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Reading *Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii*: What Mayakovsky’s Little-Known Text Tells Us about the Political Views of the Russian Avant-Gardist Ivan Puni

The Russian avant-garde was a key part of Russian artistic and political life in the first half of the twentieth century. Its complexities, especially with respect to political life, have not yet been fully elucidated and remain ripe for further study. Vladimir Mayakovsky’s book *Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii* (Heroes and Victims of the Revolution), which was illustrated by the Futurist painter Ivan Puni, is an important source on this issue. Through its analysis of the book’s text and images, this paper will provide new insight into Puni as well as Mayakovsky’s views on art and politics. It will also show how the book influenced the development of Mayakovsky’s famous *ROSTA Windows*. To date, the text has remained unexamined in both Anglophone and Russian literature on the avant-garde.

Although the political views of the avant-garde artists were mostly left-leaning, they were extremely heterogeneous. Some artists supported all the initiatives of the Bolshevik Soviet government. Some considered themselves socialists and revolutionaries, but not Soviet, and others eschewed socialism altogether in favor of different anarchist political philosophies. After the October Revolution, political views in Russia also changed quickly, reflecting the country’s chaotic situation. During the period of War Communism (1918–1921), many of those who held leftist views left the country because they were unwilling to concede to the Bolshevik program. Avant-garde artists such as David Burliuk, Nikolay Roerich, and Mark Chagall were among those who emigrated.¹ Like the political philosophies of the time, art movements depended on the leadership of their initiators and promoters. It was important to share the views of the movement’s leaders, to accept and

¹ See Golomshtock, 30.
pursue the fulfillment of their ideological objectives. After 1917, artists were, at least officially, supposed to do everything they could to achieve the dream of a new proletarian culture. The People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros), which provided them with commissions, expected them to produce works, such as paintings and sculptures, that would encourage the public to go into the factories and get back to work. The art was expected to give the people some idea of what was right and what was wrong in the transitional society. Art quickly became a powerful component of Soviet propaganda.

The painter Ivan Albertovich Puni participated in these efforts. Born in a village near St. Petersburg in 1894, Puni lived in Russia until 1919. After emigrating, he worked and took part in many exhibitions in Paris and Berlin. He died a respected and prosperous artist in 1956, without having betrayed any particular interest in politics. During his time in Russia, however, he participated in several artistic movements. Puni, like many other artists and theorists who lived through the chaotic period of War Communism, shifted his perspective on art and politics. This paper will describe the two major ways in which Puni’s views were fractured and reformulated, first during his flirtation with Suprematism and then during his work with Mayakovsky on Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii. It also describes the relationship between these fractures and reformations and the political climate of the time.

From late 1912 until his emigration, Ivan Puni worked closely with Kazimir Malevich. The Cubo-Futurist turned Suprematist leader exerted a strong influence on Puni’s work, but one that was artistic rather than political. In his articles, Malevich wrote that the remnants of the old—for example, the national style in architecture—must be destroyed. He advocated this, because as an anarchist he believed that the structures of the old world must

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2 See Lodder, 49.
3 Ibid., 100.
4 See Lunacharskii, 27.
5 See Sarabianov, 78.
6 See Malevich, 1.
be dismantled and that the new world must be built from only the purest forms of geometry and color found in nature. Although Puni did not advocate the structures of the old world, he also did not explicitly espouse anarchist principles, despite his loyalty to Malevich. In his article “Tvorchestvo zhizni” (The Art of Life), for example, Puni wrote only about the need to make the new art utilitarian:

I have an Elizabethan cup on my table, it is decorated with flowers and it is very beautiful, but the fire escape is beautiful too. Before, during artisanal production, the thing was manufactured for the sole user; its particularity, its personality, intimacy, the manufacturer’s precise, loving attitude toward it—this is its beauty. Near the stairs there is another beauty, which consists of design, marginal utility, portability, lightness, convenience; this is a modern production.

Puni agrees here that the new art must be useful and dependent on the particulars of its design rather than beautiful; he also recognizes, however, the beauty of the former art and does not suggest destroying it. Despite this difference, Malevich’s artistic influence on Puni was nonetheless huge. Puni followed in Malevich’s footsteps when he began creating his own Suprematist paintings in 1916. Suprematist Composition (fig. 1, 1916), for example, has a lot in common with Malevich’s Supremus No. 56 (fig. 2, 1916). Both Puni and Malevich use the same geometric figures, and both organize these figures into left-angled perpendicular lines in order to create a sense of dynamism. The only significant difference is that Puni’s composition is monochrome, while Malevich works with simple, basic colors. The use of color makes Malevich’s work more complex. Puni’s Suprematist Composition can best be

7 See Gourianova, 180.
8 See Puni, “Sovremennye gruppirovki v russkom levom isskustve,” 2–3.
9 “У меня на столе стоит сейчас чашка, Елисаветинская, что ли, с цветочками и она очень красива, но вот и пожарная лестница тоже красива. При прежнем кустарном производстве вещь выделялась для единоличного пользования, ее частность, ее индивидуальность, интимность, такое любовное отношение производителя именно к ней - в этом и есть ее красота. У лестницы же есть другая красота, заключающаяся в ее конструкции, предельной полезности, портативности, легкости, удобстве - это и есть современное производство.” Puni, “Tvorchestvo zhizni,” 3.
understood as an initiative work, which reflects his attempt to follow and to understand Suprematism.

In the period between late 1917 and early 1918, Malevich’s artistic influence on Puni began to wane gradually, as their personal and professional relationship deteriorated.\textsuperscript{10} Previously unrecognized archival documents reveal that the rift between the two artists was caused a by difference of opinion between Malevich and Vladimir Mayakovsky, with whom the former had worked on several Futurist projects.\textsuperscript{11} As his friends often noted, Malevich was difficult.\textsuperscript{12} He put the artists who collaborated with him under too much pressure and denied them opportunities to voice their opinions during public debates.\textsuperscript{13} But Malevich’s difficult personality was hardly the only source of tension between him and Puni and Mayakovsky.

First, as an avant-garde artist Puni tended to float freely between different styles of expression. Since the avant-garde movement was not only artistic but also political, the espousal of a particular style amounted to the public expression of sympathy for a particular set of leftist ideas. Although Puni flirted with the pure visuality of Suprematist painting, unlike Malevich he remained interested in Futurism and ultimately refused to abandon it. For instance, his painting \textit{Cylinder and Playing Cards} (fig. 3, 1917) contains numbers, representational symbols that, in Malevich’s view, Suprematist painting had overcome. The work also contains other “forbidden” mimetic figures, including a top hat and a cane. In this artwork Puni plays with space and volume in much the same way that the Russian Futurists had always done before 1917, when they distorted form, making a sort of a game of the rules of representation. The content they drew, however, remained largely recognizable. Even

\textsuperscript{10} See Sarabianov, 79.
\textsuperscript{11} See “Rykaiushchii Parnas,” 2–3.
\textsuperscript{12} See Clark, 234.
\textsuperscript{13} See Shatskikh, 9.
though Puni did not return explicitly to Futurism’s chaotic combinations of textual and visual symbols, _Cylinder and Playing Cards_ reveals his desire to remain firmly within the circle of Futurism’s representatives.  

Mayakovsky was one such representative. During War Communism, Mayakovsky demonstrated a particular sensitivity to the events of the era; he readily responded to the events of the Revolution, was hugely interested in politics, and developed his own position on questions of art and socialist power. Although over time Mayakovsky’s views became more nuanced, he had taken an active interest in Marxism and socialism even before the October Revolution. As both a visual artist and a poet, Mayakovsky often presented his position on the new socialist art world at public debates and in periodicals such as _Iskusstvo kommuny_ (Art of the Commune). Within the chaos and uncertainty of War Communism, Mayakovsky was able to explain to his circle what was happening and why leftist ideas were still worth supporting. This last point, for Puni, was key. He listened to Mayakovsky and decided to collaborate with him on a highly politicized work, a book entitled _Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii_. This voluntary collaboration suggests that Puni had come to agree with Mayakovsky’s socialist perspective on art and politics. By that time, Mayakovsky had begun to act as a kind of guiding figure as artists debated the relationship between proletarian ideology and art. He strongly believed in the “red” ideas, which emphasized the need to make art accessible to the proletariat. He supported leftist revolutionary ideas but was not quite enthusiastic about all the decisions made by Soviet power.

_**Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii**_ was published in 1918. The concept of the book is simple; there are eighteen characters, nine “heroes” and nine “victims.” Puni’s drawings of the heroes and victims are each paired with a quatrain by Mayakovsky. In addition to Puni, his wife

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14 See Lodder, 7.
15 See Mayakovsky, “Tol'ko ne vospominaniia,” 32.
16 Mayakovsky was arrested in 1908 and 1909 for pro-communist views. See Zemskov.
Kseniya Boguslavskaya as well as the artists V. I. Kozlinski and S. N. Makletsov contributed to the overall book design.

The drawings are divided into two types: caricatures of the victims and self-aggrandizing portraits of the heroes. The victims of the revolution include a factory owner, a banker, a landowning peasant (*kulak*), a mistress, a priest, a bureaucrat, a general, and a merchant. The heroes include a worker, a soldier, a laborer, a sailor, a seamstress, a laundress, an automobile driver, a telegraph worker, and a railroad worker. The word “victim” in this context carries a satirical connotation. It does not refer to the tragic human cost of the revolution. Rather, as drawn and described by Puni and Mayakovsky, the victims are types designated as class enemies of the proletariat. As such, this collection can be understood best as a guide to the leftist rhetoric that existed during War Communism. These terms, as well as the images and texts that accompany them, offer insight into the experience of revolutionary fervor, a heightened emotional state that both encompassed and extended beyond basic loyalty to the Bolshevik regime. The book also represents Mayakovsky’s own position. As a Marxist, he supported the pursuit of social equality but did not agree exactly with the Bolsheviks on certain questions of art. He was too independent to do what the government organs wanted and had his own views on how a proletarian artist might look, perform, and behave. His ideas about proletarian art were, in fact, much more informed by the romantic spirit of October 1917 than by the Bolsheviks’ ideas about the meaning of “red” power. Mayakovsky made it clear that he would rather stand on the barricades than deal with paperwork in support of the idea of revolution. Moreover, he stressed that he was a proletarian, not a Bolshevik, in doing so he demonstrated that he stood with the people, not the government, and that he wanted to make art he considered necessary for ordinary people, art which might not fulfill the requirements of Bolshevism.

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Puni collaborated with the book’s other artists on the sketches of the victims of the revolution. In most cases, the illustrators strove to fit as many details on one sheet as possible, so as to better emphasize the acquisitive, bourgeois nature of the victims. Approximately the same method for depicting enemies was used in the Soviet satirical magazine Krokodil.18 There, capitalists were depicted as unpleasant fat men trying to grab everything good.19 Despite these formal similarities, Puni’s drawings, as the predecessors of those featured in Krokodil, did not follow this pattern for depicting capitalistic greed; he made fun of the victims in a way that was at once tragic and comic. His images of the victims are rendered in monochrome, with little or no use of shadows. For example, when depicting the Mistress (fig. 4), he never makes fun of her wealth.20 She is a fat, grinning woman standing in front of a sad maid holding a mop. Mayakovsky’s satirical verse, however, embellishes the shape of the woman. He pokes fun of the fact that the servants refused to shop for food for their mistress, which forced her to stand in a queue when she wanted to eat. Likewise, Puni depicts the Bureaucrat (fig. 5) as a very rotund man sprawled out leisurely in his chair.21 He wears a fancy hat and is dressed in a waistcoat with silly flaps hanging absurdly over the back of his chair. His face is not drawn completely. Only his basic features are visible, and they do not give the viewer a good impression of the depicted character. The background of the image is empty, but the man holds a sheaf of papers in his hands. Another similar pile rests beside him on a chair, but nothing is written on any of the papers. This indicates the senselessness of the Bureaucrat’s work. Mayakovsky writes that the Bureaucrat

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18 The journal Krokodil was first published in 1922 as a supplement to Rabochaia gazeta. In 1930 it began to be published in Pravda, and in 1933 it became the only satirical magazine in the USSR.
19 See Krokodil, 4.
20 Mayakovsky, Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii, 16.
21 Ibid., 19.
used to drink and steal money and that he now asks God to repose his soul, so this dedication to him can best be described as a satirical obituary.\textsuperscript{22}

In contrast to the Bureaucrat, the General (fig. 6) is depicted as skinny and fit.\textsuperscript{23} Puni’s image of the commander embodies every known cliché about the tsar’s army. With his deliberately straight back, sharp shoulders, long braid, ridiculously large arms, and a sword that rests at his feet, Puni’s General is a hyperbolic image of military pomposity. His haughty facial expression and narrowed eyes seal this impression. The man standing behind him and saluting, with his shoulders slightly hunched, seems to represent the blind obedience of the officers and soldiers who follow the General. Mayakovsky, in his quatrain, pokes fun at the General’s rich uniform, writing that the red cloth lining of his coat became part of the labor movement’s flag.

The two heroes that best illustrate Puni’s perspective on the socialist future are the Worker and the Laundress (fig. 7). The Worker is shown to be a broad-shouldered and tall man standing erect.\textsuperscript{24} A sketch of a factory dominates the background. He casts his eyes upward and tilts his head at an angle, so that it appears as though his body is being pulled upward by a string. The shovel in his hands seems so huge that it must require superhuman strength to lift. Mayakovsky’s verse emphasizes the loftiness of the Worker, comparing him to an eagle. This is significant because the comparison endows the Worker with the status of an exalted hero, exemplifying Mayakovsky and Puni’s belief that proletarians had really achieved the revolution themselves because of their strength and honesty, a rather romantic and idealistic position.

\textsuperscript{22} “Сидел себе, попивал и покрадывал. / Упокой Господи душу бюрократову.” Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 23.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 5.
If Puni did not indicate it in his title, it would be impossible to determine the
Laundress’s occupation based only on his illustration. He depicts her in a rather abstract
manner; she appears to be simply a woman in a white blouse and black skirt sitting alone on a
chair. The interior of the room in which she sits is austere, and this austerity is further
emphasized by the image’s monochromatic tone. It is not immediately possible to determine
the details of the furniture and décor that comprise the interior space. It is difficult even to
recognize the tools of the Laundress’s trade, such as her vaguely-drawn flat iron. Her upper
body and huge strong hands resemble those of the Worker. This detail unites these two
heroes, making them comrades in the proletarian struggle. In his poem dedicated to the
Laundress, Mayakovskv plays symbolically and violently with words: the Laundress used to
wash linens, he writes, but now the time has come for her to wash her former customers into
the Neva River. This second half of the revolutionary verse reads as a direct call for the
workers, including female domestics, to rebel, and as such offers significant insight into the
rebellious nature of Mayakovskv’s political views at that time. Puni’s drawing is much
calmer than Mayakovskv’s verse. His rendering of the allegedly revolutionary Laundress as a
serene figure suggests that he did not necessarily support the call to violent rebellion
Mayakovskv endorses in his poem. The depicted woman does not seem to be ready to move
anywhere; she even looks a bit lost. On the whole, the manner of Puni’s drawing and the
vagueness of his pictures can be understood as an expression both of the obscurity of that
time and of his own uncertainties about the future, specifically about how exactly the people
should build a new world. That is, they reflect a disagreement with Mayakovskv about what
constituted the proletariat’s most pressing tasks.

Mayakovskv, who had acted as the instigator of the project that became Geroi i
zhertvy revoliutsii, considered it a work of great personal significance. In a 1927 issue of the

25 Ibid., 8.
magazine *Novyi LEF*, which was published on the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, the poet reminisced about IZO-Narkompros’s (Otdel izobrazitel’nykh isskustv Narkomprosa) 1918 publication of the “pack of monochrome drawings” that constituted the book. This bundle, according to Mayakovsky, was one of his first attempts at agitational poetry. He noted that the book did not have great artistic value for anyone. “I do not have this folder. Did anyone hold onto it?” he asked with regret. The fact that even the author does not know his work’s fate less than ten years after publication helps explain why no critics wrote about this book. Mayakovsky also noted the significance of the project in the overall evolution of his own agitational art. “This folder,” he wrote, “evolved into the revolutionary poster, which for us eventually became the *Okna satiry ROSTA* [Satirical ROSTA Windows].” The forms of Mayakovsky’s famous *ROSTA Windows* do in fact resemble those in *Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii*. The format selection can be explained easily: single, unbound frames of information gave people an opportunity to share the images’ messages with each other or discuss it at meetings or in the hobby groups that were extremely popular during the Soviet period. The same model of austere and even vague sketches of the bourgeoisie and proletariat in transition were combined with short satirical poems to create a style of visual and verbal agitation that became synonymous with the difficulties and vagaries of the period of War Communism itself. Only the quality of the poems changed; they became shorter and more effective with time. Given that Mayakovsky remained proud of this work and did not criticize its content, it can be concluded that by 1927 he held more or less the

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27 “У меня этой папки нет. Сохранилась ли она у кого-нибудь?” Ibid., 34.
28 It is worth mentioning that the format of loose pages with pictures and short verse was not common in the Soviet Union, but examples of such a format, like *lubki* (woodblock prints with folk illustrations), were common in pre-revolutionary Russia.
29 “Эта папка развилась в будущем во весь революционный плакат. Для нас – главным образом в ‘окна сатиры Роста.’” Ibid., 34.
same political views as in 1918. He supported red ideology with a shade of October romance and art for the proletarian spirit, not for beauty.

When the two began the project in 1918 Ivan Puni shared Mayakovsky’s interest in a socialist future. The book reveals, however, that he did not share Mayakovsky’s violent tone. Aesthetically, the book is sympathetic to the interests of the Bolsheviks. The symbols of the class struggle and the clear division between “us” and “them” support a description of the book’s rhetoric as socialist. While Mayakovsky’s texts also can be read as Soviet, Puni’s drawings are more ambivalent. The difference in these concepts is that the term socialist, or “red,” at the time represented the embodiment of “revolutionary ideas” and had a decidedly romantic spirit. The term “Soviet” was used to express solidarity with the Bolshevik program. While Puni had a penchant for leftist views, which became more confident and definite during the period of War Communism, he never expressed any particular enthusiasm for the construction of a Soviet state. The contrast between the content of his drawings and the rhythm of Mayakovsky’s poetry reflects the fact that at the time art was still a space for debate in which artists could express and experiment with multiple leftist positions. Although censorship existed, its applications had not yet been strictly defined.30 However, Puni’s explicit delineation of enemies represents a strong opposition to the old tsarist system. Given the overall concept of the avant-garde and the understanding of its purpose by members of the movement, one can assume that the authors tried to make this collection part of the “new world,” both artistically and socio-politically. And while it was designed as a “red tool” for propaganda, its efficacy was ultimately limited by its small print run.31

What conclusion can be drawn about Ivan Puni’s political position based on this book? When the artist agreed to take part in this work, he also agreed with its concept,

30 See “Lenin ob agitatsii i propagande,” 25.
31 Mayakovsky, “Tol’ko ne vospominaniia,” 34.
including Mayakovsky’s ideologically “red” perspective. He was a leftist with a bias towards support of the socialist movement—but not of the Bolshevik Soviet government and its violent measures—as the basis of an idea for a socialist society. Just as he eventually parted ways with Malevich over a disagreement about the need to destroy the new, Puni distanced himself from Mayakovsky and his red romance, first physically when he left Russia, and then artistically when he joined forces with the Dada artists during the next phase of his career in Weimar Berlin.
Appendix

Figure 1
Ivan Puni
*Suprematist Composition*
1916

Figure 2
Kazimir Malevich
*Supremus No. 56*
1916
Figure 3
Ivan Puni
*Cylinder and Playing Cards*
1917

Figure 4
Ivan Puni
*Barynia (The Mistress)*
Illustration from *Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii*
1918
Figure 5
Ivan Puni
Biurokrat (The Bureaucrat)
Illustration from Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii
1918

Figure 6
Ivan Puni
General (The General)
Illustration from Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii
1918
Figure 6

Ivan Puni

*Rabochii* (The Worker)

Illustration from *Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii*

1918

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Figure 6

Ivan Puni

*Prachka* (*The Laundress*)

Illustration from *Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii*

1918
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