The focus of this essay, within the context of the utopian or post-utopian resonance of the Russian avant-garde, is on a single work, i.e. the painting, The Old and the New. A Group Portrait, by Solomon Borisovich Nikritin (1898–1965). Painted in 1935 and measuring 178.5 × 216 cm., The Old and the New (Fig. 9.1, Savitskii Museum of Visual Arts in Nukus, Karakalpak Republic, Uzbekistan) tells the story of the early Soviet engagement and disengagement with the utopian model of Socialist Realism. Indeed, the date of the completed work, spring 1935, is of particular importance, coming less than a year after the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers (Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh pisatelei), at which the commandments of Socialist Realism had been declared and codified.

Nikritin is one of the most original and mysterious artists of Russia’s second avant-garde. Trained in Kiev and Moscow in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Nikritin achieved recognition for his highly experimental compositions, including abstract paintings and graphic schemes, concerned with the cosmos or, rather, with its underlying geometric harmony, which he identified with figures and landscapes, the earth and the heavens—much in the occult spirit of John Graham, Pavel Tchelitchew, and the late work of Sergei Konenkov. Although he was an extremely recondite theoretician, Nikritin also created, in the 1920s and 1930s, searing, apocalyptic visions such as Man and Cloud (Fig. 9.2); audacious satires such as Snowwoman (sic. i.e. not Snowman) and Lenin; forays into violence and perdition such as his War series of 1922–24 (Fig. 9.3); and even an endless, Kharmsian

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1 A shorter version of this essay was published in English and Greek in Natalia Adaskina, John E. Bowlt, Nicoletta Misler and Maria Tsantsanoglou, eds., Solomon Nikritin. Spheres of Light: Stations of Darkness (Thessaloniki: State Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), pp. 375–80. This catalogue is the most comprehensive source of information on Nikritin’s life and work. For reproductions of versions of, and studies for, The Old and the New, see ibid., pp. 312–19.

2 Unless stated otherwise, works cited are in the collection of the State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki.
Fig. 9.1 Solomon Nikritin, *The Old and the New*, 1935, oil on canvas, 178.5 × 216 cm., Savitskii Museum of Visual Arts, Nukus, Karakalpak Republic, Uzbekistan.