

The Moscow Underground of the Stalin Time (1934-1953). Aesthetic Features, Political Significance and Cultural Symbolism

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Introduction. The Moscow Metro as a living memorial of the past epoch

The contemporary Moscow underground (Metro in Russian terms) is one of the most extensive and widely used subway systems in the world, transporting more than 2.4 billion passengers around the city every year.¹ Today all foreign visitors believe that the Moscow underground is a tourist attraction of the same rank as the Kremlin and the Red Square.² 44 of more than 200 Moscow Metro stations are listed as cultural heritage sites, and this is especially true for the first 13 Metro stations of the ring line which were opened in 1935 (Sokol'niki, Krasnosel'skaya, Komsomol'skaya, Krasnuie Vorota, Kirovskaya, L'ub'anika, Okhotnyy R'ad, Biblioteka imeni Lenina, Dvorez Sovietov, Park kul'tury, Uliza Kominterna, Arbatskaya, Smolenskaya).

The underground in Moscow was constructed as a necessary transport system which solved the transportation problems that existed in the Soviet capital in the 1930s. As part of the era of grandiose Soviet construction projects and the romantic pathos of industrialisation, the Moscow Metro turned into an emblem of the Soviet socialist achievements: famous Soviet poets³ devoted their poetry to the Moscow Metro as the new attainment of Soviet life. Even foreign visitors, such as the German writer Lion Feuchtwanger⁴ or the Czech journalist Julius Fučík⁵ admired the Moscow Metro. Bertolt Brecht devoted his verses to the opening first stations of the Moscow Metro (*Inbesitznahme der Großen Metro durch die Moskauer Arbeiterschaft*⁶). George Morgan, the American engineer who took an active part in the Metro construction, published a brochure about the Moscow underground which was entitled *Moscow Subway is the Finest in the World*. Just after the construction of the first lines of the Moscow Metro, the chronicles of its history were created: in 1935 an almanac *How We Built the Metro*⁷ and a text collection titled *The Stories of the Constructors of the Metro*⁸ were published in which the testimonies by the workers, Komsomol leaders⁹ and architects of the Metro were collected. According to the contemporary scholars, the 'great construction projects' of the first five-year industrial plans became almost epic events in the Soviet national mythology.¹⁰

The goal of my paper is to discuss the specificity of the architectural design, aesthetic and symbolic meaning of the Moscow Metro in the context of the political situation in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1950s. The 1930s were a period of creating a new image of the Soviet capital, implementing the ideological plan to form the "new Soviet man".¹¹ This goal as the important cultural and political task of the new Soviet state was proclaimed by the Bolshevik leaders after coming to power in 1917. Its meaning was that construction of a new 'communist world' required new citizens with new moral values, such

as collectivism (instead of 'bourgeois individualism'), altruism (instead of 'bourgeois egoism'), socialist humanism, responsibility at work, willingness to overcome difficulties, love for the motherland and the Communist party, faith in a socialist future, and so on. The image of the 'construction of the new Soviet man' was reflected in Soviet art.¹² The construction of the Moscow Metro was understood by the Soviet state as the most prestigious project of the early 1930s,¹³ which should demonstrate the achievements of socialism (along with other large-scale Soviet constructions of the Stalinist time like the Palace of Soviets or the Moscow-Volga Canal). The Moscow Metro dating from the period of 1935–1953 is associated with Stalin's concept of Soviet culture, because all underground transport systems in other Soviet cities were opened after Stalin's death: in Leningrad in 1955, in Kiev (capital of Ukraine) in 1960, in Tbilisi (capital of Georgia) in 1966, in Baku (capital of Azerbaijan) in 1967, in Kharkiv (biggest Ukrainian scientific and industrial city) in 1975, in Tashkent (capital of Uzbekistan) in 1977, in Erevan (capital of Armenia) in 1981, in Minsk (capital of Belarus) in 1984, in Nizhny Novgorod (Russia) in 1985, in Novosibirsk (Russia) in 1986, and in Samara (Russia) in 1987. The aesthetic and cultural symbolism of the Moscow Metro architecture and design will be briefly analysed in my paper.

1. The Moscow Metro as a multifunctional construction of the 1930s

Discussions about the necessity to construct a Metro in Moscow were started in the Russian Empire in the late 19th century, especially in the context of the construction of this type of transport in London and New York. However, the first projects for the construction of a Metro were not implemented for several reasons: the conservative position of the Orthodox church officials¹⁴ and fear of tram companies of losing profits.¹⁵ The ambitious architectural and engineering decisions about the construction of the Metro were realised after the Bolsheviks came to power: the construction of the first Metro stations in Moscow was started in 1931, and the first Metro stations were opened to the public on 15 May 1935.

Lazar Kaganovich, the leader of the Moscow City Party Organisation, was assigned to take control of the construction of the Metro. The Politburo, the highest party authority in the USSR, approved engineer Pavel Rotert as the head of construction of the Moscow Metro.¹⁶ Since the underground was a new task for Soviet engineers, foreign specialists from Germany and the USA who had already experience in the construction of underground traffic systems, were invited to assist in the development of the Moscow Metro. The main consultant of

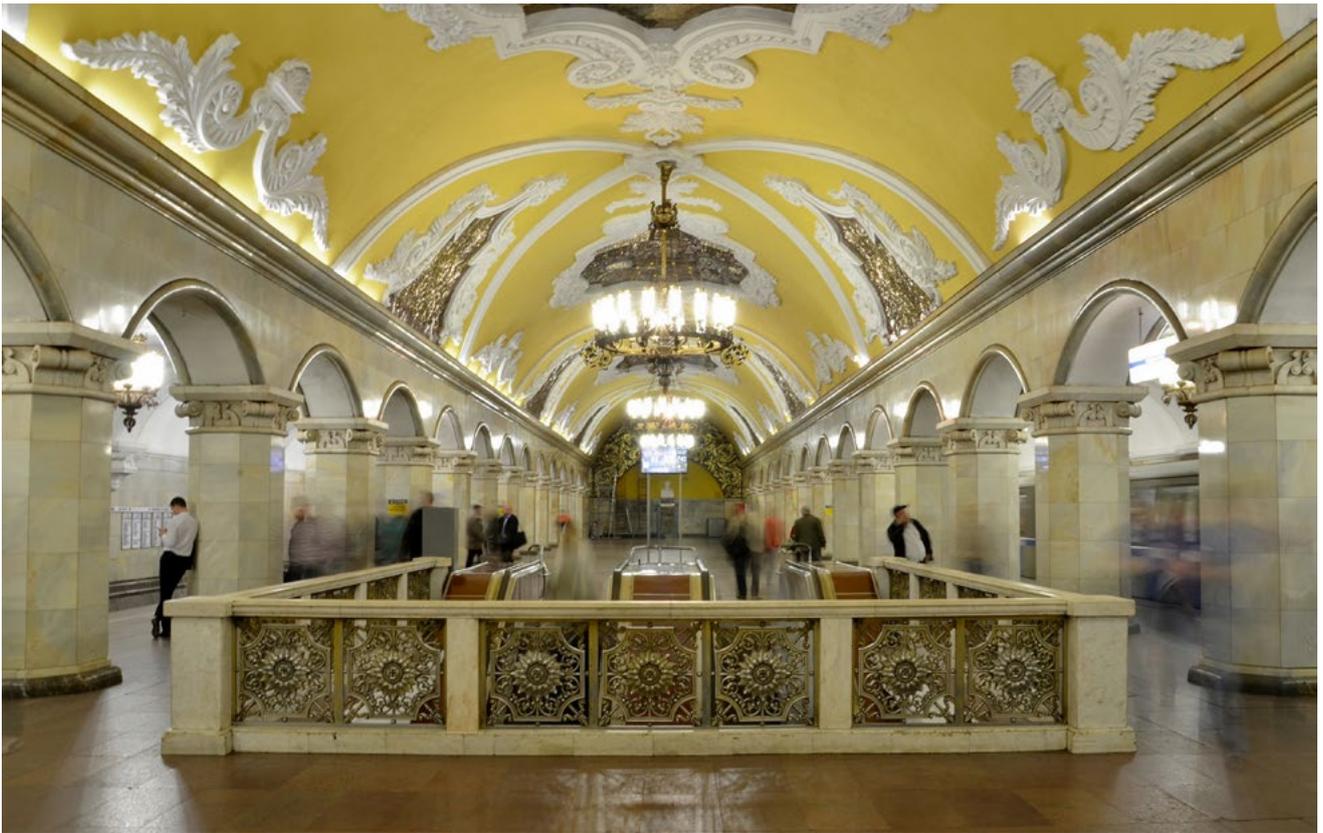


Fig. 1: Moscow Metro station Komsomol'skaya Kol'tsevaya, 1935, Southern vestibule. Photo: Felix Richter, 2015

the construction was American engineer George Morgan.¹⁷ The administration of the Metrostroï (Bureau of Metro Construction) appointed architect Samuil Kravets as head of the Design Office. He arrived from Kharkiv, the first capital of Soviet Ukraine (1919–1934), where he was in charge of the largest construction of those days, the Gosprom House (the House of the State Industry), an achievement of Soviet constructivism. Later Kravets wrote a book about his experience in the construction of the Moscow Metro.¹⁸

Due to the fact that the creation of many Metro lines in Moscow was technically difficult and the Metro builders had to deal with several underground rivers, rocks, as well as archaeological fossils of ancient animals, many new and advanced methods of underground construction, such as the techniques of shield tunnelling, artificial petrification of soil and artificial water drainage, the method of freezing, the caisson method (developing tunnels under compressed air), etc. were used. The difficult underground relief required the construction of many stations at different levels, many of them at very great depths.¹⁹ Therefore, the construction of the Metro also helped to promote the technical modernisation of the Soviet construction industry.

The Moscow underground had to fulfil multifunctional tasks: the first Metro in the USSR was understood as a significant event at both the communication and political levels. Technically, the construction of the Moscow Metro was regarded as a solution to the problem of the overburdened passenger tram traffic in expanding Moscow. Military functions were another important task of the Moscow underground: Soviet Russia had survived the hardest period of the Civil War and the foreign intervention (1918–1923), and two decades later the Soviet gov-

ernment was afraid of a new foreign military attack. Most of the construction projects in the USSR had a dual function: in case of peace and in case of war, with the Moscow Metro serving as a bomb-proof shelter during the wartime.

There were the functions of the state security: after the opening of the metro there were rumours in the city about the existence of the secret 'Metro-2'.²⁰ It was said to be built for military, security and intelligence purposes, and also for the immediate evacuation of the Soviet government in the event of any extreme situation. That secret Metro line should have existed in parallel with the officially operating Metro stations and be connected to the civilian Metro lines.²¹ The existence of 'Metro-2' was neither confirmed nor denied by the former KGB officers or Russian FSB.

2. The aesthetic goals of the Moscow Underground

The creation of the Metro in Moscow meant the birth of a new branch of Soviet architecture. The Bolshevik idea of the transformation of the 'old' (bourgeois) world resulted in the transformation of classic aesthetics, cinema, and theatre, in the attitude towards education and way of life. The same situation was in architecture: the architects of the Moscow Metro believed that the image of socialism should be embodied in grand constructions that would manifest the energetic potential of the 'new' (socialist) world and the 'new Soviet man'. The erection of these buildings which began in Moscow in the 1930s was a symbolic expression of the triumph of the Soviet system.

The design of the Moscow Underground was created at the same time as the large-scale new Moscow ‘Palaces’, for example the Palace of Labour (1933) and the House of the People’s Commissariat of Heavy Industry (1934), which symbolised the pathos of the socialist achievements and the peaceful life of the Soviet citizens.

Also, the classic utopian work *The City of the Sun* by Tomaso Campanella, the great Italian philosopher, poet, astrologer and theologian (1568–1639) about the ideal and flourishing society influenced the architectural mentality of the first Soviet decades very much. Campanella described the monumental palaces decorated with frescoes and bas-reliefs devoted to patriotic themes as part of the ideal society, and the Soviet architects (who believed that they were building the Metro as the ‘transport of the future’) were inspired by the images of the Italian utopian philosopher.²² Therefore, the first Metro stations in Moscow were built under the Communist party’s slogan: “We will create a palace for the people!” The idea of that style was that, when descending into the underground, the Soviet people should feel as if the Metro stations were already in the light communist ‘Kingdom of God’ not only functionally, but also aesthetically. So, the Moscow Metro is a good example of the interweaving of technology, aesthetics and propaganda.

The leadership of the Soviet Union saw the aesthetic of the Moscow Metro design as the continuation of the Soviet monumental propaganda,²³ as the possibility to create a new, ‘Soviet’ type of palace which was intended not for the elite but for ordinary people. That is why the architects of the early Moscow Metro stations created beautiful artistic images: all the stations of the 1930s were decorated in monumental and solemn style with marble floors and high ceilings with monolithic neoclassical pillars. The special construction of metal columns and arches, granite, and, in some cases, semi-precious minerals in the decoration of the stations turned the Moscow Metro into a majestic work of art, an underground museum of art. Such a high artistic level of the Metro was possible, because this important state project was realised by the most talented Soviet architects, many of whom had become famous for their artistic achievements even before the October Revolution in 1917. For example, Yevgeny Lancere, academician of painting, contributed to the Komsomolskaya Station. He created the big majolica panel ‘Metro Builders’. The



Fig. 2: Ceiling of Moscow Metro station Mayakovskaya, *High Jump*, one of 34 mosaic created by Deineka on theme *The Day of the Soviet Union*, 1938. Photo: Felix Richter, 2015

design of the Komsomolskaya Station was entrusted to the patriarch of Soviet architecture, academician of architecture Alexei Shchusev who was the author of the Lenin Mausoleum in Red Square. The ceiling of Komsomolskaya Station was decorated in Baroque style and supported by 68 marble columns; the floor was covered with pink granite and the entire hall was illuminated with massive multi-track chandeliers (Fig. 1). As some scholars wrote, the idea was to present to visitors the Soviet social order through painting and sculpture:²⁴ in particular, the famous painter Pavel Korin created eight majolica mosaic panels for Komsomolskaya Station which depicted the great Russian commanders of the different epochs, such as Alexander Nevsky, Mikhail Kutuzov, Kuzma Minin, Dmitry Pozharsky, and others. It was like a visual textbook on the history of the Russian military glory. The Communist party saw the Moscow underground of the 1930s as a tool to teach Soviet citizens to be good ‘Soviet patriots’: images of the ‘best heroes of the past’ were used as models of ‘right behaviour’.

Another famous Soviet painter, Alexander Deineka, created the sketches for 34 mosaics at the Mayakovskaya Station which were realized with strong romantic pathos. Those mosaics were made in the niches of the ceiling, on the general theme *A Day of the Soviet Union*, and they included *Two Airplanes*, *Aircraft over the Spasskaya Tower*, *Two Airplanes and a Blossoming Apple Tree*, *High jump* (Fig. 2). Mostly Deineka’s mosaics were devoted to the sky, to aviation, to skyward movement, because the aspiration to conquer the sky was the most remarkable feature of the Soviet Union in the 1930s.²⁵ The rare semi-precious mineral rhodonite was used for the decoration of that station. The aesthetic style of Mayakovskaya Station was art-deco. In 1939, the station project received the Grand Prix at the World Exhibition in New York.

Another beautiful station, Ploshchad’ Revolutsii, was opened in 1938; it was decorated by the famous Soviet artist Matvey Manizer. Manizer created 80 bronze sculptures of ‘new’ Soviet citizens, creators of the Socialist order which included revolutionary sailors, signalmen, border guards, workers, and athletes. They were placed in the arches of Ploshchad’ Revolutsii Station. These bronze statues represented the Soviet mythological Pantheon: military and political heroes of the October Revolution and the civil war in Russia (1918–1921), heroes of labour and science, and images of happy Soviet families. Real Soviet ‘heroes’ of the 1930s posed for Manizer’s sculptures; for example, Manizer created a statue of a border guard with a shepherd dog from photographs of the famous Soviet border guard Nikita Karatsupa and his smart dog. The real border guard Karatsupa was unusually popular in the Soviet mass culture of the 1930–1950’s as the hero who arrested more than 500 violators of the Soviet border and a founder of service dog breeding in Soviet Union. In this way the authentic Soviet history was depicted in metal.

The Novokuznetskaya Station, another architectural marvel, was built as a bunker station, more than 37 metres deep; it was put into operation in November 1943. The mosaics which pictured engineers checking a new tractor decorated the ceiling of the station, girls collecting apples in the beautiful garden, steel-makers smelting metal for rails. The most unexpected fact is that the pictorial mosaics of the Novokuznetskaya Station depicting the peaceful life of the Soviet people were created at the most terrible time for the Soviet Union during World War II. According to the sketches by painter Alexander Deineka, the mosaics were created by the mosaicist Vladimir Frolov who had made



Fig. 3: Ceiling and luxury candelabras of Moscow Metro station Komsomol'skaya, 1935. Photo: Felix Richter, 2015

mosaics for St. Petersburg churches before the October Revolution and used the same techniques for the Moscow Metro.

It is important to take into account that the architecture of the Stalinist period should perform the important function of propaganda to prove the advantages of the Soviet way of life, and the functions of the political propaganda were performed in the luxurious interiors of the stations showing the stylistic features of the Baroque, Art Deco, Rococo, and French Empire. Much attention was paid to the artificial lighting of underground aprons and passages (Fig. 3). Moscow Metro architecture incorporated images of plenty and respectability, supposed hallmarks of Soviet civilisation. The aesthetic magnificence of the stations was subordinated to the political task, the education of patriotism among the Soviet people and their faith in the socialist state. Seven new stations²⁶ of the Moscow underground were built during the wartime despite the difficult financial situation in the country. This had great ideological importance for Soviet citizens who were meant to be proud that the Metro construction was not stopped even in the most difficult times. So, to sum up, the Soviet art of the Stalin period was not only highly artistic, but also highly ideological at the same time.

3. Mystic interpretations of the aesthetics of the Moscow Metro

The mystic and religious aspects of Stalin's society began to be discussed in the 1990s when the post-Soviet society discovered the topics of religion, spirituality, mysticism, and others. The traditional view is that the Soviet society was atheistic and anti-religious. However, if we observe the design of the Moscow Underground, we can see many allusions to the Christian ideas of paradise, the sacred martyrs, heroes and the medieval Orthodox concept that 'Moscow is the Third Rome'. The first mention of the latter was found in the letter written by the Pskovian monk Philophei in the 16th century: "This is the Roman kingdom: two Romes have fallen, the third stands, but there will not be the fourth."²⁷ In spite of the fact that Philophei devoted his words to

the religious role of Moscow, they were typically interpreted in the political sense,²⁸ as a triumphant ode to the new empire and as the promises of Moscow's great fate: the first Rome was destroyed by barbarians; after the fall of the 'Second Rome' Byzantium, Orthodox Russia became the 'Third Rome' of Orthodoxy. It would have seemed natural that this religious concept should be forgotten in the Soviet state as a thing of the bygone epoch of the Russian Empire. However, the discourse and the visual analysis show that this influential medieval Orthodox concept was transferred into the post-revolutionary idea that Moscow should be the centre of the world's communist movement just as pre-revolutionary Moscow had been the centre of Orthodoxy.

Another medieval Orthodox concept, that of Moscow being the New Jerusalem,²⁹ was transformed into the idea of Moscow as a 'holy city' for the communists of the whole world (which was realised in the early Soviet concepts of the 'World Revolution' and the Komintern as the organisation of the communists worldwide under the leadership of Moscow). I see the conceptual parallels: due to the fact that the Soviet communists of the 1920–1930s dreamed of the 'World Revolution', Moscow became its origin, just as Jerusalem was the origin of early Christianity. The Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev found similarities between the Christian and communist faiths.³⁰ So, religious believing in Christ could be equalised with believing in the 'World Revolution' in the Soviet context. Just as the Orthodox Church depicted saints and martyrs in icons, the Soviet state created its own iconography of saints, martyrs and heroes. This iconography consisted of picturing people of the past and present who were considered by the Soviet ideology as the most praise-worthy, as role models for the citizens. These 'Soviet saints and heroes' were presented, in particular, in sculptures and interiors of the Moscow Metro of the 1930s to 1950s.

Another specificity of the Moscow Underground of the Stalin period was that it was meant to represent 'paradise', although not Christian but Soviet paradise. For example, Alexander Deineka used the images of people flying in the ceiling mosaics of the Metro stations and this was an obvious analogy of the Christian angels. The ceiling, the top, traditionally sym-

bolised Christian paradise, the bright blue colour in mosaics stood for purity and innocence. So, the visitors of the Moscow Underground felt as if they were in Christian heaven, but among 'communist angels' flying in the sky. A contemporary observer with an open mind will discover the religious and mystic allusions in the Soviet ideological symbols: for example, the star, the most common symbol in the Moscow Metro, referred to the designation of a harmonious person by Leonardo da Vinci and to the symbolism of the pentacle as image of protection and security. Another well-known symbol, the sickle and hammer, is known as the Soviet symbol personifying the unity of the workers and peasants. However, those signs had a long historical tradition. I cannot describe all mystical and mythological aspects of the Moscow Metro in this short paper; however, the main conclusion is that sacral symbolism was an integral but an unobvious part of Soviet public culture.

Summary

In summary, the majority of the Moscow Metro stations of the 1930s to 1950s are the most iconic today. Each station of the Moscow Underground of the Stalin period was devoted to a certain historical theme which was meant to inspire the Soviet people for new achievements or should visualise their heroic past. It means that aesthetic and ideological functions in the Moscow Metro of Stalin's time were closely intertwined.

Due to the fact that Stalin turned the belief in communism into a religious order, the religious and sacral symbols which were removed from the Soviet official public space, returned to Soviet architecture as a hidden part of the new Soviet aesthetics (for example, images of Soviet women as Madonna and Child). The construction of the first Metro in Moscow was equated by the Soviet government with one of the stages of the biblical creation of the world, the difference being that it was the 'new Soviet world', in which the 'new Soviet man' played the role of Adam. The analysis of stained-glass windows, mosaics, sculptures and other elements of the interior in the Moscow Metro of the 1930s to 1950s allows us to find that there are strong mystical, mythological, religious, Masonic, and even magical motifs, though in the Soviet interpretation. Today, the Moscow Metro can be considered as the city attraction, as the memory of a bygone historical epoch and the legacy of prominent architects and artists.

Die Moskauer Metro der Stalinzeit (1934–1953). Ästhetische Merkmale, politische Bedeutung und kulturelle Symbolik

Der Aufsatz analysiert die Baugeschichte der Moskauer Metro während der Stalinzeit und ihre ästhetischen und kulturellen Merkmale. Die Autorin argumentiert, dass die Architektur der Moskauer Untergrundbahn die ästhetischen und politischen Ansichten der 1930er Jahre in der Sowjetunion widerspiegelte: Die Idee, einen ‚neuen Sowjetmenschen‘ zu schaffen, zeigte sich darin, dass die Metro-Architektur als ‚sozialistischer Palast‘ gebaut wurde. Darüber hinaus verfolgt der Aufsatz die These, wonach man die Architektur der Moskauer Untergrundbahn im Kontext der religiösen und mystischen Symbole analysieren kann, die in der Gestaltung der Moskauer Metro zu finden sind.

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² НОЙТАТЦ, Московское метро [NOJTATZ, Moscow Metro], 2013, p. 11.

³ Vladimir Mayakovsky, Mikhail Svetlov, Semen Kirsanov, Samuil Marshak, Elizaveta Tarakhovskaya devoted their verses and poems to Moscow metro.

⁴ Lion Feuchtwanger visited Moscow in 1937 and wrote about the Moscow Metro in his book *Moscow 1937*, in a chapter *Work and Leisure* (see: FEUCHTWANGER, Moscow, 1937).

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¹⁰ NEUTATZ, *Moskauer Metro*, 2001.

¹¹ SOBOLEVA, *New Soviet Man*, 2017.

¹² In the literary works *How Steel was Tempered* by Nicolai Ostrovsky in 1934, *The Pedagogical Poem* by Anton Makarenko in 1935, in sculptures of Vera Mukhina and paintings by Alexander Deineka, in the films directed by Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Alexander Dovzhenko, the brothers Sergey and Georgij Vasilyev and others.

¹³ НОЙТАТЦ, Московское метро [NOJTATZ, Moscow Metro], 2013, p. 20.

¹⁴ WOLF, *Russia’s Revolutionary Underground*, 1994, pp. 16–18.

¹⁵ НОЙТАТЦ, Московское метро [NOJTATZ, Moscow Metro], 2013, pp. 40–44.

¹⁶ NEUTATZ, *Moskauer Metro*, 2001, pp. 55–125.

¹⁷ WOLF, *Russia’s Revolutionary Underground*, 1994, pp. 80f.

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²⁸ КЛИМЕНКО, Концепция „Москва-Третий Рим“ [KLIMENKO, Concept “Moscow is the Third Rome”], 2013.

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