Werner Richter, „Russians in Berlin“ (February 1927)

Abstract

Germany served as a temporary or permanent stop for hundreds of thousands of Russians in the years after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Some were Russian Jews fleeing the antisemitic pogroms unleashed by the political unrest; others were propertied elites who loathed the prospects of life under communism; and still others just needed a spot where they could strategize and raise money on behalf of the “White” armies of the counterrevolution who sought to defeat the Red Army of the Bolsheviks in the brutal civil war that had engulfed much of Russia by 1918. Berlin attracted the lion’s share of these refugees, exiles, and counterrevolutionaries, and this 1927 article took a jaundiced look back on how those Russian émigrés had affected life in the German capital.

Journalist Werner Richter acknowledged that Russians had made some vibrant cultural contributions to postwar Berlin, including three Russian cabarets and four or five newspapers, but he otherwise characterized this population’s impact in terms of the turmoil, violence, and criminality that it had ostensibly unleashed. In very broad brushstrokes, he characterized the Russian émigrés’ initial displays of decadent wealth, the hardships that they faced after having sold off the last of their assets, and their purported recourse to swindles, bribery, and inflation-era profiteering of various sorts. In particular, Richter called attention to the supposedly nefarious financial dealings of “Ostjuden,” Jews from Russia and elsewhere in eastern Europe, many of whom had concentrated in the central Berlin neighborhood known as the Scheunenviertel.

In Richter’s telling, Russian Jews first spotted the path to huge profits in the topsy-turvy stock market of inflationary Germany and then drew other Russian opportunists in their wake. He also invoked the names of several Russian Jews embroiled in infamous financial scandals that first came to light in late 1924—Julius and Henry Barmat, Michael Holzmann, and Iwan Baruch Kutisker. Historian Michael Geyer points to the way in which opponents of the Weimar Republic, especially the parties on the far right, but also including Communists, used these scandals to tar the SPD as corrupt and to perpetuate antisemitic stereotypes of Jewish profiteering. Hostility toward “Ostjuden” had long predated those scandals, of course. On November 5, 1923, thousands of unemployed Berliners had rampaged through the Scheunenviertel, vandalizing property and beating up residents, after agitators had spread the rumor that Jews had siphoned off all of the available unemployment benefits.

Richter’s piece revisited other moments that had anchored themselves in Berliners’ memories of the postwar Russian influx, including the presence of Czarist military uniforms on the streets of some neighborhoods during the time of Nikolai Judenitsch’s White Army offensive near Petrograd in 1919. His piece also recalled the 1922 assassination attempt against Pawel Miljukow that instead claimed the life of Wladimir Dmitrijewitsch Nabokow, the father of the great Russian-American novelist Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokow had invited the constitutional-democrat Miljukow to speak at a congress of Russian exiles in Berlin’s Philharmonic Hall, where he then leapt to prevent an exiled monarchist from shooting Miljukow. Richter did conclude on a positive note, though, with praise for the success of two “assimilated” Russian women who had contributed to German life: the opera singer Zinaïda Jurjewskaja, who died under mysterious circumstances in August 1925, and Sonja Jovanowitsch, whom Berlin’s fashion industry had crowned as its first “fashion queen” in December 1925.

Werner Richter wrote for a number of magazines and daily newspapers in the Weimar Republic, in addition to publishing several books on historical subjects. His article here appeared in the magazine *Das Leben*, which had reinvented itself in January 1926 to appeal more to women, and its covers almost

invariably featured an image of a quintessential “New Woman,” often piloting a motorcycle, playing a sport, dancing, or modeling the latest look.

Source

Russians in Berlin

by Werner Richter
with two photographs

The Russian invasion of Berlin began immediately after the great war ended for Russia, following the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. By the spring of 1918, Berliners could admire and envy elegant attachés from the Soviet embassy and well-fed Ukrainian grain agents on Unter den Linden. There was a brief hiatus in October 1918, when Ambassador Joffe’s briefcase, hurled at the sidewalk by a German lieutenant colonel masquerading as a porter, broke open, spewing Communist fliers far and wide — whereupon Mr. Joffe and his entourage were expelled. Just a few weeks later, however, the German Revolution arrived and with it a flood of Russians from two inexhaustible reservoirs: the disbanded prison camps and Germany’s poorly guarded or completely unmanned eastern borders.

It was naturally Berlin that exerted the greatest magnetism upon all of them, and it took but a few months for the Russian bourgeoisie fleeing the Soviets to install themselves here with all their accoutrements. One now saw the former upper-middle-class citizen of St. Petersburg, the high officials, that typical well-groomed figure with a carefully trimmed goatee, melancholy, brutal eyes and a slightly emphasized embonpoint wandering the Berlin asphalt in ever-new versions; their women dressed in heavy furs to the tips of their white-powdered noses, radiating the scent of unusually pungent perfumes, tripping daintily alongside them. In Berlin, Petersburg nights long past underwent a new (if milder) infusion. At times there were no fewer than three Russian variety theaters, which gave rise to a few seriously good ballet troupes; a motley flock of Russian restaurants and liqueur bars spread, with strictly drilled balalaika orchestras, warbling and stomping Gypsy choruses and menus in Cyrillic letters; four or five Russian newspapers appeared daily and argued angrily with each other.

After all, the foreigners had brought with them not just their joys and pleasures but also their emotions, desires and opinions: the tsarist and democratic fronts within the bourgeoisie driven out by the Soviets were soon reestablished. The Tsarists in particular organized a veritable *Etappen* system with transparent obfuscations such as “refugee aid“ or “employment agency” that they used to supply their favored “White” generals in Russia with additional personnel and materiél. From time to time it was even possible to meet these untiring warriors, such as General Avalov-Bermondt, a handsome, dark-haired operetta hero in picturesque Circassian garb, or his Berlin commander, General Biskupski, an athletic figure in elegant Western European civvies. Especially at the time of the Yudenich Offensive against Petersburg, some western Berlin neighborhoods appeared to be located directly behind the front, as they were suddenly crawling with officers and soldiers in German field gray, who however wore on their caps the large oval cockade of the Russian Empire.

Meanwhile, the work of the Russian democrats was far quieter, but by no means less intense. Under the leadership of the highly adept Milyukov, and hosted above all in the salons of Princess Bariatinsky, a circle of significant influence emerged; they sought and found support from the English officers of the control commissions, and ultimately also connections to American financiers. Auch General Skoropadski, once hetman of Ukraine by the grace of Germany, also joined them, dreaming of a democratic Cossack republic of South Russia. In these circles people thought little of military attacks against the Soviets and trusted instead that the new regime in Russia would in time be worn down, perhaps with the aid of economic blockades. The consequence was increasing tensions between the two émigré camps, since

ultimately the shots in the Philharmonie aimed at Milyukov struck down Nabokov, who had stepped forward and sacrificed his own life. The perpetrator was a young Guards officer from Petersburg. […]

Meanwhile, however, Soviet power had become consolidated to the extent it was unassailable, while at the same time in Germany inflation was increasing apace. And this also changed the nature of the Russian invasion of Berlin. The subsidies of intervention-happy foreign countries grew more meager, and all of the "family jewels" from which people had allegedly been living slowly disappeared. Now for quite a few of these emigrants exile became a tragedy. Those romantic transformations that have gained such sad renown began; princes, military officers and councilors of state took jobs as waiters, porters, coffeehouse violinists and peddlers, and their wives as dance teachers, salesclerks and hairdressers, while weaker characters slid into criminality in the metropolis as confidence men, pickpockets and burglars.

Above all, though, this brought quite a different stratum of the Tsar's former subjects to the surface in Berlin: the ghetto, the Jewish proletariat. Silently and at first quite unnoticed, these families had emigrated, mostly driven by the fear of pogroms, and taken up residence in the cheapest and poorest quarters of Berlin, in the old Scheunenviertel. Indifferent to politics, concerned only to stay alive, they now swarmed the narrow lanes: shaky old men in their native caftans, sidelocks along their ears. Men with bent backs and a squinting, fearful gaze, matrons wheezing asthmatically, beautiful girls with jet-black wigs, pale boys adroitly weaving in and out— a confusion of voices, dust, smells, a constant agitated fight over second-hand goods and military supplies, entire wagons full of foodstuffs, bills of entry and residence permits.

But the progressive deterioration of the German currency meant that all of these highly dubious business dealings grew unimaginably profitable. And the direct moves from the gloomy corners of Grenadierstraße or Schendelgasse to ten-room apartments in the city's West became ever more numerous. Within a year or two, households that had begun in some garret with a rickety bed and a few cracked dishes spread out to villas in Wannsee und Dahlem.

The Russian émigré bourgeoisie naturally noticed this onslaught from the lower depths and, since the murderous floods of paper money rose ever higher, and business with them brought greater and greater profits, even Tsarists and democrats left politics to its own devices and jumped with both feet into the witches' sabbath then known as "economic life." And it was only at this point that the Russification of Berlin reached its peak. Shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow, former Moscow generals and Minsk second-hand dealers pressed ahead. At the stock exchange, where utterly imaginary values flew from hand to hand, Russian virtually became an official language of business. Russians hoarded German buildings, factories and landed estates that they had never seen and never wished to see. Veritable Russian courts arose in the suburbs with their own parking lots and treasures of silver, often with the most wonderful libraries as well, with interiors of Indochinese splendor—open, with expansive native hospitality, to anyone at any time and therefore also densely populated by German and foreign scroungers. It is, alas, no secret that old Russian methods proceeded from here to influence the German bureaucratic corps. And so it went until the great cleansing crisis of stabilization. And there lightning struck most devastatingly those firms bearing Russian-Jewish names: Barmat, Holzmann, Kutisker. […]

Today the majority of Russian émigrés have disappeared from Berlin. The cold terror of the fall of the great and the expense of life in Germany swept them away, to France or Italy. What remains in Berlin is scarcely noticeable as these are the Russians who have assimilated, who no longer simply profit from, but benefit and have become part of German society. It is characteristic that the Russian names that most recently attracted public interest were the names of two women who were courageous, clever and industrious enough to earn their own living in exile through honest work. One of them, Zinaida Yuryevskaya, was diverted by a dark and tragic destiny from a career that had begun full of shimmering hope. The other, Sonia Yovanovitch, however, was crowned a beauty queen in the half lighthearted, half

serious battle of Berlin fashion houses—a coronation that, as it were, may have been a reward not just for her youthful grace, but also for the valor with which this young girl from the finest Petersburg family did not shy away from starting at the very bottom, as a model. […]

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