III. Sales in Europe and the United States

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SOVIET ART SALES TO EUROPE, 1919-1936

In February 1919 Leonid Krasin, Commissar of Foreign Trade, entrusted Maksim Gor’kii with the sale of nationalized art and cultural property abroad. One of the first aims of the newly appointed head of the so called “expert commission” (the name changed repeatedly) was to establish contacts with leading art galleries, dealers, museums, and auction houses throughout Europe. After a long period of isolation from the international art market – following the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 – Gor’kii realised the need to catch up on the latest market developments; he sent special envoys to traditional cultural centres such as Rome, Florence, Paris, and Berlin. This move reveals the basic characteristic of the initial sales. At first, the Soviet authorities negotiated deals with a great variety of international partners. There was no systematic strategy, no central agency behind the export drive. Archival material documents sales all over the continent – to the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, Poland and the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Belgium, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France and Britain, as well as to Spain and Italy.

Nevertheless, a clear focus on Central Europe, primarily on Germany, soon emerged. The Weimar Republic was an almost ideal partner for the Soviets. It was the first to recognize Soviet Russia diplomatically, in 1922; its courts recognized the nationalization decrees issued in the wake of the October revolution; and its political leaders, businessmen and art world were equally eager to resume ties with the Bolsheviks. Already in 1921 Soviet emissaries negotiated the first sales of art treasures. The deal failed, as the Germans feared legal actions by Russian émigrés. But in 1922, Moscow resumed and successfully concluded the talks. In the fall the van Diemen Gallery in Berlin organized the first sales. Lepke, the renowned Berlin auction house, quickly followed. Backed by the powerful Soviet trade mission, notably by Gor’kii’s second wife, Mariia F. Andreeva, Lepke soon secured a special position on the Soviet market. Beginning in 1923 the firm’s agents enjoyed privileged access to museums and storages in Petrograd (later Leningrad) and Moscow. Lepke staged the first major Russian auctions (“Russenauktionen”) in late 1928, which caused an international scandal; dozens of lawsuits were filed by mostly noble émigrés. Germany proved loyal, her courts decided in favor of the Soviet government. Art business with Moscow continued until 1936, though beginning
in 1929, and especially after 1933, Germany drastically lost ground to other competitors within Europe and, most notably, to the United States.

In this contribution the focus will be on Germany and her role in the various stages. Central aspects of the sales in other countries, primarily in France and the Netherlands, will be included as well. The article will also provide insight into the discourse on the topic in Western Europe, past and present. It will touch on aspects of restitution. A final account will be devoted to a recent issue: the efforts by the new Russian entrepreneurial class to buy back some of the works sold in the interwar period at the latest auctions in Europe and the United States. The foundation “Link of Times” (Sviaz' vremen) established by the Moscow-based billionaire Victor Veksel'berg is indicative of this development, which in turn reflects Russia's new cultural policy.

Strategic partnership: The Weimar Republic

The first major sales that were carried out systematically, apparently to finance the First Five Year Plan, largely concentrated on the German and Austrian art market. In November 1928 so-called Russian auctions were held almost simultaneously in Berlin and Vienna. They were discussed worldwide and were repeatedly followed by lawsuits by former owners. These auctions document the resolve of the Soviet government – despite mounting legal pressure – to publicly auction off abroad for the first time works of art and antiques nationalized in the wake of the revolution. Germany proved to be a wise choice. Unlike France, which was confronted with severe protests by her large émigré community, or the United States, which refused diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union until 1933, the trusted ally Germany and – to a lesser extent – Austria were considered reliable partners. Furthermore, both had the advantage of being represented at home and abroad; both acted as intermediaries, notably in the Anglo-American countries, but also as resellers (such as documented in France and Switzerland).

From the very start the exports to Germany were a key element of Soviet policy. Already in August 1921, only three months after the conclusion of the Russo-German Trade Treaty, Soviet Russia, being isolated in foreign policy, initiated talks with chancellor Wirth and economic minister Schmidt to sell art treasures worth between 300 and 600 million Swedish crowns. The deal fell through due to concerns on the part of the Germans. After the Rapallo Peace Treaty in April 1922 the negotiations gained momentum; efforts were made to “gain money in solid hard currency for our bric-à-brac.” ¹ In the fall of that year the Berlin-based van Diemen gallery organized the First Russian Art Exhibition in the German capital, which offered over two hundred of the best