



## ARCHITECTURE OF THE 1930s – 50s AND THE FATE OF AN ARCHITECT IN RUSSIA

**M**arking a headline of my communication in such a way, I might have been too bold and self-sufficient. I take a heavy burden of general discussions about the fate of an architect, who was obliged to live and work during one of the most complicated and tragic periods in the Soviet history and I should admit that from the very beginning.

But there are some reasons which pushed me to formulate the theme of my paper in such a way. First of all, I find it possible to step aside in a headline from a widely used term 'Stalinist architecture', which gives bright, "meaning" associations (by the analogy, for instance, with the style of Louis XIV, Napoleon Empire in France or architecture of the Petrine time in Russia), being only a sign for a part of the historical and stylistic process in the development of the 20th century architecture. Numerous investigations, publications and exhibitions which were carried out during the last decades in western Europe (but not in the USSR or Russia), prove this fact. Soviet architecture of the 30s-50s is considered to be one of the branches in art, as a result from a totalitarian regime, an international style of the "totalitarian culture" (in Germany, Italy, China and other countries) as well as one of the classicist versions in its global context.<sup>1</sup>

For a conference initiated by ICOMOS, a scientific, non-governmental organization, which tries to protect world heritage monuments on the basis of definite value categories, – it is also logical to examine this phenomenon as an historical process and not only as an outcome of absolutism, tyranny and political dictatorship. It is important to look at the heritage of the Stalinist period as a field of creative activity, as one of the images of culture (Russian in this case), which found itself in the severity of limitations, in dramatic aspects of social and political life and to give to it professional appraisal.

However, the international status of the Berlin conference turns to be appropriate for the term of "Stalinist architecture", because for the other countries (of the eastern Europe and the Baltics, partly for Germany) it carries the "colonial" shade and the seizure of professional field of architecture during the post-war period. Therefore, for these countries 'Stalinist architecture' is an introduced notion, which demands different criteria in its evaluation.

The other key-word that I have chosen seems a little bit solemn: it concerns the idea of a personal "fate". It has the

capacity to combine three main aspects: the course of life in the sense of a biography, the development of an architect as a creative personality as well as the biography of structures built by him, in a broader sense – the fate of a master's heritage.

Obviously, this theme is boundless. So, two guide-lines are chosen for brief examinations:

1) the attitude towards "heritage" during the 30s-50s and its interpretation in the more or less eclectic architecture of the Stalinist cultural period;

2) the fate of the Stalinist architecture and the present attitude to it as a property.

These two poles will coordinate a link between the creative work of an architect, his position in the society and the built environment of that time.



*Hotel Leningradskaya in Moscow, detail*

The discussion on the Stalinist architectural heritage is predetermined not only by the lack of sufficient time distance, but first of all by an inadequate knowledge of this phenomenon. Till now, our historiography, which has a considerable amount of publications and sufficient factology, does not provide a clear scientific evaluation of these three decades, with some rare exceptions.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, it had been

under ideological and political pressure, on the contrary, bore the reflexions of the Stalinist regime and sometimes directly associated with the mass terror in the country. Both these tendencies do not cover the field. Unfortunately, an objective history of the Soviet architecture has not been written during the last decade.

As to the wave of interest to this event in the west, which after the investigation of the Russian avangarde and puristic image of Constructivism had moved consecutively to Stalinist architecture, there is a shade, in spite of many positive results of this action, of an amusing fashion for the Socialist Realism. Sometimes this theme is developed into ironical, almost kitsch versions of an exotic, half-barbarian aesthetics of the "Communist" style.

For such an approach, which had been spread also in Russia, there are certain reasons. Even the texts of resolutions on architecture and architectural publicism of these years are striking with their rhetoric, being out of the frames of the real culture, a vocabulary almost out of the meaning and artistic implication, a plenty of Soviet wording, which

◁ L. Polyakov, A. Boretski, *Hotel Leningradskaya in Moscow, 1949-1953, Neo-Russian replica of the Stalinist sky-scraper*



*St. Virgin's Assumption in Pokrovka street (Moscow 1696-1699), an outstanding building of the Russian 17th century, destroyed in 1936*

seems to close an opportunity to speak about architecture of the 30s-50s as about the field of art. This is one of its paradoxes, a specific doublemeasured space of a thus created 'game'.

On one level there were party slogans, absurd for a normal ear, and heavy sculptural compositions with all the figurative attributes, characteristic to the so called socialism. On the other, parallel level, there was creative and intellectual work, natural for architects. It was marked with high professionalism, which had been driven into the tough frames of thematic and stylistic limits.

The existence in these two levels was a condition for creative and physical survival in which superficial, verbal "camouflage" had been a password, giving the possibility for action. For instance, in order to publish for the first time in Russian language 'Entretiens sur l'Architecture' in 1938 (the value of this book does not require any commentaries), Viollet-le-Duc was called in the preface "an ordinary French bourgeois with narrow social mental outlook and hide-bound philistinian social positions", and the book itself – "a severe denunciation of the architect's creative work fate in the capitalist conditions".<sup>3</sup> The evident absurdity of these remarks was clear. But in comparison with the authentic text of an outstanding French architect and restorer of the 19th century it was a lesser sin to write such commentaries, than not to publish this book in Russia at all. A similar pattern of dualism can be illustrated with numerous examples in different fields of creative work.

The task of an investigator is to understand this double-measured language of an epoch and to do justice to those who had to speak it, without violating the ethical borders. It concerns as much the late constructivists, as the architects

of the Stalinist style. The assumption that the whole Stalinist era was a period of the persecution of true creators (which it was indeed) nevertheless simplifies the situation, and the position of many talented artists, working at this period, is reduced to a simple conformism.

To apply this dualistic model to the life biographies is more difficult. Until now there are many unknown and vague facts even in the life stories of the best architects. However, a comparatively small amount of repressions towards architects is surprising as well as their insignificant emigration after 1917 from Russia, compared to the mass flight of intellectuals.

This is usually explained as a need for architects for "the arrangement of a new life" and their own wish "to create in a different way as before". The work in the USSR, the "Promised Land" according to Le Corbusier and to many other foreign specialists (H. Mayer, H. Schmidt, E. May and others) preserved until the mid of the 30s "Température moscovite, atmosphère parisienne".<sup>4</sup>

But the résumé which has been recently done – "Tyrens have always loved architects"<sup>5</sup> – automatically puts architects in the service of the repressive regime and turns them into direct participants in producing the mighty machine of suppression. To what extent is such an opinion correct? Does it have a right for existence in its ruthless straightforwardness? Yes and no. Yes, because only architecture (differing in that point from fine arts and music) is always obliged to obey the orders of the client, otherwise its material existence stops and turns into its own immaterial paper shadow (the phenomenon of "paper architecture"). No, because art and human psychology never follow a strict scheme.



*Redeemer Cathedral at Moscow, built after the Napoleonic War, destroyed during the Stalin era*

Looking at the faces of many architects from the so called Stalinist Pleiad – some enlightened by the pre-revolutionary education and experience and others – with the features of spirituality and artistic intellect of the new generation in Russian culture, I try to understand the complexity of their dilemma, either to be professionally unrealized<sup>6</sup> such as E. Lissitsky, V. Tatlin, I. Leonidov, and partly of K. Melnikov or, with a submission to the power, always peculiar to architecture, have chosen a compromise approach. Having made such a choice, going through the blows of the party resolutions on the ‘Socialist Realism’ (1932), ‘Creative Intelligentsia’ (1946), the ‘formalism’, ‘Struggle with the Cosmopolitanism’ (1948), – they managed to preserve the status of architecture, its professionalism, and to revive the social reputation of the profession of the architect.

The duality of this situation was also characteristic for the treatment of the architectural heritage, and had revealed itself both in a frank nihilism and utilitarian use. On the one hand, the Stalinist epoch was marked by tremendous losses of outstanding buildings of Russian architecture. From the mid 20s a massive repression of monuments began. It was an unprecedented political action, which had realized literally the revolutionary slogan about a break with the culture of the past. According to the evidence of a special commission of the USSR Academy of Architecture, between 1917 and 1940 “in the city of Moscow some fifty percent of architectural monuments were destroyed and a number of unique links essential for the study of history and development of the architectural skill of the Russian people were obliterated.”<sup>7</sup> It is notable that this comes from an “official” statistic of the Stalinist period. Many of the latest publications reveal terrible facts of vandalism, which were sup-

pressed for decades. So, already in 1930 seventy percent of the monuments were taken off from the register of protected monuments. In Moscow alone seven hundred monuments of architecture and three thousand historical buildings were destroyed. Of the 929 churches that were in Moscow in 1917, 493 churches and chapels were demolished, 278 were closed and totally neglected according to statistics of the 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

In parallel to this action, the destructive impulse that seems to be characteristic for many artistic trends of the early 20th century, gained ever greater force and the Russian constructivism occupied leading positions among them. One of its essential methods succeeded by architects of the Stalinist era, consisted in a discord with existing urban fabric, a statement of conscious opposition of new architectural forms and spaces to the principle of successive inheritance. In superposition of this creative programme with political and ideological demands of the Soviet regime, there was the strongest outcome of destructive energy.<sup>9</sup> Even architects of academic trends pleaded for “clearing” the city from the historic buildings. Such a mood was not only supported by the official power, but also provoked by it. Those architects who dared to speak frankly against these senseless and barbarious steps (V. Semenov was calling for reason: “Reconstruction demands decisive measures. Surgery is required, but when you need a surgeon, you do not call for the executioner.”)<sup>10</sup> were pushed aside from a work, in a best case. The defence of moral and civil positions demanded courage and was similar to balancing between a liberty and confinement.

In this context a splash of scientific and research interest to heritage at its large looks like a paradox, a typical Stalin-

ist "game" that is ambiguous, but at the same time – a naturally determined creative phenomenon. In the emotional sphere it can be considered as a reflexion on the physical destruction of the national Russian culture, as an in-fill of thus formed cultural vacuum, and also a search for architectural harmony in classical heritage. But in practice there were direct utilitarian goals to form a scientific basement for the so called method of "Socialist Realism". Among its principles, as K. Alabyan had defined them in 1936, there were: truth in architecture, use of classical heritage, nature as an integral part of the architectural ensemble, national forms in architecture, a synthesis of the arts and the use of high technology.<sup>11</sup>

The foundation of the Academy of Architecture in 1932 became an event. Together with professional architects, the best academic forces, scholars and art historians were involved in its work. The forms of historical architecture, in the classical canons became the subject of general interest. Fundamental research, possibly the best that has been written in Russia since 1917 was created under the shadow of "Socialist Realism", the works of A. Gabrichevsky, M. Alpatov, V. Zubov, N. Brunov, A. Bunin and other authors. For the first time after the reign of Catherine the Great the treatises of Vitruvius and Palladio were translated into Russian again, as well as Alberti, Vignola, etc. and of the etchings of Piranesi, priceless facsimile editions were reproduced. The works of many famous western authors were published, among them A. Brinckmann, A. Riegl, H. Sedlmayr, M. Dvoržak and other authors. The continuity of the Russian academic school in the study of Antiquity, later – of the Russian Middle Ages and Classicism was succeeded. The Academy and its Institute for the Post-Graduate Studies was one

of the last splashes of real Russian culture, a memory about its "Silver Age", which was never repeated.

Nevertheless, I should also mention that here, in the Academy, as well as in the Union of the Soviet architects, the campaigns against the differently minded and the "enemies of the people" were organized.

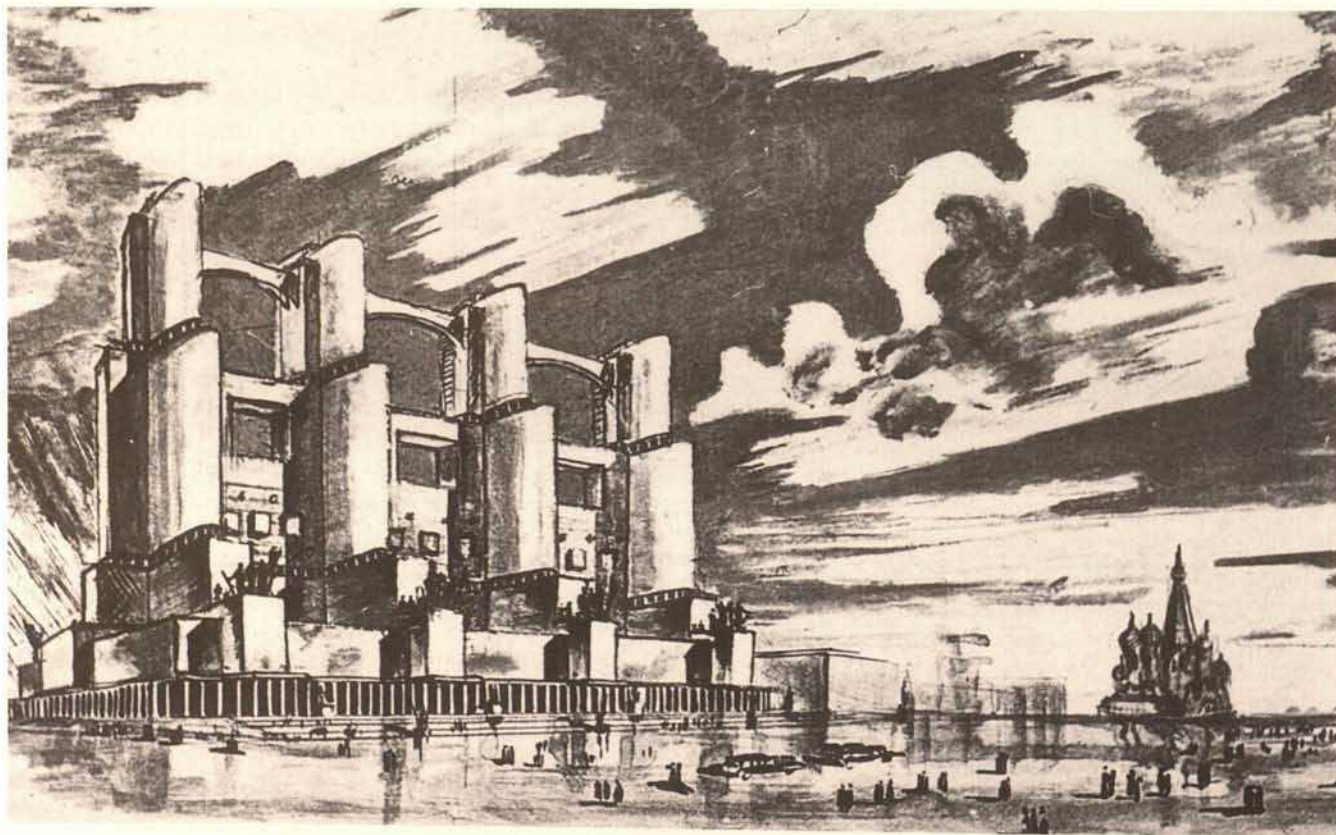
Another aspect, which was appropriate to the lack of state "order" for wide heritage protection as priceless national property, became the forming of new, "Stalinist", recently "done" historical monuments. They should bear the most important monumental quality – the image of "eternity" and "timelessness". Immaterial transparency of Constructivism was changed by corporal tangibility of "Classic", short-lived building materials – by an idea of solidity. The minimalism of the graphic work was forced out by the gigantic naturalized canvases, which led to the Utopian world of prosperity.

New "monuments" should stand near "real" historical structures, selected for preservation having the status of a national and political symbol. But there was no true continuity in combination of scales, volumes, masses and rhythm between them. The role of an architect, being now under the banner of historical tradition survival, turned to be as ruinous as before for saved fragments of the historical fabric.

In this conditions several thematic lines, being the visual metaphors of an architect's creative fate, were developed. It is necessary to name the most brightly expressed trends, among them:

1. The Neo-Renaissance and Palladianism.
2. The development of the classical heritage in its Greco-Roman versions. Two approaches are notable here: the

*V. and A. Vesnin, competition project for the Heavy Industry Commissariat, Red Square in Moscow, 1934: The concept of destruction and opposition to the existing historical ensemble is introduced.*



creation of new "Proletarian Classics" and the use of Classicism in its different metamorphoses (from the Pompeian grace in a form and drawing to the strictness of the European Neo-Classics and semi-official governmental style).

3. During the post-war period, after the campaign against the cosmopolitanism and a break with the western cultural traditions, the Neo-Russian style had appeared in its medieval and classicist versions.

Besides that, two other specific types should be stressed:

4. The development of architectural heritage in full variety, with a bright innovation in its interpretation.

5. The creation of symbolic, narrative images.

Only few architects were working within the frames of one "stylistic" trend (I. Zholtovsky, partly I. Fomin), but there were the examples of permanent change in value orientations (A. Shchusev). A specific type of personality and eclectic thinking were formed. The presence of historicism in the interpretation of architectural form should be stressed specifically.

The Stalinist heritage, this monolithic fabric consisting of real achievements and a big amount of frankly ungifted conjunctive structures, gained the symptomatic fate. The year of 1955 brought the repressive actions against architecture. The directory rejection from its "extravagances" was the beginning of a new circle of the persecution. Many architects were pushed aside from a work again. The Academy of Architecture was abolished. The Stalinist style, being already on a way of its inner transformation as constructivism was in the early 30s, had been driven by force into the unified faceless chaos. This time architecture had really stopped to be a field of art. The political "destalinization" became equal to the dismantling of architecture. Three dec-

ades of the classical line development had mirrored in the three decades of linear simplicity and degradation of profession.

The fates of architects, whose peak of creative activity had coincided with the mid of the century, were different. To those, who had been marked by pure talent, inner modesty and honest feelings, there is a deep piety among architects until now, as to the sign of high professionalism and culture. Some unrealized projects of that time were executed later. Many buildings are on the list of the national monument register, but their state arouses strong anxiety as the majority of the 20th century structures. The traditional "ruinization" of the constructivist buildings little by little became characteristic to some edifices of the 30s-50s. The theme of "eternity" is considerably shaken.

During the last years of a new "capitalization" of Russia, Stalinist architecture, despite some calls to destroy it, has consolidated its positions. The high prices in privatization of buildings are associated with it; their illuminated silhouettes are dominating in the cityscape. Mass enthusiasm for that epoch is revived on gigantic building sites, in the impetuous erection of copies of those monuments, that were dynamited in the 30s.<sup>12</sup> A national idea, supported by the centralized power, begins to exude in the images of architecture. The term "totalitarianism" is often sounded in the democratic press.

This paper should not be considered as an apology of Stalinism. It was however necessary for me to stress the independent spirit of architecture, that turned in the mid 50s towards a classical revival, with its thread of continuity to the 19th century tradition. The heritage of this period should be estimated according to the common criteria, pe-

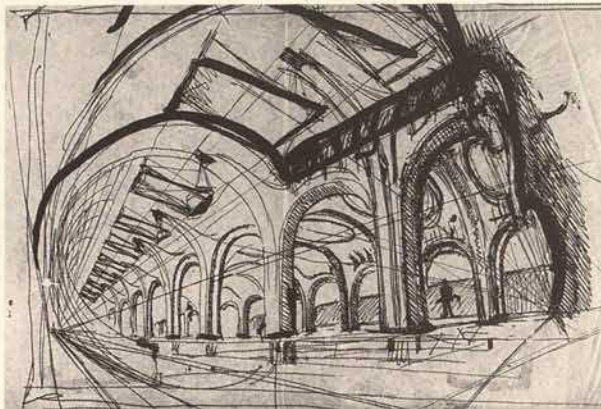
*Perspective of the historical centre of Moscow near the Kremlin, showing the Palace of Soviets, drawing by L. Rudnev. The new dominant contradicts to the traditional historical urban environment.*



cular to the 20th century monuments, where aesthetic and artistic appraisals are prevailing. Such an approach is faced to the personality of an architect and determines his fate in the historical perspective, the value and price of this life and personal creative outcome.

## Notes

- 1 B. Groys, *Utopia i obmen* (The Utopia and Exchange), Znak, Moscow 1993. I. Golomshtock, *Totalitarnoye iskusstvo* (Totalitarian Art), Galart, Moscow 1994. 'Tyrannei des Schönen. Architektur der Stalin-Zeit', Ausst. Kat. Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst, Wien, München 1994. 'Kunst und Diktatur. Architektur, Bildhauerei und Malerei in Österreich, Deutschland, Italien und der Sowjet Union 1922-1956', Ausst. Kat. Künstlerhaus, Wien, Baden 1994, 2 Bände.
- 2 A partly new interpretation of the Soviet architectural history was proposed in: A. Ikonnikov, *Architectura i istoria* (Architecture and History), Moscow 1993.
- 3 D. Arkin, *Predislovie* (Introduction) to: E. Viollet-le-Duc, *Besedi ob arkhitekture* (Entretiens sur l'architecture, translated into Russian by A. Sapozhnikova under the edition of A. Gabrichevski), Moscow 1938, vol. 2, pp. 7, 8.
- 4 J.-L. Cohen, *Le Corbusier et la mystique de l'URSS. Théories et projets pour Moscou, 1928-1936*, Paris 1987, p. 246.
- 5 A. Tarkhanov, S. Kavtaradze, *Stalinist Architecture*, London 1992, p. 10.
- 6 I mean material realization as a core quality of architecture.



A. Dushkin, a sketch for the *Mayakovskaya Metro station, Moscow*

7 *Arkhitekturnye problemi rekonstruktsii Moskvy* (Architectural problems in the reconstruction of Moscow), USSR Academy of Architecture, Moscow 1940, pp. 47-48.

8 Sorok Sorokov, compiled by P. Palamarchuk, vol. 1. Moscow 1992, p. 7. These figures also include the number of destructions which have occurred during the last decades. See also in English: W. C. Brumfield, *Lost Russia: Photographing the Ruins of Russian Architecture*, Durham, North Carolina 1995.

9 N. Dushkina, *Gedanken über das historische Schicksal Moskaus im 20. Jahrhundert*, in: *Die Alte Stadt*, no 3, Stuttgart 1992, pp. 195-209.

10 V. Belousov, O. Smirnova, V. N. Semenov, Moscow 1980, p. 94.

11 K. Alabyan, *Protiv formalizma, uproshchenchestva, eklektiki* (Against formalism, simplification and eclecticism), in: *Architectura SSSR* (Architecture of the USSR), no 4, Moscow 1936, pp. 1-3.

12 In 1993-1995 three historical buildings that were destroyed in the 30s, were reconstructed in Moscow: The Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan (17 c.), the Gates of the Resurrection (16 c.) with the Chapel of Our Lady of Iberia in Red Square and the Red Porch (16 c.) in the Kremlin. Also in the process of reconstruction is the Cathedral of Christ the Savior (19 c.), the biggest cathedral of Moscow, which was dynamited in 1931. N. Dushkina, *Reconstruction and the Architectural Profession in Russia. - Conservation Training. Needs and Ethics*. ICOMOS-CIF-Reports, Helsinki 1995, pp. 85-102.

*Project for the Academic Cinema of the USSR of Moscow by A. Dushkin, V.S. Beljavskij and K.S. Knjazev, 1936* ▷

A. Dushkin, *Mayakovskaya Metro station, Moscow 1938, an example of an innovatory approach to the heritage*

