year and in the same ideological vein as the notorious article "About the Dauber-Artists" (*O khudozhnikakh-pachkunakh*: about the illustrators of children's books) in *Pravda*. I am at a loss to grasp how the Stalinist walloping of pedology "might also be critiqued from a feminist perspective." Especially if we recall that all the leaders of the pedological school, good or bad, were men: A. Zalkind, P. Blonskii, L. Vygotskii, S. Molozhavyi, M. Basov, A. Griboedov, et al.

And the last comment to one more opinion on the situation "that prove questionable from a feminist perspective" (p. 52). This time it is about the famous Leningrad editorial offices of the *Detgiz* Publishing House, led by Samuil Marshak and Vladimir Lebedev, who "famously had female successors, although they often were regarded in a demeaning light as if purely imitative and lacking originality. Indeed, misogynistic patterns do emerge in the way women's contributions to Russian children's literature were discounted" (p. 52).

To substantiate these serious charges, no facts or references are given. Therefore I need to explain that Marshak's four female editors: Tamara Gabbe, Zoia Zadunaiskaia, Aleksandra Liubarskaia, and Lidiia Chukovskaia were held in the highest esteem by their male colleagues as numerous textual pieces of evidence attest. Gabbe, about who people would say that she had "the best taste in Leningrad and Moscow,"²⁴ was the right hand in editorial work and the muse of Marshak, who wrote love poems to her. The Oberiu poet, Nikolai Oleinikov, very close to this circle as the editor of *Ėzh* and *Chizh* magazines, dedicated his poems to Lubarskaia. All four had not just been editors (in the sense of redactors or copy editors), but translators from many languages,²⁵ literary editors of folklore tales, and authors

of their own original prosaic works, poetry, and theater plays for children – many of which up to now are being reprinted again and again. In 1937, the height of the Great Terror, Chukovskaia and Zadunaiskaia were fired, and Gabbe and Lubarskaia were arrested. They were accused of being members of a “Trotskyite spy cell linked to the Japanese intelligence.” And, out of sync with any “misogynistic pattern,” Marshak and Chukovskii, defying the mortal risk, both wrote letters in the defense of these women and managed to get an appointment with the sinister General Prosecutor Andrei Vyshinskii, in December 1938, in Moscow and convinced him of the innocence of the arrested women. As a result, Gabbe and Lubarskaia were released in 1939. It was like a miracle. But, alas, these women could not become Marshak’s and Lebedev’s “female successors” because there was no succession anymore.²⁶ The Leningrad editorial offices of the *Detgiz* were closed down in 1937, and Marshak had to move to Moscow next year.

“Don’t you go, children, to Africa for fun”

These words of Chukovskii²⁷ notwithstanding, the African (as well as Chinese, Indian, and other exotic lands) theme was extremely popular in the early Soviet children’s literature, and it is no wonder that Weld discusses it a few times. This topic deserves to be treated with greater detail here too. Dozens of books have been published on this subject. They were very different: good, bad, clever, funny, boring, or distasteful, but most of them have one common denominator: they would not pass the screening for racism, colonialism, and orientalism if performed by nowadays activists. Weld’s book demonstrates that there are no fields that can be immune from scrutiny (and condemnation) under the magnifying glass of these theories. In the book *Okhota* [The hunt]²⁸, Lebedev depicts various ways of hunting of different peoples, north and south. There is a brutal scene of the killing a mother bear by a man in a Russian fur hat (his dogs are chasing a little soon to be orphaned cub); there is a scene with a tiger on top of an Indian native (a white hunter saves the man by shooting the tiger). Weld does not mention these and other pages. She chose the one where a European hunter sits on the back of an elephant with a mahout in front of him: “the uneasy juxtaposition of the colonizing ‘white man’ and the indigenous people serving him. [...] Like the elephant Lebedev depicts, the ‘other’ has been harnessed in the name of imperial power that denies its freedom” (p. 73). As far as history concerned, hunters would hire mahouts with their elephants, who were specially trained for hunting, in the same way as local rich people customarily did. There are no reasons to believe that the white sahib enslaved the rider. Even less evident that “the colonizing power, even if unconsciously, aims its weapons at the back of the elephant’s native rider, failing to recognize the humanity of the ‘other,’ who is fused with the animal according to a racist evolutionary hierarchy” (p. 73). I think, it is highly implausible that Lebedev had this criminative agenda in mind or felt himself a colonizing power. There are no forensic data to suggest that, living in the environment of Soviet internationalism, he could harbor any

colonial or racist feelings. More than that, if we continue the line of the rifle that the hunter holds, we will easily see that the trajectory of a bullet, if he accidentally shoots, goes well above the Indian's head. This is actually an interesting idea: let's imagine that he wants to kill his elephant rider – in this case, he would need to ride the animal himself (he hardly possesses the driver's license for this vehicle) or go back to his camp on foot through the jungle.

I emphasize this episode because it reveals a methodological problem: what happens when a hot theory interferes with an unbiased observation of our material. If we follow the trail of post-colonial guilt, we are at risk of becoming similar to the young enthusiasts of the Soviet utopia of the 1920s who believed that all previous generations were either ignorant, corrupt, or malevolent because they did not know the right theory of class struggle.

Censorship

Throughout the text, Weld reiterates the idea of the severe censorship imposed upon the writers and artists of children's books. She posits that "An ecological approach that recontextualizes these artifacts within the environment from which they originated thus might reveal hidden meanings that could not be expressed at that times, as writers and artists had to adapt and reorient themselves in a rapidly changing environment" (p. 150). She profusely mentions Lev Loseff's book on Soviet censorship²⁹ and dozens of times uses the word "Aesopian" (sometimes five or seven occurrences per page – p. 8 or 24 and around them).³⁰ Weld refers to three bodies discussed by Loseff: "Author, Reader, and Censor."³¹ She rightly asserts that the story with Russian children's literature is even more complex, "for here we have two readers, child and adult, while the author is also accompanied by the artist" (p. 16). I agree with this elaboration, but if we are to talk about the really multifaceted sociocultural situation (or ecological habitat) of picturebooks, which defined their inception, birth, and existence within the society, we should complicate this schema with even more players and agents. First of all, it is editors who often commissioned subjects to authors and made significant revisions (like Marshak), and art editors who asked artists to change this or that in their illustrations (like Lebedev). Other idiosyncratic figures were literary or art critics, kindergarten or school teachers, librarians, and pedologists/psychologists or even a group of parents who could write an angry letter against some book³² – a noisy clique, all eager to disseminate their opinions and judging a book from various facets and, thus, affecting the future production. All these players often imposed variegated restrictions besides and no less severe than the Glavlit. As Evgenii Schwartz wrote, "the vituperation and intolerance that accompanied the rise of the children's literature (more precisely, the flourishing of children's books) turned many participants crazy. The faith faded with years, and distrust blossomed."³³ Chukovskii also very vividly and bitterly wrote about the drastic fall of the level of quality of some specimen of children's literature at the end of the twenties: "It

was never before, even in the times of Bor'ka Fëdorov, that little children were fed with such a rancid and rotten trash like the one they are served with now."³⁴ This is to say that some kind of aesthetic quality censorship could have been not always unwarranted.

Also, we should not forget about budget constraints (some publishers always suffered from a lack of money, being reduced to cheap and unpretentious outcome), and technical limitations (connected sometimes with quite serious financial restrictions), which resulted in the crude printing of chromolithographic illustrations with the usage of but two or three plain colors.

If we take all these factors into consideration, the prohibitive role of the Glavlit party censors would appear to be not the single and perhaps not the most influential force in shaping children's books, at least till the early 1930s. During the twenties, the time had not yet arrived for the inquisition on the "visual counter-revolution and sabotage," which from the mid-thirties sometimes bordered with paranoid pareidolia.³⁵ All in all, to get a stereoscopic picture of the children's book production we need more deeply investigate the whole plethora of the inhibiting and catalyzing factors in their habitat. Weld made a good job in discussing the role of the direct censorship, but all those adscititious and additional factors are worthy of further study too.

And the last: all these writers and artists – what exactly did they want to hide? Were they really subversive (not from the viewpoint of Stalinist semiliterate³⁶ vigilantes and clairvoyants who in every word and image saw something anti-Soviet and laboring for foreign capitalists)? Evidently not. Weld convincingly writes about the case of Mandelshtam, deconstructing the subtext of his oft-quoted *Dva Tramvaia* [Two Streetcars, 1925] and adding interesting observations to my earlier analysis which she mentions (Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades*, 126-128). But Mandelstam's other children's book, *Shary* [Balloons, 1926] yields no fewer insights into the suppressed voice of the poet, delegated to a small balloon:

Woe on me, the Green, from the Red balloon,
From the hideous big-headed Red balloon.
I am the one which is a softy, goofy balloon,
The foster green child, the silly foundling.

Yet another, perhaps even more striking case of the voice of the persecuted and soon imprisoned and exterminated we can find in the little-known book, *Pirozhok* [Little pie].³⁷ It is a revolutionary rendering of a fairy tale about a gingerbread man (Rus. *Kolobok*) who ran away just before it was eaten. But unlike its folklore predecessor, this witness of the post-revolutionary reality did not travel too far. He (or it) met, on a narrow road, a young soldier who without much ado, shot him dead. "The bullet to the middle, // Into the stuffing." Marianna Purgold drew a horrifying image of the zoomorphic Pie lying on its back with its belly wide open and the stuffing like intestines are spread around. The artist, who belonged to a St Petersburg aristocratic family, the following year, 1927, was arrested for "being

a freemason and anti-Soviet,” and served time in a concentration camp and died on a stormy ocean while being transported to exile in 1932. Her husband and mother were imprisoned even before her. Most probably, in the image of the shot Pie, she depicted herself. But, as I already mentioned, the visual vigilance of the state censors matured later, to forbid these ambiguous images.

As a final note on this subject, I'd like to mention that I am not sure if I can fully agree with Weld that scenes of violence were suppressed by the censorship (“the biggest taboo at all,” 107): it is possible to recall a number of excessively gruesome depictions of cruelty, torture, and death in children's books of the 1920s, beginning with Maiakovskii's *Skazka o Pete tolstom rebenke i o Sime, kotory tonkii* [Story about Peter, the fat child, and about Simon, who is thin, 1925],³⁸ etc.

An Ecology of the Russian Avant-gardepicturebook demonstrates how complicated this subject is, with lots of material seemingly well known but still full of deceptive ambiguity. An example of such a confusion might be Weld's analysis of Maiakovskii's poem *Skazka o krasnoi shapochke* [The tale of Little Red Cap] – “Once upon a time there lived a cadet” on p. 57. It is quite interesting, although it is relevant to add that this poem was not aimed for the children's audience at all and it was not about a cadet (a teenage student of a military school). Maiakovskii sarcastically meant the members of the party of Constitutional Democrats (CD: Rus. ‘kede’ or ‘kadety’) with their liberal (or “red”) leanings. They were very influential after the February revolution, and Maiakovskii with his pro-Bolshevik radicalism wrote this poem as a political satire and published it in July 1917, in Petrograd's newspaper *Novaia Zhizn'*. The similarity of the words and the red color of the cap-band of a cadet's uniform gave him the opportunity to tell this mockingly derisive tale about the political enemies of the communists.

Epilogue

As I tried to demonstrate, Weld's book, interesting and well-intended, sometimes has factual errors and misinterpretations based on not taking into account the contextual meaning of her material. Yet, what is more serious, is the tendency to interpret this material not only ahistorically, but disconfigured on the Procrustian bed of fashionable “isms.” Ironically, it reminds the adherence of the Soviet era scholars to the Marxist-Leninist “scientific” method. Sometimes funny, often clumsy, and inevitably dogmatic, this Soviet theory yielded to new methodologies and political doctrines, which, however useful they might be in certain cases, are not immune from playing the upper hand over the material they serve to explain. The result might not only be the distortion, but the new “progressive” indoctrination – which, in our case, leads to branding the authors and artists of the early Soviet era as racists, colonialists, and misogynists. With all their shortcomings, they were not.

In general conclusion, I'd like to return to the notion of unnatural selection that led the avant-garde children's book to its demise in the first half of the 1930s.

Although all generalizations are fraught with subtle omissions and contradicting peculiarities, I still allow myself to say that in the USSR, from its very inception, virtually everything was unnatural: political regime, ideology, economics, societal moral, human relations, and notions of decency... In a way, in terms of incompatibility with human nature, it can loosely resemble Jesuit reductions in Paraguay or Kampuchea's Khmer Rouge. Old forms of order had been broken and the new ones oscillated between experiments and the struggle for survival. The phenomenon of the avant-garde children's book in this environment was but an exotic dressing which was served to accentuate the unknown taste of the Soviet broth. Therefore, all the studies about these picturebooks, and Weld's book is not an exception, are, *volens nolens*, the studies about the Sovietization of childhood or, in broader terms, the construction of the New Man. There was a poignant ambivalence in this process: the best and the worst took part in it. After a brief, seemingly successful éclat, the best lost, being physically exterminated, or silenced, or undergoing mutations of style and aspirations. The ecological situation for the avant-garde children's picturebook, or for the Avant-garde in general proved to be incompatible with life.

1 – For instance, Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia 1890-1991*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007; Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917- 1932*, NY: Routledge Falmer, 2001.

2 – Evgeny Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades: Revolutionary Artists and the Making of the early Soviet Children's Book*, Seattle – London: University of Washington Press, 1999.

3 – For a comprehensive introduction into all genres see: Margit Rowell, Deborah Wye, with essays by Jared Ash et al., *The Russian avant-garde book 1910-1934*, NY: MOMA, 2002. Also, it is pertinent to add here that "picture books" is the established translation for Japanese *ehon*, the books which consist of illustrations with minimal captions for the adult audience. Thus, even if the term "picturebook" (in one word) is gaining recognition as a designation of a children's book it is not necessarily understood this way by everybody.

4 – I will discuss it in length later, but now I'll indicate but one example from the very beginning of the book.

5 – Weld indicates the author as Valery Briusov, which is evidently a *lapsus calami* (p. 48). Perhaps, she had in mind Briusov's poem "Mice" (1899) – with a very benign attitude to them, which traditionally was typical for Russian culture.

6 – Vladislav Khodasevich, *Schastlivyi Domik* [Happy Little House], M.: Altsiona, 1914.

7 – Anna Khodasevich, *Vospominaniia o Khodaseviche* [Recollections on Khodasevich], M.: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1990, 397.

8 – See more on this in my new book: Evgeny Steiner, *Chto takoe khorosho* [What is Good and What is Bad: The Art and Ideology in the Early Soviet Children's Book], M.: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2019, 15.

9 – Aleksandr Benua, *Azbuka v kartinakh* [Alphabet in pictures], SPb., 1904.

10 – In the early 20th century Russian parlance, the word 'arap' was a humorous and stylized – in the manner of the 18th century – term to designate dark-skinned inhabitants of faraway southern lands. The image of a noble Arap was present in the Russian culture since Peter the Great (and it was immortalized by Pushkin, who described his own great grandfather as an *arap*); in the early 20th century, little *araps* were part of the stylized theatricality of Meierhold ('meyerholdovyi arapchata,' Akhmatova said, decades after

when she wanted to give a succinct image of that epoch); Gumilev was very fond of African imagery, as well as countless gymnasium boys and girls. Anyhow, the stories of African and Native American peoples, including *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, were enormously popular at that time amongst children and young teenagers, being the medium to learn about the diversity of the world and to determine right from wrong. With all its deficiencies in political or social spheres, the Russian Empire was not a model colonial empire with its colonies in Africa, as leading European countries, or with African slaves living in its own country, as in America. To call Benoïis and his educated circle racist, would be rather anachronistic. Much more questionable (and poorly tasted) representations of Africans would appear later, in the Soviet book production, all the nominal "proletarian internationalism" notwithstanding.

11 – A. Benua, M. Gorkii, eds., *Ėlka* [Christmas Tree], Petrograd: Parus, 1918.

12 – See: N.Ia. Vengrov *Zverushki* [Little animals], M.: GIZ, 1921, 12. (Or, perhaps, in the easier available Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades*, 20). By the way, in this edition, the poem is titled "About the Sun Bunny" ("Pro zaïku solnechnogo"). Most probably, Vengrov did not want to repeat quid pro quo happened with Lebedev and clarified the gist (quite clear, even without it, I believe).

13 – The bibliography of Russian women writers before 1917 has about 230 pages and growing. The Tartu bibliographer Tat'iana Sigalova is working on its publication now.

14 – For example, let's take two crucial avant-garde exhibitions: "Tramvai B" and "0,10." Among ten participants of the first, five were women artists (Kseniia Boguslavskaia, Aleksandra Ėkster, Liubov Popova, Ol'ga Rozanova, Natalia Udal'tsova). In the second: among fourteen artists seven were women (Kseniia Boguslavskaia, Anna Kirillova, Vera Pestel', Liubov Popova, Ol'ga Rozanova, Natalia Udal'tsova, Mariia Vasil'ieva).

15 – Albert Lemmens, and Serge-Aljosja Stommels, *Russian Artists and the Children's, Books 1890-1992*, Nijmegen: LS, 2009.

16 – Françoise Lévêque, Serge Plantureux, *Dictionnaire des illustrateurs de livres d'enfants russes et soviétiques (1917-1945)*, P.: Paris bibliothèques à partir des collections de l'Heure Joyeuse et d'autres bibliothèques françaises, 1997.

17 – Mariia Chapkina, *Moskovskie khudozhniki detskoi knigi, 1990-1991* [Moscow artists of children's book, 1900-1991], M.: Kontakt-Kultura, 2008.

18 – Vera's surname is given in different transliterations: 'Ermolaeva' (thrice) and 'Yermolaeva' (twice) on p. 50-51. In the Index, she goes under 'Yermolaeva.'

19 – Besides a number of articles in periodicals, see a catalog published by the Russian Museum (ed. Antonina Zainchkovskaia, 2008); a voluminous monograph-catalog (Antonina Zainchkovskaia, Ildar Galeev, *Vera Ermolaeva*, M: Scorpion, Galeev Galereia, 2009). There was even a novel based on archival documents from KGB (Semen Laskin, *Roman so strannostiami* [The romance with oddities] SPb.: Blitz, 1998). In my books, I have written about Ermolaeva at length too.

20 – N.K. Krupskaja "About Chukovskii's *Krokodil*," *Pravda*, Feb. 1, 1928. (Full text: <http://www.chukfamily.ru/kornei/pro-et-contra/borba-za-skazku/nk-krupskaja-o-krokodile-chukovskogo>. [Accessed 10 October 2019]

21 – Svetlana Maslinskaia, "'Heritage and Heredity'. The Evolution of the Critique of Children's Literature in the 1910s-1920s," *Revue des études slaves*, LXXXVIII, 1-2 (2017): 237-255. Access: <https://journals.openedition.org/res/821#bodyfn27>. [Accessed 10 October 2019]

22 – K.T. Sverdlova, "About Chukovshchina", *Krasnaia Pechat'*, 9-10, 1929. A biweekly of the Department of Agitation, Propaganda and Publishing of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks). Sverdlova was no less powerful than Krupskaja: in 1920-25 she was the head of the Department of Children's Institutions of VTsIK, in 1925-31: the head of the Department of children's literature in the OGIZ, since then, in Glavlit (Central Censorship Office).

- 23 – For the analysis of how ideas of Krupskaja of education lacked originality see: T.Iu. Krasovitskaia “N.K. Krupskaja – ideolog bolshevistskoi reformy obrazovaniia [Krupskaja as an ideologist of the reform of school education],” *Trudy Instituta Rossiiskoi Istorii*, 5, M.: 2005, p. 244-272.
- 24 – Iurii Trifonov, “Zapiski soseda [Neighbor’s notes],” *Rasskazy, povesti, roman, vospominaniia, esse* [Short stories, novelettes, a novel, memoirs, essays] Ekaterinburg: U-Faktoriia, 1999.
- 25 – Liubarskaia, on top of that, has written a textbook for teachers on how to teach French (1935).
- 26 – To be exact, there was still the monthly magazine for preschoolers *Chizh*, which was a part of Marshak’s team. (The magazine *Ėzh* was suspended earlier, in 1935.) Two more gifted and daring women worked there and published besieged authors. In 1932-1937 the editor of it was Nina Gernet, the children’s author herself. She was fired in 1937. Unlike the main editorial offices, this magazine was not closed, its editor became another talented writer, Ester Papernaia, who was arrested in 1940.
- 27 – Kornei Chukovskii, *Barmalei*, Drawings by M. Dobuzhinskii, L. – M.: Raduga, 1925.
- 28 – Vladimir Lebedev, *Okhota* [The hunt], L. – M.: Raduga, 1925.
- 29 – Lev Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature*, Munchen: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1984.
- 30 – One other publication exactly on this subject could have been mentioned: L. Klein-Tumanov “Writing for a dual audience in the former Soviet Union: The Aesopian children’s literature of Kornei Chukovskii, Mikhail Zoshchenko, and Daniil Kharms” in S.L. Beckett, ed., *Transcending Boundaries: Writing for a Dual Audience of Children and Adults*, NY: Routledge, 1999, 128-148.
- 31 – Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship*, 4 as quoted on Weld’s, 16.
- 32 – For example, see “We call for a fight against ‘Chukovshchina’.” (The statement of the general meeting of the parents of the Kremlin kindergarten), *Doshkolnoe Vospitanie*, 1929, 4.
- 33 – Evgenii Schwartz, *Zhivu bespokoino... Iz dnevnikov* [Restlessly I live... From the diaries], L.: Sovetsky Pisatel’, 1990, p. 300.
- 34 – Kornei Chukovskii, “Trinadsat’ zapovedei dlia detskikh poetov [Thirteen Commandments for Children Poets],” *Kniga Detiam*, 1, 1929, 18. <http://www.chukfamily.ru/gabbe/o-tamare-gabbe/yurij-trifonov-zapiski-soseda>. [Accessed 10 October 2019]
- 35 – See Aleksandra Arkhipova, Elena Mikhailik, “Opasnye znaki i sovetskie veshchi [Dangerous signs and Soviet things],” *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 2017, 143.
- 36 – Only 506 censors out of ca. five thousand had higher education in 1940, according to Gennady Zhirkov, a specialist in the history of censorship in the USSR. See: G.V. Zhirkov, *Glavlit na puti k monopolii v tsenzure* [Glavlit on the road to monopoly in censorship], M.: Aspect Press, 2001. In 1930, obviously, the percentage was even lower.
- 37 – Mikhail Sandomirskii, *Pirozhok* [Little pie]. Drawings by Marianna Purgold, L. – M.: Raduga, 1926.
- 38 – First publication with drawings by Nikolai Kupreianov, M.: Moskovskii Rabochii, 1925.

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