

## Nikolay Punin's Views on Art and Politics in the Early Soviet Period

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**Abstract:** The study examines the construction of ethnic/national/racial identities within the avant-garde movement. Nikolay Punin, art critic and one of the main representatives of the Russian modernism, contributed a lot to the development of this distinctive art construct, conflating political, cultural and artistic discourses in his numerous writings. *Against Civilization* by Eugeny Poletayev and Nikolay Punin's considered in this context as a unique example of the Soviet proto-fascist utopia that combined futuristic, socialist and racist ideas. The key tropes contained in Punin's art criticism (his theory of formalism as imperialism, for instance) have their origin in this tract. The form as a distinct concept in Punin's rhetorical system symbolized the freedom from 'human, all too human with techno-organic and sacral connotations. Unintelligible and 'invulnerable' artistic form is interpreted as an expression of a nation's 'will to power', a weapon in the imperialist struggle. Special attention is paid to the sacral connotations in the Poletayev and Punin's theoretical project and the concept of palingenesis. The tract by Poletayev and Punin is interpreted as an example of the non-Marxist socialist theory, closely connected with the ideas of the German Conservative Revolution. Nikolay Punin's conception of the Russian identity (and his theory of the Russian imperialism) is regarded in the light of the avant-garde theoretical heritage.

**Key words:** Literary works nikolai Punin, avant-garde movement, literary works eugeny Poletayev, conception of the russian identity, socialism, communism, russian nationalism, pan-germanism.

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### INTRODUCTION

Punin (1920) enjoys a well-deserved reputation among the greatest theorists of the Russian avant-garde. He was a public figure and politician, litterateur, arthistorian and critic, theorist of Pan-Germanism and Russian nationalism. In his central political and philosophical work *Protiv Tsivilizatsii* (*Against Civilization*), co-authored by Eugeny Poletayev, he synthesized a number of racist, socialist and avant-garde (Futurist) ideas. He got involved in the left political mainstream (as a public officer on high-ranked positions in government in the first Soviet years) and was poorly known in the West and very biasedly perceived in Russia. So far, in Russian artistic and scientific circles, the mythologized image of Punin has been formed, the image of Punin as a 'pure' art critic with a unique intuition in the sphere of 'pure art' and 'formal' (in the wide meaning of the term) matters of art interpretation, an unbeaten expert who reveal an 'artistic' or 'formal' (with the regard of romantic and intuitionist connotations of the term) quality of works of art. The image is in a way similar to the position of Roger Fry or Clement Greenberg in the British-American world at the culmination moment of their influence. In fact, Punin who was not only a researcher but also a fully-featured representative of the

Russian avant-garde, its ideologist and theorist is much closer to those representatives of modern culture whose creativity was directly connected with political and ideological campaigning, i.e., Marinetti, Wyndham Lewis, Ernst Juenger, Mario Sironi, Giovanni Papini, Ardengo Soffici and other representatives of the 'conservative-revolutionary' wing of Modernism. The amalgam of the ideas of right and left radicalism in the theoretical works by Punin makes us recollect Georges Sorel and Georges Valois. While in the West, there has been established a developed tradition of interdisciplinary interpretations for such phenomena, step by step dissolving the border between right and left radicalism, as well as between disciplines of culture and politics as they are, in Russia so far, the art and the culture have been generally perceived as absolute antithesis of politics and political philosophy.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Works by Punin have not been subject to a review which would include its political, philosophical and cultural dimensions. Few attempts of a textual analysis for Punin's works have left these questions out of the focus (Karasik, 1996). It looks like the central (co-authored by Poletayev and Punin (1918) was a theorist of culture,

orientalist and philologist, a member of Narkompros (State Commissariat of Education). Executed during Stalin terror. His life and work of the 1920-1930's are little known. See more in: Finkelstein 2009) work by Punin on philosophy of culture and history, book *Against Civilization* when reviewed in the academic literature, is viewed in isolation of his art criticism (Stites, 1984, 1989). In their turn, Punin's works on art history and theory (even in those rare cases when they make a separate object of interpretation) are regarded in isolation from historical and philosophical works by their researcher.

Meanwhile, theoretical and critical works by Punin are of chief importance if one seeks to understand transformations of the formalistic discourse of modernism into political (ideological), conceptual and 'corporeal' strategies of 'the second wave avant-garde' (Dadaism, Constructivism, Surrealism), totalitarian art of the Soviet Union and the Third Reich as well as of a number of movements in Postmodernism. The Punin's theory of the avant-garde, his philosophical and anthropological books and articles are one of the most authentic and radical examples of the avant-garde thought, in which the art and the politics, the form and the energy appear closely connected. Different reality spheres and levels, from biological up to political and artistic, in Punin's works almost magically bypass in each other uncovering important features of the avant-garde thinking style. The Punin's avant-garde theory is at the same time a philosophy of culture and apolitical theory. For his entire life, Punin was actually writing one text, political, philosophical and art critical concepts in which make a united theoretic space. It is not a mere fact that the most well-known and central works by Punin on modern art were written and published in the late 1910's early 1920's, in time of the most active publishing efforts of the author in the sphere of political philosophy and culturology. One can speak about the common stylistics and akin mythologemes in the Punin's texts of different 'genre' affiliation, a complex interdisciplinary research of which enables to find out the 'racist gen' in the Russian avant-garde development and trace its further mutation and interbreeds with the communist ideology.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Expressionism, racism and proto-fascism:** An evolution of Punin's political and philosophical views can be with a great extent of relativity divided into three stages with vague chronological boundaries, i.e., 'racist' (about 1916-1918), 'communist' (about 1918-1921) and 'late', 'anarchic' (or 'anti-ideological') which lasted up to the Punin's death in the Stalin's GULAG. As during all the

three periods Punin remained faithful to the utopian ideas of the avant-garde such an evolution at first sight could certify the width of the ideological platform in modern art. In fact, in political philosophy and art, through all his life Punin rather consistently was adhering to the same ideology (or to be precise, anti-ideology- intuitivism and pure activism) which just changed its external forms and was closely connected with artistic preferences of the Russian art critic. In his art criticism, in terms of methodology, Punin at first sight hesitates between formalism and expressionism, between treating art as a certain form both universal and independent from subjective feelings and the opposite concept of the art as an expression of a certain feeling or style of life. Actually, the so-called Punin's formalism was no more than a private case of his own expressionist aesthetics which dated back to the Life-Philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*) at the turn of the 20th century. The form is eventually regarded by Punin as the top point in the life organization and tension, as the Aristocratic victory over human, all too human. The Russian author tends to rewrite the history of art and culture in terms of domination, power, strength and a kind of anti-romantic Romanticism. Expressionism in this case quite logically becomes a common style in Punin's art criticism and political studies.

There is no better artwork for Emily Braun's statement about 'the common ideological and historical matrix of the Expressionist and fascist movements' (Braun, 1996) than Punin's writings. Proto-fascist into nations in the *Against Civilization* (Poletayev and Punin, 1918) made it a forbidden subject for the Soviet and post-Soviet researchers (who did not only follow the restrictions of the state censorship but also 'self-censorship'), while it was this work that contained the key to the entire theoretical heritage of the Russian art critic. It was this work that pointed out and theoretically grounded the repertoire of Punin's central philosophical and art critical concepts. With no direct counterparts, the *Against Civilization* treatise might be in a way regarded as one of the brightest and most radical samples of that culturology production which was typical for the age of Conservative Revolution in Germany. The book title reflects the culture/civilization dichotomy typical for German journalism of that time. Among the most well known treaties of such kind, there is, for example, *Preussentum und Sozialismus* (Prussianism and Socialism) by Spengler, published 2 years later than its Russian counterpart. Meanwhile, the avant-garde (Futurist) and antibourgeois component in Punin and Poletayev's book is clearer than in works written by the most of their German co-thinkers. Extremism of the Russian authors is boundless: totalitarian (as we would say now) traits in

their social project are so hyperbolized that its negativistic and utopian character becomes obvious. The theory contained in the *Against Civilization* is a racist theory. The term 'race' is a key one here and the most frequently used. Only races and nations that make history and art are real and valuable for the authors of the treatise. All that, to the opposite, connected with the sphere of 'personal freedoms,' 'individual' and 'private' in the art and the life seems to be something unreal and at the same time harmful, undermining the fundamentals of the state and the society and their integrity. 'Monism' of Punin and Poletayev, their belief in the absolute integrity and homogeneity of the public life as a certain highest weal extends to the extreme anti-humanism as a deliberate program.

"Die Kleine Narrenwelt" of an individual cannot serve as a base and a center of social and political constructions. It is high time to throw away to barbarians, still numerous on the globe, the old coloured rags of mystical individualism, personal freedom and similar fetishes of the European Decadence. It is nation and nation and race's well-being that exist. Separate individuals can, of course, suffer or die but it is necessary and humanistic... when the well-being of the whole nation or race and finally, of the humankind is at stake (Poletayev and Punin, 1918). The totalitarian social system, according to Poletayev and Punin, provides perfect conditions for such creativity perceived in terms of energy. Consequently, it gives competitive advantages in the struggle of nations and races for world domination. For the authors of *Against Civilization*, ancient Greece is a prototype of the perfect model of the social structure which was extremely successful, in Poletayev/Punin's view, to make the racially homogeneous society. A vital strength, according to Poletayev and Punin, is also a creative force, so the progress of culture, in their mind is expressed in multiplication and mobilization of the energy. The concept of the book is built on the Nietzschean identification of the will to creativity and the will to power. Creativity, in the sense as we understand it in the system of classic views on culture, is first, as it has been mentioned above, looks like the growing tension, multiplied initiative, accumulation of energy, inventions, and a desire to arrange the chaos. Creativity is a powerful rush, an abundance which tends to be implemented. In this sense, the most typical sign of creativity is a wish to prevail instead of living only (Poletayev and Punin, 1918).

**Formalism, militarism, imperialism:** In the spirit of Social Darwinism, the authors of the *Against Civilization* declare that the imperialist struggle between the 'most perfect', 'virile', 'creatively more strained' nations and

races with 'less creative', 'less heroic' and consequently 'less perfect' ones is the most important mechanism to achieve 'progressive' changes in the social life (Poletayev and Punin, 1918). Poletayev and Punin require a recantation from the rational, comfortable and non-creative struggle, risks and adventures of the philistine life ('civilization' of the English and the French). Herewith, racial and nationalistic theories again reveal their avant-garde component; mythologies of a race, nation and art intersect. The so-called Punin's formalism, the methodology of his art critical works appeared in that period, demonstrates the same alienation from the social and cultural experience, the same anti-egotism and anti-psychologism, as we see in his idealistic theory of imperialism. The Punin's formalism turns to be a specific world outlook, one can say, it is a form of a secular religion which requires a recantation from the profane terrestrial world, 'Only in front of Tatlin's reliefs you do feel how vain is the world' (an entry in the Punin's diary of October 23, 1916) (Punin, 1920). In the letter to his fiancée A.E. Arensof July 15, 1915, Punin wrote: I have understood what the painting without content is. Picasso searched for his planes as Morales did; Cezanne molded his heads like Greco. It is in vain to look in both for feelings, ideas and moods, there is only one wish to understand the form in as precise, deep and rigid way as possible... You can figure out that these were just dry souls, not ours which knew all and did not idealize anything. They just saw everything with their kite's eyes and ruthlessly created things equal to what they saw instead of things they saw. They were not romantics at all but the first-class minds. Their irrepressible logic, heart aristocratism but not aestheticism or grace; to my mind, there were souls living in them. Souls of real knights, those knights who had not marched in Crusades to Palestine but conquered Jaffa. Oh, I would like to have such the dry soul and such the devil's mind. ... Why have I understood it at once, me, romantic to the depth and why have I liked it? (Punin, 1920). An appearance of the militaristic rhetoric in discussions of Cezanne/Picasso's formalism should not be a surprise for us. 'Painting without content' was for Punin the same form of social utopia (pure irrational activism) as his 'politics without content'. In social way, they were fed from the same virulent source, vitalism. Theories, clearly set goals, moral reasons are nothing compared with the frenzy of the pure energy, the life, as it is, its unrestrained moving ahead. 'Heart' aristocratism of formalist artists, described by Punin, is in that bravery with which they reject the word of intellectual constructions without offering anything in return except for the belief in their own spiritual strength. They do not experience feelings usual for an ordinary person, they do

not fall in love and do not suffer in a regular way (Punin develops this idea in his late work called the Letters to MG (1940) (Punin, 1920), though they live a more intensive life than the rank and file. This Nietzschean concept of the superman was to the full elaborated in Punin's works on politology and art criticism.

**Socialism, communism, vitalism:** On 23 October 1916, in his diary, Punin makes the following entry, 'Futurist ideas and socialism are the best ideas. Not Marx but healthy socialism, the life' (Punin, 1920). The Punin's address to socialist ideas thus happened before the revolution of 1917. The mixture of racist and socialist (but non-Marxist) ideas in Punin's theories is a rather toxic material from the social ecology viewpoint. For instance, Israeli scholar Zeev Sternhell in his well-known research on the origin of the fascist ideology puts an accent on pathogenic features of similar non-Marxist, idealistic and romantic interpretations for socialism (Sternhell, 1987). Mentioning knights in the above mentioned A.E. Arens's letter fragment is also not a mere chance. Many leaders of German Conservative Revolution (and among them there was Oswald Spengler) saw in knights' orders an ideal prototype for Prussian socialism. In the period of his closest contacts with the communist ideology, Nikolay Punin writes the article the Art and Proletariat, in which, in the essence, he takes the art beyond the frames of social relationship, 'our understanding of art just makes it free from everything which was super imposed on it by class conscience and its separate art forms...' (Punin, 1920). In its essence, Punin's thinking was a historical and a social: elements of class is in his theoretical works of that period were the result of the same 'energetic' conception of history where proletariat had occupied the place of 'German race' and the Russians. Punin believes in the inheritance of central contradictions and conflicts of the reality, the persistent tragedy of life. As opposed to Malevich, thinking that it possible to overcome 'the world of struggle' as a manifestation of 'the green world of flesh and bone', Punin regarded tension, a game of powers as an essence of the reality and of the art, 'The art is struggle anyway and to the greater extent than anything else ... Any artistic work is a trace of struggle; it says about man's behaviour in a battle' (Punin, 1920). The whole life is a struggle but it is in the art where it reaches its maximum (the artist, according to Punin, is the 'world ruler), so 'the force, tension and the reserve of nervous energy in the artist as he is an artist indeed are higher than in an ordinary person...' (Punin, 1920). Independence of art from the social dimension therefore does not mean, according to Punin, its autonomy. Art is opposed to politics as a theory (rational doctrine) or a stagnant and

bureaucratized reality but not as a revolution power, the life form maximally saturated with the energy, 'international is the same Futurist form as any other creatively-made form... I ask what is the difference between the Third International and the Tatlin's Relief or The Trumpet of the Martians by Khlebnikov? I see none' (Punin, 1920). The book *Against Civilization* contains the same list of 'creative processes': Crusades, Renaissance, Reformation (it is the latter which the authors prefer as a national, state and team process) (Poletayev and Punin, 1918). The comparison of crusaders with formalist painters in the letter cited above to A.E. Arens is not a mere chance: in both cases, the question is a surplus of energy, necessary for a collision with the severe reality (pure art, war, etc.). Punin's pure formalism in close consideration appears to be burdened by the strategies of racism, sexism, and classism which construct the vitalistic mythology of art and culture.

**Russian nationalism and pan-germanism:** The courageous, heroic life philosophy and specific energy which are the peculiarities of the great races are required to create the great art. Following this conviction, the authors of the *Against Civilization* come to a particular justification of German imperialism and the real cult of the German race (praising of which is a leitmotif in their treatise) which has revived, according to them, the idea of the classic culture in the Modern Times and defended the ideas of progress and culture in the struggle with racially extraneous, reactionary and 'civilized' England and France. Russia in this struggle, from the treatise authors' point of view, should act on the side of Germany and in future, maybe even lead the 'struggle for culture'. The Russian culture was given the following characteristics: history treated us even harder than Germans: in a thousand of years we have not yet learned ourselves and have not learned how to value ourselves. However, through the centuries we have saved the most precious qualities of our Great-Russian character: inherent childishness and natural vitality, they are the first presuppositions for creativity. We have few traditions, and those are weak as we, Great Russians, are notable for some instinct distrust towards the olden times. Let us remember this plus as well (Poletayev and Punin, 1918). Other advantages of the Russians, according to Poletayev and Punin are the following: 'naturalness', 'a low estimation of the value of personal existence' and living in each Russian (even anarchist), the 'inclination towards the iron power and discipline', absent compassion and pity, an excess of which is harmful for a nation. The authors state, 'Moscow has never believed in tears... In fact we, Great Russians, feel pity for nobody and nothing,

even for ourselves' (Poletayev and Punin, 1918). In the *Against Civilization*, thus, the essentialist ahistorical opposition is established: avant-garde ('progressive'), courageous, objective (hard headed) Germany and Russia (on the one hand) and reactionary (conservative, traditionalist), female (gerontic or relaxed) and individualistic (subjectivist) England and France (on the other hand). In his later works, Punin will focus on the Russia/West contraposition. At that, Tatlin's works will become for Punin the highest embodiment of the 'genuine Russian' tradition (that is 'pitiless', 'objective' (collectivist), heroic and avant-garde (Futurist)).

**Formalism and palingenesis:** Saying that Punin was a brilliant master of formalistic methodological tools we have still perceived formalism as a set of technical procedures which guarantee fixation of certain 'objective' parameters of art. Thus, we omit the cultural dependence of art history. The Punin's method combines Woelfflin's aristocratic Nietzscheanism with the nationalistic rhetoric of the Russian avant-garde. Metaphors of might and power penetrate into those spheres of art criticism which were regarded traditionally independent from the ideology as studies of an artistic form. Finally, Punin openly defines formalism in the modern art as a form of palingenesis, spiritual and biological regeneration, in full accordance with the Roger Griffin's conception of the fascist culture (for the fascist myth of palingenesis see Griffin, 2007). In this connection, saying of Cezanne/Picasso's formalism as well as the works of the Russian avant-gardists of the early 20th century, Punin equalizes their approach to the art with the formalism in the Ancient Greek art: ... young artists rejoice that they can create and they do create without analysing which emotions, impressions and moods accompany their creativity. We are formal. Yes we are proud of this formalism as we return the humankind to those unbeaten samples of the cultural art which we knew in Greece... This formalism is a formalism of a classic healthy body rejoicing at every form of the reality and only striving to reveal all the richness, all the tension of its creative spontaneous forces to turn them into such artistic works which would not contain anything else except the signs of the great joy, great creative tension... (Punin, 1920).

More in detail, this concept of palingenesis, as we remember was described in the book *Against Civilization*. The anti-intellectualist, rich in vitalistic metaphors, the Punin's rhetoric anticipates the style of the Russian totalitarian culture from the time of Stalin and Stalin time art criticism, based on (as shown by Vladimir Paperny) the inanimate/living opposition. In the monograph (1932-34) on the life of neo-primitivist artist Pavel

Kuznetsov Punin once again returns to his beloved thought that the Russian art is 'more realistic, more full-blooded and vital; it just has more energy...' (Punin, 1920). In this monograph which begins with speculations (quite in the manner of Clement Greenberg) on a need in studying the physical basis of painting as an art, its medium (the first chapters are in an indicative way entitled like 'The Problem of Plane' and 'Pavel Kuznetsov's Painterly-flattish Culture'), Punin discusses the art in terms of imperialism, expansion and enslavement (Punin, 1920). More than a dozen years after his monograph on Zeev *et al.* (1994), Punin again speaks about the need in a 'confrontation with the West.'

**Constructivism and secular religion:** Reductionism and minimalism are interpreted by Punin in a way to some extent different from that of orthodox constructivists. A common denominator for them is, of course, a liberation from an old ideology. The most remarkable moment of the organization of life, assumed by Poletayev and Punin's theory was the creation of the new religion of the nature (cosmos). The energetism philosophy acquires in this case a character of some quasi-religious vitalism, quite typical (as some recent investigations have argued (Mosse, 2003; Gentile, 1996; Adamson, 1989; Antliff, 2002) for fascist and proto fascist rhetoric in Western Europe of that period. The nature, science, art and social sphere, according to Punin, 'will fuse in culture as in a creative category that has been hard to be defined. The culture, thus, 'absorbs the functions, authority and charm of the religion' (Poletayev and Punin, 1918). Poletayev and Punin speak about 'the pantheistic religion of the Arian mankind' which will become the base for the 'powerful social religion of the future', the synthesis of man and cosmos (Poletayev and Punin, 1918) The revision of his own social philosophy done by late Punin did not touch the main bearers of pathogenic ideologies, i.e., energetism and delirium. 'The spirit' (creative energy) as before 'cannot suffer in our regular sense of the word' (Punin, 1920); 'artists should never suffer,' 'art liberates from sufferings'; 'I am a human made in art, I neither suffer, nor love' (Punin, 1920). Like in Punin's theoretical works from the second half of the 1910's and the early 1920's, the aesthetics here (in accordance with the Susan Buck-Morss' theory of fascism) becomes anaesthetic. The integral, 'solid' form of social and artistic bodies in Punin's political and formalistic theories was a particular case of the Lacan's mirror theory with its (as shown by Hal Foster) fascist connotations. Ideas of constructivism, for which Punin is thought to be a founder, acquire in his interpretation a specific sense enabling to shed some new light on such phenomena in the Western art world as

Purism and l'Esprit Nouveau, De Stijl, Bauhaus, Precisionism, etc. The Russian avant-garde, breaking repressive barriers was inventing strategies of radical nihilism, making its own totalitarian version of the writing degree zero. Nikolay Punin's life and work were one of the most dramatic attempts of such kind.

## CONCLUSION

Appropriated by the leftist discourses in the West, in the political sphere, the Russian avant-garde is often associated with communist and anarchist utopianism of the Bolshevik Revolution. The recent research have revealed the totalitarian dimension in the Russian avant-garde, drawing parallels with the Stalinist cultural policy. In this reevaluation of the Russian modernist art, the next step should be taken that relates to proto-fascist connotations of this artistic phenomenon. The unique example of the Soviet proto-fascist utopia, the *Against Civilization* by Eugeny Poletayev and Nikolay Punin, is a conflation of racist, socialist and Futurist ideas. One of the most complicated cases of proto-fascist modernism and its convergence with the communist theories, this treatise combines rhetoric of romantic anti-capitalism with the cynical, anti-ideological (in the strict sense of the word) logic of the Russian avant-garde. Reminiscent of the Germany Conservative Revolution' theories, the *Against Civilization* is a vivid evidence of the hidden Nietzschean movement in the Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent Stalinism. Punin created his famous formalist concept of Modernism using the sexist, racist and ultra-nationalist metaphors in the *Against Civilization*. In this regard, the vocabulary of tropes introduced in this totalitarian project was transformed into the system of notions for one of the most sophisticated and authoritative interpretations of the Russian avant-garde. In Nikolay Punin's art criticism, the Russian avant-garde was integrated into the proto-fascist quasi-religious rhetorical system that anticipated Stalinist propaganda: abstract images of the avant-garde were used as tools in the totalitarian racist/nationalist project and acquired the virulent vitalist meanings. Later when Punin was canonized as a leading art critic in the Russian Modernism, his heritage was partly censored, some of his central theoretical works became a forbidden subject for the researchers and the Russian avant-garde was

deprived of its proto-fascist connotations. The *Against Civilization* treatise viewed in a new way as a Soviet proto-fascist utopia, a form of the Nietzschean bolshevism, is crucial for understanding of complex relations between the modernist image making and the cultural policies of totalitarian regimes.

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