

# At the Fateful Turn — Russian Architects and the Revolution of 1917\*

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**Abstract**—The article examines the little-researched period of the history of Russian architecture, on the eve and during the revolution. Generally, architects in Russian Empire were interested neither in a social cataclysm nor in the fall of monarchy. However even this inert professional group had played its role in that fateful events. With the decline in the amount of civil construction and patriotic propaganda, the politicization of an architectural discourse has taken place. Stylistic controversies received a new value, but plans for the rational re-establishing of war-demolished cities and even capitals, which had to be occupied (e.g. Constantinople) became even more important. In the March of 1917 this ambition to rearrange the world has been easily converted into plans for the new democratic organization of the architectural community throughout the country — all-Russian Union of Architects. This association inspired by revolutionary romanticism was cancelled in 1918, when Bolshevik era began.

**Keywords**—architecture; architectural press; 1917; Russian revolution; First World War; professional communities; All-Russian Union of Architects

## I. INTRODUCTION

Despite the obvious significance of the events of 1917 for the history of Russia, there is almost no research devoted to the place of architecture and architects in revolutionary events. It is noteworthy that such "concealment" is typical for both Russian (Soviet) and foreign authors. If in the latter case there is an interest in the first place to the artistic experiments of the 20s, which relieve foreign researchers from the need to talk about the situation of 1917 [1], then the tradition of the clear separation of pre-revolutionary and Soviet material is important for depicting the history of Russian architecture as national, so that the events of February-October (taking into account the decline in the volume of construction caused by the war) form a certain

period of "timelessness". As an exception it is possible to recall a very long article by Anatoly Strigalev in which the author, focusing attention on the period of the First World War, couldn't avoid talking also about the Revolution [2]. For Soviet historiography, which generally paid much attention to the period of the revolution and the role of various social and professional groups in it, it was the architectural community that turned out to be a completely unsuitable object for description: unlike writers or artists, architects, due to the peculiarities of their art, saw revolutionary events not so much as the factor of the liberation of creative work but as the moment of the collapse of the world order that allowed them to receive large commissions and move up the career ladder [3].

Apparently, the hundred-year historical distance that separates us from the events of the Russian Revolution today, obliges us to put long-overdue questions and seek answers to them. In 2018 one of the authors of this work, Yulia Starostenko, released the publication which for the first time considered an interesting episode from the history of the self-organization of Russian architects in the early twentieth century — the emergence and brief history of the All-Russian Union of Architects, born out of the thirst for renewal and reconstruction of life, so characteristic of the spring months of 1917 [4]. The article attempts to build a common narrative of architects' behavior as a professional corporation in the realities of the February-October of 1917.

## II. BEFORE THE OUTBREAK

The war prepared the public consciousness for the possibility of radical changes in the fate of the country. According to Anatoly Strigalev, it changed the situation in the architectural and construction sphere "radically" [5]. Many initiatives were buried under the yoke of wartime worries or became impossible due to the changes in the foreign policy. In particular, the history of the Congresses of Russian architects has ended: the fifth Congress, held in Moscow in 1913, has become the last. So, the construction regulation document, preparation of which has taken forty years, had not been released [6]. The next international

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Congress of Architects, which has been scheduled for 1915 in St. Petersburg, has not take place. As it is known, the capital of the Russian Empire has been already a city with a different name in 1915. The list of construction initiatives cancelled in connection with the beginning of the war should probably be very extensive. The most famous are the project of "New Petersburg" — the development of Goloday island, designed by Ivan Fomin and Fyodor Lidval for the Italian millionaire Riccardo Gualino, and the building of the new Nicholas train station, designed by Vladimir Shchuko.

However, it is worth noting, that the construction of Kazansky (Alexei Shchusev) and Kievsky (Ivan Rerberg, Vyacheslav Oltarzhevsky) train stations in Moscow has not been interrupted. In the nomenclature of projects considered in 1914 and 1915 by the Technical and Construction Committee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, there is not so much effect of the wartime as the inertia of the "Romanov Celebrations" (celebrating the 300th anniversary of the ruling dynasty in 1913), which resulted in the abundance of memorable chapels and monuments to the representatives of the dynasty (including the young Tsarevich Alexei) [7]. The architectural life concentrated in both capitals, flowed in the rearguard rhythm. The largest Metropolitan organizations — the Moscow Architectural Society (MAS), the Petrograd Architectural Society (PAS), the Society of Architects and Artists (SAA) — organized and conducted competitions, published magazines as usual. The subjects of the contest tasks were only partly related to the military everyday life: in 1916 SAA announced several competitions for the projects of military memorial structures — a stone, iron or wooden chapel, a monument on a mass or a single grave, as well as a memorial plaque for recording the names of the fallen [8]. At the same time, a competition for the "drafting of a stone church-monument, to be built in the places of battles or at cemeteries, to commemorate the memory of the heroes — soldiers of the Russian army" was held. The memorial church had to accommodate 400 people, have a belfry or a bell tower, as well as a crypt for the military graves. The organizers did not regulate the style of the project, however, made it clear that they would prefer to see the solution in the Russian Style and Neoclassicism [9]. The question of style in general became strongly aggravated in connection with war, clearly showing ideological conditionality of this concept. The topic of the battle of styles will be regarded later.

The influence of military realities on the architectural profession in Russia in the second half of the 1910s can be traced, perhaps, in three main aspects. First, it is the formation of patriotic rhetoric in the professional press, including sweeping criticism of German architecture (both modern and historical). Secondly, we are talking about a natural reorientation of architecture to the production of cheap and prefabricated buildings, demanded in the conditions of war — caserns, military towns, barracks, etc. Finally, in the third place, the requirements of wartime had an impact on architectural education, as students were threatened with conscription, and the educational process was constrained by cost-saving measures.

In the second half of 1915, since the great retreat at the front, the hardships of war time became noticeable in the rearguard. For example, the Academy of Arts has introduced measures to reduce fuel consumption, resulting in a new schedule according to which the classes in the workshops were limited to the daylight hours. The deadlines for the competition projects were extended, and the requirements of the task were facilitated (the need to draw the side facade and details was eliminated). The reason for such concessions from the academic administration was the need for students to combine their studies with other activities, such as unloading sanitary trains or listening to military-technical courses organized by the Society of Railway Engineers. Such a "split" between the needs had negative consequences for academic performance [10], and revolutionary events only aggravated the situation. In April 1917, it became clear that some of the graduates of the Higher Art School at the Academy are working as policemen, which is why classes are going in a "not quite normal manner" [11]. As a result, the deadline for the submission of works for attaining the qualification of an artist-architect was postponed from May to the end of October 1917.

### III. PRACTICE AND RHETORIC

The undeniable "merit" of the war was the extraordinary politicization of all aspects of life. Style related architectural discussions which have been extremely disturbing the professional community since the second half of the XIX century were no exception. It was a military clash with Germany and Austria-Hungary that created the context in which the ultra-modern Art Nouveau has been finally discredited. "For a number of years, with the help of clever booksellers-voyagers — one of the authors of the "Architecture and Art Weekly" wrote — the libraries of Russian architects have been flooded with the last cry of German fashion — the works of Otto Wagner, Olbrich, Ritt, in magazines and even architectural newspapers. Directed along the line of the weakest resistance, aimed at the mass of the least talented and persistent architects, this attack has ended with a major, albeit short-term success. The streets have got littered with impersonal uninteresting facades, decorated with factory-made ornaments, canelures, interrupted, restless cornices, bindings of ridiculous shape, strange proportions. ... But the fresh wind blew. The nightmare dissipated. Russian creativity has flowed onto a healthy path as prompted by the feeling, traditions and soul of the people" [12].

In March 1915, under the direct patronage of Nicholas II, the "Society for the Revival of Artistic Russia" has been established, with the aim of "freeing the everyday environment of life from the effects of recent times, full of attempts to reflect the samples of foreign art", and troublesome "on the purification of Russian speech, aimlessly littered with foreign words and expressions" [13]. The architects Alexei Shchusev, Petr Pokryshkin, Stepan Krichinsky and others known for their ecclesiastical works have also contributed to the creation of the society. [14] That ideological and artistic mindset realized in the forms of

Neo-Russian Style in the first place in the buildings of the Fyodorovsky Settlement of Tsarskoe Selo, which in fact has become the Imperial capital. In support of the appeal to the Pre-Petrine tradition in relation to church construction, there has also been a confessional argument: European styles were strongly associated with non-Orthodoxy, whose manifestations in Russian Church construction have been seen as inappropriate in the light of the war, as well as the naming of the capital in the German manner [15].

However, along with such national-nostalgic projects, there was a search for the image of the future, which was concretized in time, associated with the moment of peace. The ephemerality, which is inherent in any attempt to construct the unknown future, added a special feeling to the fantasies of Russian architects during the war and the revolution. We must admit that the futuristic dreams of the war years had more certainty than the dreams of the revolutionary months. If in the texts published before 1917, the authors argued about the need to restore the destroyed cities in a progressive way or about the future reconstruction of Constantinople (which would be returned to the bosom of christian civilization) [16], then after the February events the emotional intensity has already clearly prevailed over the attempts of rationalization. The main topic of professional discussions was the search for the new form of the existence of the architectural profession in the country, plunged into the chaos of total projecting and political demagoguery. A remarkable exception to this background was the speech of Oscar Muntz, who in an article entitled "The Dawn of Freedom and Eternal Art" tried to look into the future of architecture itself: "we are drawn to the public significance of monumental buildings, in the mighty self-sufficient forms which will be expressed eternal, universal, abstract truth. The need for such an expression will never run out, and the greatness of the historical moment, its immutable logic should encourage new searches in this plane and the manifestation of creativity outside the memorized routine, outside the random transient fashion" [17].

However, in reality, the architects in Petrograd had to solve more mundane tasks, although not less honorable. There is an episode took place in March of 1917 which clearly shows the ambiguity of the situation of architects in the capital engulfed in revolutionary fervor. The Petrograd Soviet decided to hold a "national, civil" funeral of the victims of the February events on Palace Square on March 10. The proposal to install two monuments symmetrically opposite the main facade of the Admiralty – one dedicated to the victims of the revolution, and the other to the Decembrists was considered [18], and the sappers have already begun to study the soil at the site of the planned burial. A group of architects and historians of St. Petersburg-Petrograd, United around the SAA, only with the support of Maxim Gorky have managed to convince the workers and soldiers' deputies of the expediency to move the cemetery to the territory of the Marsovo field, where it has been opened on March 23 [19].

#### IV. ARCHITECTS UNITE

The abdication of Nicholas II in March 1917 marked the beginning of the active work of the architectural community to create a fundamentally new organizational structure that could unite colleagues across the country. First of all, it has been a question of building a new system "from above", i.e. of creating an "Independent Department of Fine Arts", for which such an energetic artistic manager as Alexander Benois has fervently advocated [20]. The origins of this idea can be traced back to the pre-war period, when one of the resolutions of the VIII international Architectural Congress, held in Vienna in 1908, stated the following: "Governments are urged to establish special ministries of fine arts, or at least special offices (sections), specifically responsible for the interests of art. The staff of such ministries or branches should include the most prominent artists. Since architecture should be considered as the union of all fine arts, architects should be represented in the ministry or the department in the largest number" [21].

But the project of the "Ministry of Arts" has eventually failed, and the idea of self-governing organizations of creative workers, including architects, came to the fore. Two years before, a draft charter of the All-Russian Union of architects, compiled by Kharkiv engineer Alexander Ginzburg, has been published in the "Architecture and Art Weekly". Attention has been drawn not only to how this initiative was ahead of real events, but also the ethical maximalism of the author, who wrote: "the architect should not create housing unfit for people" [22]. None of the existing architectural societies included similar theses in their program. However, in 1915 Ginzburg's proposals could only be considered.

On the 9 (22) of March 1917 in Moscow at the meeting of MAS the idea of "the urgent need to form an All-Russian Union of Architects to unite all the builders in order to protect the conquered freedoms, professional interests and the broad development of construction life in the national sense of the word" was expressed [23], and already on the 16 (29) of March the Constituent Assembly of Moscow Architectural Groups and Individual Architects was held, which has been designated to "the immediate goals and objectives of the All-Russian Union of Architects", which covered almost all spheres of life of the architectural community from the development of construction legislation to "preparation and distribution of technical forces of the country in the elimination of war and other economic and construction difficulties that may arise" [24]. However, despite such extensive goals and objectives, the question of whether the Union would be utilitarian-technical or architectural-artistic, and the question of the relationship of existing organizations and the newly created Union at that time remained unresolved. Architects of Petrograd reacted differently to the news about the Union of Architects, which came to them from Moscow in early April. At the meeting of the SAA on 6 (18) of April, the idea was accepted by many with enthusiasm, and some members of the society even advocated that the SAA should undertake the preparatory work among the Petrograd architects. Those who were skeptical about this idea, "found that the issue

requires a detailed discussion in view of the already established unions, one-Artists and the other-Engineers, which both have architectural sections" [25]. Since the SAA decided to postpone the detailed discussion of the issue, the work on the creation of the Petrograd section of the Union of Architects has been undertaken by the PAS. Despite the fact that among its members there were also opponents of the new Union, on 11 (24) April at the meeting of the PAS it was decided that it "takes the work of the organization of the Petrograd Union of Architects, as an integral part of the General Union, just as the Moscow Architectural Society" [26].

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In the second half of April, Alexei Shchusev as Chairman of the Organizing Committee of the All-Russian Union of Architects (ARUA) visited Petrograd, where he made reports in the SAA and the PAS. In his reports, Shchusev clearly indicated the main reason for the creation of the Union: "the existence of individual architectural organizations caused a certain competition between them and put the Government in its construction assumptions in the difficulty of choosing" [27]. As a result, many decisions were taken without the participation of competent organizations, and a single union, whose competence would be recognized by all, should have eliminated this evil. This objective also led to the supposed distinction between the activities of old societies and the newly created Union. Shchusev noted that "the Union will not deal with such matters that belong to each individual of its member unions, but will only give general ideas to the government, guarding the most general architectural interests" [28].

Despite Shchusev's clear principles of the Union creation, the question of its relationship with existing organizations for Petrograd architects remained controversial. Indicative in this respect are the questions voiced on May 6 (18), 1917 at the constituent meeting of the Petrograd section of the All-Russian Union of Architects, in which representatives of all architectural societies of Petrograd have participated. These were the questions about what kind of Union has been created — Petrograd or All-Russian, who exactly was the "architect", and who would be

part of the Union — societies or individual architects. Only after a separate voting round established that that meeting has been the Petrograd section of the all-Russian Union of architects, that section has been approved [29].

Further work of two sections of the Union of architects — Moscow and Petrograd were focused on the development of the Charter of the new organization. And each version of the Charter reflected the specifics of the architectural communities of the two cities. In the Moscow version, approved on 6 (18) of May 1917, it was clearly stated that "members of the Union can be all institutions and individuals ... having architecture as their professional activity, regardless of the nature of their special education, understanding here also women who have received the appropriate special education." The architect thus was defined as "any person for whom the relevant competent authority recognized the responsible right to make constructions" [30]. The Petrograd version, approved on July 27 (August 9), did not mention the possibility of membership for institutions. According to the text, members could be "persons of either sex who have received due to their acquired education the title of architect, architect-artist, architect, Builder, civil engineer, etc., i.e. such a title, from which it appears that the person has devoted himself to architecture" [31]. Admission of persons without special education was allowed only on the recommendation of the Union's current members. Considering the fact that it was impossible to get a diploma of higher architectural education in Moscow, the Petrograd version was completely unacceptable for Moscow, where one of the leading architects and Chairman of MAS Fedor Shekhtel actually did not have a completed special education, but received the right to work by passing a special exam.

At the same time, both versions of the Charter reflected the changes that the goals of the Union had undergone in comparison with the very first ideas of March. In both versions of the Charter, it has been stated that the Union is approved "for the purpose of: 1) organized participation in public and political life of the Country; 2) promoting the development of national architecture in the artistic, scientific and technical relations and 3) to protect the professional and legal interests of architects" [32]. The localization of the goals on defending the interests of architects was the evidence that by the middle of 1917 the accumulated experience of interaction with the new authorities showed that only under the condition of the unity of forces it can eventually become an effective mechanism for the development of the architectural community.

The surviving materials show that the ARUA, or rather, its Petrograd section continued to function until the spring of 1918. During this time, the most significant event for the Petrograd section was received from the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy (VSNKh) invitation to participate "in the organization of the Central state architectural body", i.e. the future Committee of Public buildings of the Supreme Economic Council of the RSFSR (The Committee of Public Buildings and Public Works).



The Petrograd section was ready to cooperate with the VSNKh, provided that the new body would have been based on the principles proposed by the Union: the destruction of bureaucracy in management, the democratization of management (i.e. election to positions of responsibility, etc.) and the provision of the opportunity to make key decisions to "competent professional, technical and scientific organizations and institutions" [33]. The last principle was key, it confirmed the previous desire to preserve the independence of the architectural community from the state in matters of a professional nature.

However, after the VSNKh officially confirmed that "the Declaration of the Union is accepted completely", the Petrograd section has got a competitor in the person of the breakaway from the Moscow section of the Professional Union of Architects (PRUA) [34]. The organizers of this new Union of Architects Jacob Reich and Mikhail Kryukov proceeded from the fact that the existing Union of Architects is "non-proletarian". They believed that "the conflict between the existing ARUA and the nascent PRUA can be reduced in its basis... to the conflict of interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie – two sworn mutual enemies" [35]. The members of the Trade Union explained the necessity of their participation in the work of the council not by the need for professional solution of the relevant tasks, but by the arguments about the enormous influence of architecture on the people, and what its role as the highest art in the unification of all types of construction. In a specially prepared petition, they emphasized that a Trade Union is "the only proletarian organization of architects in Russia, excluding architects, contractors, and architects-entrepreneurs, architects, exploiting the work of their colleagues from its circle, standing for the widest democratization of architecture in the sense of bringing it into line with the requirements of the working masses" [36]. In fact, it was an attempt to win the sympathy of the new Soviet government not by professional knowledge and experience, but by demonstrating loyalty to the new regime. The fact that such an approach has brought the desired result is evidenced by the fact that none of the representatives of the ARUA of architects was among the employees of the Committee of Public Buildings and Public works. At that time in 1919, Mikhail Kryukov, was chairman of the Board of The Committee of Public Buildings and Public Works, and later became a member of its Executive Bureau [37].

## V. CONCLUSION

Thus, the Russian revolution and the architectural life in Russia in 1917 were intertwined closely. At the same time, not the revolution, but the war that has begun three years earlier was the factor of serious changes in the activities of the professional community. It was with the beginning of the war that the fate of the academic architectural school, poorly adapted to survive in conditions of lack of resources and instability, was questioned. The atmosphere of the wartime in the architectural and construction sphere was formed by the mobilization rhetoric and the practice on the arrangement of prefabricated objects both for military avantgarde and rearguard. And if in the latter case it is

worth talking about a certain shift in the craft of the architect in the field of industrial design, anticipating the ingenuity of the Avant-Garde, in the field of building value orientations and scales the mood of nationally oriented passeism, with the apology of the Russian style or "Patriotic" classics began to dominate. The share of industrial buildings has increased extraordinarily, while civil engineering has been in decline due to economic reasons. However, in the spring of 1917, the questions about what and how to build, have been replaced by much more topical ones about the organization of the self-government of the Corporation of Architects and construction specialists throughout the country, under the auspices of the All-Russian Union of Architects. The idea of uniting everyone turned out to be a utopia, a fraction of young and "independent" architects, who felt that the revolutionary era presupposes the priority of political declarations over craft and professional abilities quickly stood out. After the October revolution, idealists who wrote about the "dawn of freedom and eternal art" were pushed into the background by young populists from the PRUA.

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