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ScienceDirect

Russian Literature 87–89 (2017) 147–200

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Russian Literature

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## CIVIC POETRY IN RUSSIAN PRAGUE. MAKING SENSE OF THE RECENT PAST AND PRESENT

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### Abstract

The trauma of exile affected the cultural production of the interwar Russian émigré community and, like in other diasporas, honed the émigrés' attention on issues of politics, memory and (cultural) identity. Nonetheless, despite their all-dominating nature, the 1917 Revolutions and the traumatic events that followed suit never became a major topic in Russian émigré literature of the time. An exception to the rule is the literary oeuvre of the largely unexplored Prague Russian émigré group "Skit poetov" ("A Hermitage of Poets"). The present article shortly discusses the group's attitude towards writing literature on the very *raison d'être* of life in exile and its literary practice. The main emphasis, however, lies on the analysis of two long, complex poems which were published in tandem in the journal *Volia Rossii* in 1928. Both poems can be called the very height of the kind of poetry the Prague literary community advocated as they not only interpret and evaluate the events of 1917 and their aftermath, but also draw a future that is a logical and inevitable continuation of the remote and recent past. Aleksei Eisner's 'Kon'nitsa' ('Cavalry', 1928) foretells a Eurasianist future for Europe: Russians take the lead in a barbarian raid on Europe to "uncivilize" it, repeating past battles and sieges that were decisive for Russia's development. Viacheslav Lebedev's Westernist 'Poema vremennykh let' ('Poem of Bygone Years', 1928) instead offers a Westernist future, whereby

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ruslit.2017.04.007>

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Europeanized Russian emigrants will defeat the Bolsheviks and colonize Russia with European culture.

**Keywords:** *Skit poetov; Modernity; Civil War; Revolution; Viacheslav Lebedev; Aleksandr Turintsev*

How much I would like to see in a literary representation the recent years we lived through, which are still hazy for us and still need to be interpreted, to find in characters our own characteristics and thoughts, X-rayed by artistic intuition, which would help to lay the foundations of our disposition. (Turintsev 2007d: 243)<sup>1</sup>

When thinking of twentieth-century Russian civic poetry, Russian interwar émigré literature usually does not come to mind. Of course, the Russian émigré community was a *de facto* free society (within multiple other societies) where civic themes could be expressed relatively easily in texts other than poetry. Nonetheless, the very *raison d'être* of the First Wave was precisely socio-political, i.e. it was based on a chain of socio-political facts (Andreev 1971: 21). The shared trauma and life in exile obviously affected the cultural production of the émigré community and, like in other diasporas, honed the émigrés' attention on issues of politics, identity and memory. One of the things to remember, one would think, was the causes of the "Russian exodus". These events, however, do not seem to have become a major literary topic. Only a few dozen prose texts (see also Foster 1972) and a limited number of poems – often monarchist in orientation<sup>2</sup> – devoted specifically to these events were published between 1917 and 1940. (Needless to say that many more touched upon the events or used them as a backdrop.)

This contrasts sharply with the enormous number of non-literary texts on these events that were published in emigration: autobiographies by former generals and public figures; recollections and articles in journals and newspapers; historical, social and religious-philosophical writings. This also contrasts sharply with the Bolshevik side of the story, where these events soon turned into a major literary topic (Howlett 1994) and later on were even molded into a foundation myth (Corney 2004). Lastly, this contrasts with the abundance of nostalgia in émigré literary texts ("the nostalgia industry"; Tihanov 2011: 336; see also Slobin 2013: 25), – i.e., literature about pre-revolutionary Russia (e.g. Ivan Bunin's *Zhizn' Arsen'eva* [*The Life of Arsen'ev*], 1927-1933) and about alienation and despair (e.g. Georgii Ivanov's "Khorosho, chto net Tsaria..." ["It is good that there is no Czar..."], 1930). Additionally, it is significant that many writers and poets of the older generation, like Bunin and Zinaida Gippius, tended to avoid the topic in literary texts, but did deal with the events in their ego-documents and

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