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A Red City: Russian Jews and the Soviet Cultural Presence in Weimar Berlin

In Folge des Ersten Weltkriegs und den russischen Revolutionen von 1917 wurde Berlin zu einem der führenden Zentren der russischen Emigration. Im Jahr 1922 erweiterten Sowjetrussland und die Weimarer Republik die gegenseitige diplomatische Anerkennung und ebneten so den Weg für eine weitere Migrationswelle. Dieser Artikel legt nahe, dass russisch bzw. sowjetische jüdische Migranten eine Schlüsselrolle beim Ideentransfer zwischen den beiden Ländern in der frühen Zwischenkriegszeit spielten, gleichzeitig aber auch auf der Suche nach einer neuen jüdischen Kultur waren. Der Artikel untersucht den Fall des Künstlers El Lissitzky, der beispielhaft für eine Kohorte russländischer jüdischer Intellektueller steht, die sich in den 1920er Jahren am Ideentransfer zwischen der Sowjetunion und der Weimarer Republik beteiligten, und untersucht die Sozialgeschichte sich überschneidender russisch-jüdischer Migrantenkreise im Weimarer Berlin. Eine tiefergehende Auseinandersetzung mit diesem Forschungsdesiderat wird zu einem differenzierteren Verständnis des Kulturtransfers zwischen der deutschen, jüdischen und sowjetischen Gesellschaft in der frühen Zwischenkriegszeit führen.

After WWI and the Russian 1917 revolutions, Berlin emerged as one of the leading centers of Russian emigration. In 1922, Soviet Russia and the Weimar Republic extended mutual diplomatic recognition, paving the way for yet another wave of migration. This article suggests that while Russian/Soviet Jewish migrants played a key role in the transfer of ideas between the two countries in the early interwar era, they were simultaneously engaged in a search for new Jewish culture. Exploring the case of the artist El Lissitzky, illustrative for a cohort of Russian-born Jewish intellectuals who engaged in the transfer of ideas between the Soviet realm and the Weimar Republic in the 1920s, the article probes the social history of overlapping Russian-Jewish migrant circles in Weimar Berlin. A deeper exploration of the topic, still a desideratum, will forge a more nuanced understanding of the cultural transfer between the German, Jewish, and Soviet societies during the early interwar era.

The February and October revolutions of 1917 and the ensuing Russian Civil War (1917–1923) spurred an exodus of some three million people from the lands of the Russian empire. Alongside Constantinople and Paris, Berlin emerged as one of the major centers of Russian migration. By 1923, there were up to 600,000 Russian émigrés in Germany,

with up to 360,000 living in the capital.[1] Some researchers estimate that up to a quarter, (ca. 90,000), of them were Jewish. While this estimate might be too high, it is difficult to provide the exact number of Russian-born Jews within this immigration wave.[2] In any case, even if the precise numbers are subject to further research, early interwar Berlin was home to thousands of Russian Jews who migrated to Germany post-1917.[3]

As the central European capital closest to the Soviet border and an important transportation hub and cultural center, the German capital was an extremely attractive destination for migrants from the former Russian Empire. Hyperinflation in Germany (1921–1923) made the country especially appealing to export-oriented entrepreneurs. Many publishing houses, for instance, relocated from the revolution-torn former Russian lands to Berlin. Taking advantage of low labor and production costs and German technical expertise in printing, they produced multiple titles for export in Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew as well as other languages. This publishing boom in Berlin created employment opportunities for writers and translators, drawing an increasing number of migrant intellectuals to the city.[4]

After the Treaty of Rapallo (1922) established diplomatic relations between Soviet Russia and Germany, the two countries became major trade and cultural partners. Diplomats, spies and others in Moscow's employ flocked to Berlin. Emissaries of the Soviet government sent to Germany starting in 1922 included many Jews.

This article focuses on Russian-Jewish émigrés and Soviet-Jewish expatriates in Berlin. Unlike most émigrés, the Soviet representatives were relatively free to shuttle between the Soviet Union and Weimar Germany in the interwar era. While members of these two groups often ascribed to opposing ideologies and pursued a range of competing cultural agendas, they also had much in common. Many of them originated from the liberal, acculturated, or rapidly acculturating Jewish substrata in the Russian Empire. They were profoundly influenced, if not shaped, by the cultural modes, linguistic practices, and socialization models that emerged in late imperial Russia.[5] In Berlin, the Russian-Jewish and Soviet-Jewish intellectuals operated in multiple overlapping circles, moving between the Russian émigré circles, the German and the German-Jewish milieus, and the Soviet cultural/political sphere. I am particularly interested in their cultural

[1] See Robert C. Williams, "The Emigration," in Edward Acton, Vladimir Iu. Cherniaev, and William G. Rosenberg, eds., Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution, 1914–21 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 507–14; Jochen Oltmer, Migration und Politik in der Weimarer Republik (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 262.

[2] Karl Schlögel, Berlin, Ostbahnhof Europas: Russen und Deutsche in ihrem Jahrhundert (Berlin: Siedler, 1998), 78; Oleg Budnitskii,"Von Berlin aus gesehen – Die Russische Revolution, die Juden and die Sowjetmacht," in Verena Dohrn and Gertrud Pickhan, eds., Transit und Transformation. Osteuropäisch-jüdische Migranten in Berlin 1918–1939 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010), 157; Oleg Budnitskiy and Aleksandra Polyan, Russko-evreyskiy Berlin (1920–1941) (Moscow: NLO, 2015), 6; Tobias Brinkmann,"Ort der Übergangs - Berlin als Schnittstelle der jüdischen Migration aus Osteuropa nach 1918," in Transit und Transformation. Osteuropäisch-jüdische Migranten in Berlin 1918-1939, eds. Verena Dohrn and Gertrud Pickhan (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010): 26, 37–8; Oltmer, Migration und Politik in der Weimarer Republik, 220.

[3] I use the term "Russian" to relate to the fact that my research subjects were all born within the borders of the Russian Empire prior to 1917.

[4] Robert C. Williams, Culture in Exile: Russian Émigrés in Germany, 1881–1941 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 112–13.

[5] Yuri Slezkine, The Jewish Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 67–71; Benjamin Nathans, Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 334–8; Alex Valdman, Ha-gimnazistim: Hinuch, aktivizm ve-mekorot ha-inteligentsiya ha-yehudit ba-imperiya ha-rusit (Jerusalem: Magnes University Press, 2023), 191–212.

practices, especially when their actions crossed between the abovementioned environments in their pursuit of writing, publishing, and activism. To explore this dynamic, I will apply the concept of a "contentious community," a term that I expand upon below.[6]

The migrants and the expats inhabited the same spaces in interwar Berlin: intellectually, socially, and culturally. They mingled at Soviet Embassy receptions, frequented the same cafés, and published in the same Russian and Yiddish journals.[7] While they intensely discussed a variety of issues, ranging from internal Jewish concerns to general Russian émigré matters, many of them were profoundly engaged with a burning set of cultural and political questions concerning the future of Russia – or, more accurately by then, the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Embassy on Berlin's *Unter den Linden* became Moscow's main espionage hub in Europe, with much of its activity specifically targeting émigrés. Émigrés, in turn, were intensely preoccupied with the country they had left. Life in Berlin offered multiple social and cultural opportunities to connect to developments in the Soviet Union, be it attending the Soviet-backed First Russian Art Exhibition in 1922 or enjoying Soviet theater on tour.[8] All these factors resulted in a politically and culturally diverse Russian-Jewish migrant population in Berlin in the 1920s. This community included those who fled the Soviet regime due to fear of political persecution and were anti-Soviet; those who left for economic reasons and were anywhere from indifferent to sympathetic to the new regime; and, finally, those employed by the Soviet government, charged with promoting Moscow's policy. Regardless of their worldviews, they often remained connected to one another and also to their country of origin via familial, emotional, cultural, intellectual as well as economic ties.

I am particularly interested in individuals whose preoccupation with Jewish culture was combined with an engagement with the Soviet agenda, be they for it or against. The artist El Lissitzky (1890-1941), the writer David Bergelson (1884-1952), and the activist and playwright Isaac Steinberg (1888-1957) are some examples of this dual engagement. For my protagonists' and their generational peer group, Jewishness had a direct bearing on the educational, economic, and political opportunities available to them in the context of late imperial Russia. It also informed their intellectual and cultural interests throughout the course of their lives. These men and women were shaped by the evolving Jewish public sphere of fin de siècle Russia as well as by their socialization in late imperial Russian society. This socialization and the new educational opportunities it offered provided them

[6] Sean Chabot, "Framing, Transnational Diffusion and African-American Intellectuals in the Land of Gandhi," International Review of Social History 49 (S12) (2004): 23; idem, Transnational Roots of the Civil Rights Movement: African American Explorations of the Gandhian Repertoire (New York: Lexington Books, 2016), 16.

[7] See Shachar Pinsker, A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Karl Schlögel, Das russische Berlin: Eine Hauptstadt im Jahrhundert der Extreme (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019); Susanne Marten-Finnis, "Art as Refuge: Jewish Publishers as Cultural Brokers in Early 1920s Russian Berlin," Transcultural Studies 1 (2016): 25.

[8] Katerina Clark, Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 171, 226–7; 273–4; Shelly Zer-Zion, Habima ba-berlin: Misudo shel teatron tzioni (Jerusalem: Magnus University Press, 2015). For further reasons that Berlin appealed to migrants from the East, see Esther Gartner, Budapest - Berlin: Die Koordinaten Einer Emigration 1919–1933 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011), 13–14.

with multiple avenues for cultural and social activism.[9] Accordingly, the array of cultural and political agendas in Russian-Jewish émigré circles predated the 1917 Russian revolution, covering the entire spectrum of contemporaneous political loyalties.[10]

Whether by choice or by chance, Berlin became a temporary abode for them all. The peak of the cultural activity of individuals in the overlapping circles of Russian (Jewish) emigration and those in the Soviet cultural sphere occurred in the early 1920s. While some left Germany shortly after the hyperinflation abated in the winter of 1923/24, others remained until the later interwar period, prompted to leave the country by Hitler's rise to power in 1933. For some, embarking on this next round of migration took time. Destinations for the second (and sometimes third) migration ranged from the Soviet Union to the United Kingdom and France. Those who moved to London and Paris in the 1930s often eventually reached the US.

My approach is informed by previous research in the fields of Russian history, German Jewish history, and Eastern European Jewish cultural history. It utilizes concepts from the discipline of diaspora studies, specifically "critical community" and "contentious community." While each of these fields considers the group in question from its own perspective, overall, intellectual Jewish elites in post-1917 Russian emigration await systematic research.[11]

I suggest that the circles of Russian emigration, the sphere of Soviet cultural influence, and the German artistic and intellectual milieu converged. In that space, at the point of overlapping circles, we discover a group of cultural producers who were influenced by these three cultural environments and in turn exerted an impact on them. I will explore one case study representative of this phenomenon. Ultimately, I will seek to locate my hypotheses in the overarching context of early interwar era German-Soviet cultural transfer.

Over the last twenty years, historians of Russian Jewry have discussed the process of Jewish acculturation during the late imperial era (Nathans, Slezkine, Veidlinger, Horowitz, Gassenschmidt) as well as the reshaping of Jewish daily life and culture in the Soviet Union during the first decade following 1917 (Bemporad, Sloin, Moss). Among the works concerning the revolutionary era, however, only Moss examines specifically the Russian modes of Jewish culture in the former imperial lands. The chronology of his work, however, does not extend into the post-revolutionary era, nor does it explore émigré life.[12]

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[9] Nathans, Beyond the Pale; Brian Horowitz, Jewish Philanthropy and Enlightenment in Late Tsarist Russia (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008); Jeffrey Veidlinger, Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Slezkine, The Jewish Century; Valdman, Ha-gimnazistim.

[10] Jennifer Platt, "Some Issues in Intellectual Method and Approach," in Edward Timmes and John Hughes, eds., Intellectual Migration and Cultural Transformation: Refugees from National Socialism in the English-speaking World (Vienna: Springer Verlag, 2003), 7–21.

[11] Scholars began to touch upon the topic in the last decade, although systematic studies are still a desideratum. See, for example, Olaf Terpitz, "An Enclave in Time? Russian-Jewish Berlin Revisited," in Jörg Schulte, Olga Tabachnikova, and Peter Wagstaff, eds., The Russian Jewish Diaspora and European Culture, 1917–1937 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 179–99, which offers a broad overview. See also Stürmann, Osteuropäisch – jüdisch – sozialistisch, focusing on Menshevik Jews in Weimar-era Berlin.

[12] Benjamin Nathans, Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Veidlinger, Jewish Public Culture; Brian Horowitz, Empire Jews: Jewish Nationalism and Acculturation in Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century Russia (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); idem, Jewish Philanthropy and Enlightenment in Late Tsarist Russia; and Cristoph Gassenschmidt, Jewish Liberal Politics in Tsarist

While Jews constituted a significant part of Russian immigration to Germany, the role of the debate on the emerging modern Jewish culture in relation to Russian cultural life abroad remains a desideratum in much of the scholarship on the Russian emigration post-1917. Robert Williams's *Culture in Exile: Russian Émigrés in Germany, 1881–1941* briefly discusses Russian Jews in the context of Weimar in relation to their proclivity for cultural brokerage, and Marc Raeff, in *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939*, acknowledges in passing that Jews were active in continued Russian cultural production in exile.[13]

Most recently, Faith Hillis' *Utopia's Discontents: Russian Émigrés and the Quest for Freedom, 1830s–1930s* explores the story of radical Russian communities in Europe. Many of her protagonists are of Jewish origin – yet their story is told as that of being Russian radicals first, Jews second. Both Slezkine and Hillis focus on left-wing radicalism among Russian Jewry, leaving aside a broader range of affinities, including liberal, integrationist Jews who pursued an interest in Jewish culture in parallel with seeking the answers to the burning questions of Russian life.[14]

The relationship between German Jews and their East European coreligionists was historically fraught with complexity. Focusing on Eastern European Jewish migrants in Germany, broadly defined, scholars tend to overlook the provenance of and the resulting cultural differences among the various groups within this large migrant body.[15] As part of this perception, Russian-speaking Jews are often painted as part of the broader Yiddish-speaking Eastern European migrant strata that included Jews originating from the Polish lands, Galicia, and Hungary. Most research concerning Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to Germany focuses on the pre-First World War era, with the Weimar Republic period receiving only limited attention. Thus, in popular imagination as well as in scholarship, Russian Jews merged with other Jewish communities originating from Eastern Europe who made Berlin their home prior to the First World War.[16]

Were Jewish migrants from the Russian lands diasporic twice over, simultaneously belonging to both the Russian and Jewish diasporas? Following the political sociologist

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Russia, 1900–14: The Modernization of Russian Jewry (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995). For a thorough review of twenty years of scholarship on Russian Jewish history, see Kenneth B. Moss, "At Home in Late Imperial Russian Modernity – Except When They Weren't: New Histories of Russian and East European Jews, 1881–1914," The Journal of Modern History 84(2) (2012): 401–52; Elissa Bemporad, Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Andrew Sloin, The Jewish Revolution in Belorussia: Economy, Race, and Bolshevik Power (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Kenneth B. Moss, Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[13] Williams, Culture in Exile, 154–58; Paul Hanebrink, A Spectre Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2018).

[14] Slezkine, The Jewish Century; Hillis, Utopia's Discontents; on the typology of Jewish political affiliations, see Mendelsohn, On Modern Jewish Politics, 3–36.

[15] Steven Aschheim, Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923 (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999); Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Fin de Siècle Orientalism, the Ostjuden, and the Aesthetic of Jewish Self-Affirmation," in Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 96–139; Jack Wertheimer, Unwelcome Strangers: East European Jews in Imperial Germany (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Delphine Bechtel, "Cultural Transfers Between 'Ostjuden' and 'Westjuden': German-Jewish Intellectuals and Yiddish Culture 1897–1930," Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook 42(1) (1997): 67–83; Michael Brenner, The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 189-97, 200-5.

[16] Anne-Christine Saβ, Berliner Luftmenschen: Osteuropäisch-jüdische Migranten in der Weimarer Republik (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012).

Rogers Brubaker, "…those who consistently adopt a diasporic stance […] are often a small minority of the population that political or cultural entrepreneurs formulate as a diaspora."[17] This understanding of a "diasporic stance" puts the spotlight on intellectuals. While a minority within the broader migrant strata, they were highly influential and are at the center of my research. Yet this definition does not explain the diversity of views and agendas within the group in question. The concepts of critical community and contentious community might prove more helpful here. A critical community, as defined by sociologist of culture Thomas Rochon, consists of networks of intellectuals who "have developed a sensitivity to some problem, an analysis of the sources of the problem, and a prescription for what should be done about the problem."[18] Sean Chabot, a scholar of social movements and globalization, further developed Rochon's ideas in the context of his work on transnational diffusion between social movements, suggesting an evolved concept of a contentious community: "Contentious communities are groups of intellectuals and activists that identify an urgent social injustice, analyze its causes, develop possible remedies, and critically reflect on their ideas and actions. While members agree on the existence of a social injustice, they do not necessarily favor the same interpretations, worldviews, or strategies."[19] I suggest that an ideologically and culturally diverse group of Russian-Jewish intellectuals, émigrés and Soviet emissaries alike, formed a contentious community in interwar Berlin. Their preoccupation with the big questions of Russian and Russian Jewish life in the pre-1917 tsarist empire followed them abroad, continuing to occupy them in interwar Germany. The prism of a contentious community is especially helpful as we think about the shared patterns of behavior and social strategies of the individuals within this broadly defined group.

A particularly prominent example of an intellectual who generated the flow of ideas between the Soviet and German cultural spheres and engaged with the sphere of the post-1917 Russian emigration in the Weimar Republic is Lazar Lissitzky (1890–1941, in Germany 1921–1928). He is better known as El Lissitzky. Born in Pochinok in the Russian Empire, he, like his entire generation of Russian Jews, found the Russian educational system off-limits due to *numerus clausus*. Like many in his cohort, he was educated in Germany. Lissitzky was close to completing his studies in architecture at the Darmstadt Technische Hochschule when the First World War broke out. He had to leave Germany at once. Upon moving to Moscow, he eventually completed his studies and, during the war years, started making a name for himself as an artist. Lissitzky's pathbreaking avant-garde style had its roots in his early work illustrating Yiddish children's books published by *Kulturlige* in Kyiv during the war. This was followed by a collaboration with Shoshana Persitz's *Omanut* publishing house that also produced children's books – this time in Hebrew, first in Moscow, and later in Odessa.

In the early 1920s, we find Lissitzky in Germany. According to family lore, accepted prima facie by historians, he was the main Soviet cultural envoy in Germany in the 1920s. Allegedly, he was employed by Narkompros (People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, in

[17] Rogers Brubacker, "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora," Ethnic and Racial Studies 28(1) (January 2005): 12.
[18] Thomas Rochon, Culture Moves: Ideas, Activism, and Changing Values (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 22.
[19] Chabot, "Framing, Transnational Diffusion and African-American Intellectuals in the Land of Gandhi," 23, and idem, Transnational Roots, 16.

charge of both educational and cultural matters), headed by the then-powerful Anatoly Lunacharsky, and tasked with promoting Soviet art and rallying support for Moscow's agenda from intellectuals and cultural figures in Weimar Germany.[20]

Archival evidence of such an appointment, if it exists, has yet to be uncovered. However, even in the absence of direct proof corroborating the narrative of Lissitzky's official mandate in Germany, it is clear that the artist stood apart from the majority of his Soviet peers. Unlike most of them, he travelled widely in Germany, France, and Switzerland for the good part of the 1920s, and continued to develop export-oriented visual material while based in Moscow in the 1930s. In the interwar era, he built a reputation as Moscow's go-to designer for a host of international exhibitions, tradeshows and printed propaganda. Lissitzky was tremendously productive. His talent was recognized domestically with multiple exhibitions, including one held at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow in 1927. In addition, internationally, his work was on display in Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig, Stuttgart, Cologne, Essen, Basel, Paris, Amsterdam, and New York between the world wars.

Lissitzky's approach was bold and innovative. He pushed the limits of avant-garde art, interpreting the Soviet agenda in a striking visual language. At the same time, he continued to pursue his interest in Jewish culture throughout the 1920s. He published art criticism in Yiddish and produced illustrations for Yiddish-language publications, including collections of Ukrainian and Belarusian folktales in translation.[21] His case presents a confluence of artistic agendas. One, backed by the Soviet Union, focused on developing a modernist visual language with the broadest universal public appeal. The other, continuously informed by Jewish cultural and religious heritage, reflected upon it and articulated an artistic vision for modern Jewish culture.[22]

Lissitzky's perhaps most important work from that decade involves the design of the First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin in 1922. The exhibition was pointedly named "Russian" and not "Soviet". It showcased the work of émigré artists from the post-1917 wave along with works of artists based in the Soviet Union. The exhibition was conceived in order to raise funds for hunger relief in the Soviet Union, and was designed to send a message of continuity of culture between pre-revolutionary Russia with whom the affinities of the first-wave émigrés lay and Soviet Russia ruled by the Kremlin.[23]

The impact of the exhibition on the German art community and intellectuals was profound and long-lasting. It raised tremendous interest among visitors, and there was an unexpected personal benefit to the exhibition designer, Lissitzky himself. Sophie Küppers (1891-1978), a Hannover art dealer, was fascinated by Lissitzky's art upon seeing the exhibition, and decided she had to own his work.[24] Her persistence got her a painting by the artist-inventor, as Lissitzky liked to call himself. The financial transaction between

[20] See, for example, Marten-Finnis, "Art as Refuge," 25.

[21] Christina Lodder, "Ideology and Identity: El Lissitzky in Berlin," in Jörg Schulte, Olga Tabachnikova, and Peter Wagstaff, eds., The Russian Jewish Diaspora and European Culture, 1917–1937 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 339–65.

[22] Moss, Jewish Renaissance, 68; Hillel (Gregory) Kazovsky, The Artists of the Kultur-Lige (Jerusalem: Gesharim, 2003): 47–9, 192–203 as well as idem, The Book Design of Kultur-Lige Artists (Kyiv: Dukh i litera, 2011), 64–121. See also Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed, eds. Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003).

[23] Ewa Berard, "The 'First Exhibition of Russian Art' in Berlin: The Transnational Origins of Bolshevik Cultural Diplomacy, 1921–1922", Contemporary European History (2021), 30, 164–180.

[24] Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, "El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts" (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 11.

the German art dealer and the Soviet artist facilitated the acquaintance between the two that evolved into a relationship. They got married in Berlin in 1927 and subsequently moved to Moscow. Their son Jen was born there in 1930.

Lissitzky spent much of the 1920s working and teaching in Germany, including a stint teaching at the Bauhaus in Dessau. He was aware of his mediatory potential. In a letter sent from Moscow on July 9, 1925, he wrote: "Now I will also make full use of the personal relationships I established with the creative influences in Europe."[25] Lissitzky's marriage to Sophie Küppers (1891-1978) boosted his network in the German art world, securely positioning the Lissitzky-Küppers couple at the juncture between the German and the Soviet cultural spheres for years to come.

At the same time, during the 1920s, leaving the Soviet Union was becoming more of an issue than before. Lissitzky experienced some difficulties procuring a travel passport from the Soviet authorities already by 1926, alluding to this fact in a number of letters. His last visit abroad took place in 1930. The artist might have ceased travelling due to his worsening health. He suffered from tuberculosis from the early years of the Civil War, and was eventually to succumb to it in 1941.

Still, both in the 1920s and beyond, the Lissitzkys were widely connected in the German art world. Especially Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky put her considerable network and organizational talents at the service of her husband in the years that followed their nomadic 1920s. Her letters, held today at the Sprengel Museum in Hannover, illustrate both the vast reach of her network and her dedication to Lissitzky's art.[26]

Lissitzky is but one example of an artist whose work crossed state, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, mediating between the Soviet Union and the Weimar Republic during what possibly was the period of the most active cultural exchange between the two countries. His role, then, and that of others like him, is important in view of both German and Russian cultural histories. From the vantage point of Jewish history specifically, he was one of a cohort of Russian-Jewish intellectuals who resided in Berlin in the interwar era, preoccupied with articulating a vision for modernist Jewish culture.

Further avenues for research suggest a number of questions that can be productively explored. The central question, perhaps, is what kind of internal tensions accompanied the engagement of the contentious community members with multiple cultural spheres in interwar Berlin, and how did this engagement contribute to the flow of ideas between the Soviet, German, and Jewish societies.

The political, cultural, and economic links between Germany and the Soviet Union were actively rebuilt following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1922, and lead to an influx of official Soviet representatives to Germany. The growing cooperation between the two countries drew multiple Soviet emissaries to Berlin, impacting the émigré intellectual community. In future research, I am particularly interested in shedding light on the ties that emerged between the Russian-Jewish émigrés and Jewish representatives of various Bolshevik institutions in Germany and social spaces in which these two groups interacted.

[25] Lissitzky-Küppers, "El Lissitzky," 64.
[26] Lissitzky-Küppers, "El Lissitzky," 73 and 75-76.

In addition to engaging with the pro/anti-Soviet agenda, Russian-Jewish émigrés in Weimar Germany were active participants in a robust debate concerning the desired nature of modern Jewish culture. Did their voices, vocal in the 1920s, leave an imprint on Jewish culture beyond the confines of interwar Germany? What traces of their role in it survive, if at all, today, some hundred years after this period of intense cultural creation?

Early interwar Berlin, before the rise of Hitler and Stalin's regimes eventually stifled cultural activity in both Germany and the USSR, provided a window of opportunity for creativity and public expression. Migrant Russian-Jewish intellectuals' creative output peaked in these early interwar years, when free public discourse, bold cultural experimentation, and movement of ideas across borders was possible. While we can appreciate that they were positioned to facilitate connections between a number of different cultural and political spheres that arose in Weimar Berlin, the full impact of the intellectual and cultural exchange generated during this period is yet to be explored. Ultimately, such exploration will provide a more nuanced view of the transfer of ideas between the German, Jewish, and Soviet societies during the early interwar era.

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