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A Monument to Bakunin:
Korolev's Cubo-Futurist Statue of 1919

"Workers and Red Army men are surprised and outraged when they find out that the monument is about to be unveiled."¹ Such was the public reaction to the statue to Mikhail Bakunin erected at the Miasnitskii Gates (now Kirov Street) in Moscow in September, 1919. The designer of this provocative monument was the sculptor, painter, and architect, Boris Danilovich Korolev (1884-1963),² an artist now appreciated in the Soviet Union not for his abstract sculptures but for his expressive, if orthodox, busts and statues of Lenin. Like many of the celebrated masters of Socialist Realism—Aleksandr Deineka, Vera Mukhina, Iurii Pimenov—Korolev started his artistic career as a "formalist." As a young man, Korolev was almost as radical in sculpture as Bakunin was in political theory. How did the paths of artist and politician cross? This article tells the story of their curious confrontation.

Korolev's statue of Bakunin was commissioned by the Visual Arts Section of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (IZO NKP) in accordance with Lenin's Program of Monumental Propaganda which he initiated by decree on 12 April 1918: On the Dismantling of Monuments Erected in Honor of the Tsars and Their Servants and on the Formulation of Projects for Monuments to the Russian Socialist Revolution. In order for us to understand the artistic and political importance of Korolev's Bakunin, we must examine it within the immediate context of this Decree. What did the Decree decree? A few extracts indicate Lenin's general purpose and objective:

1. Monuments erected in honor of the Tsars and of their servants and which do not present interest either from a historical or from an artistic viewpoint are to be dismantled and taken off the squares and streets; in part they are to be transferred to depositories, in part they are to be used for utilitarian ends. . . .

2. The same committee [the Soviet of People's Commissars] is entrusted with mobilizing artistic forces and organizing an extensive competition for producing projects for monuments intended to commemorate the great days of the Russian Socialist Revolution.

3. The Soviet of People's Commissars expresses the desire that certain of the more hideous idols be dismantled and the first models of the new monuments be put up for verdict by the masses by the 1st May.

4. The same committee is entrusted with urgently preparing the decoration of the city by 1st May and the replacement of inscriptions, emblems, street names,

1. [unsigned article] "Uberte chuchelo!" in Vechernie izvestiia Moskovskogo Soveta rabochikh i krasnoarmeiskikh deputatov (Moscow), 10 Feb. 1920.
2. The most comprehensive source of information on Korolev is L. Bubnova's monograph: Boris Danilovich Korolev (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968).
coats of arms, etc., by new ones reflecting the ideas and feelings of the working-
class of Revolutionary Russia.  

In a conversation with Anatolii Lunacharskii, Commissar for Enlightenment, some time in January, 1918, Lenin had already explained the motives behind his very ambitious plan: “You remember that Campanella in his City of the Sun speaks of frescos as being on the walls of his fantastic socialist city. . . . I think that this is by no means naive and, with certain modifications, could be assimilated by us and realized right now. . . . For the moment I’m not even thinking in terms of eternity or permanence. . . . Even more important than inscriptions I consider monuments: busts or full-length figures, perhaps bas-reliefs, groups. . . . We should compile a list of the predecessors of socialism or its theorists and fighters as well as those luminaries of philosophical thought, science, art, etc., who, while not having direct relevance to socialism, were genuine heroes of culture.”  

What Lenin envisaged was, therefore, a series of three-dimensional posters recognizable immediately to the mass spectator. Naturally, Lenin also envisaged a Realist or academic mode of execution and may well have taken a sculptor such as Mark Antokol’skii (famous for his dramatic statue of Ivan the Terrible [1875]) as his ideal. On no account did he expect the “predecessors of socialism” to be modelled in an abstract fashion. As he once said: “I just cannot consider the works of Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism and other ‘isms’ to be the highest manifestation of artistic genius. I do not understand them. I do not experience any pleasure from them.”  

Shock and disappointment would disturb this placid aesthetic vision.  

In order to expedite the Program, the Moscow branch of IZO NKP decided to place commissions not with a random selection of sculptors, but with members of the Moscow Union of Sculptors (then headed by Sergei Konenkov, assisted by Korolev). In this way IZO NKP, which was not at all enamored of Lenin’s idea, transferred part of its responsibility to another body. At the very end of July, 1918, IZO NKP and the Union of Sculptors compiled a detailed list of who was to sculpt whom and passed it on to the special Commission for the Dismantling and Erection of Monuments attached to Mossovet.  

On 15 August 1918 IZO NKP and the Union of Sculptors signed a contract stipulating that sixty-seven temporary monuments were to be delivered by the Union’s members in time for the first anniversary of the October Revolution, i.e., 7 November 1918. The contract also contained essential guidelines: the total height of pedestal and figure was not to exceed five arshins (eleven feet, eight inches); the sculptor was free to choose a full-length figure, a bust or a bas-relief; the sculptor was to receive a sum in the

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4. Reported by A. Lunacharskii in “Monumental’naia propaganda,” Literaturnaia gazeta (Moscow), No. 4-5, 29 Jan. 1933. Reprinted in Iskusstvo [hereafter I] (Moscow-Leningrad), No. 3 (1933), p. 150.
6. This list is published in V. Kuchina, comp., Iz istorii stroitel’stva sovetskoi kul’tury 1917-1918 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), pp. 38-44.