

## Surfaces



# RUSSIA'S SILVER AGE IN TODAY'S RUSSIA

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Volume 9, 2001

TROISIÈME CONGRÈS INTERNATIONAL SUR LE DISCOURS  
HUMANISTE. LA RÉSISTANCE HUMANISTE AU DOGMATISME  
AUJOURD'HUI ET À LA FIN DU MOYEN ÂGE  
THIRD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HUMANISTIC  
DISCOURSE. HUMANISTIC RESISTANCE TO DOGMATISM TODAY AND  
AT THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065062ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065062ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

1188-2492 (print)

1200-5320 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Azadovski, K. (2001). RUSSIA'S SILVER AGE IN TODAY'S RUSSIA. *Surfaces*, 9.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065062ar>

Article abstract

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# RUSSIA'S SILVER AGE IN TODAY'S RUSSIA

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**Surfaces** vol IX 101.2 (v1.0a - 15.12.2001) - ISSN:  
1188-2492

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## ABSTRACT

The culture of Russia's Silver Age (1890-1917) has taken its place in the history of the arts of the country after having been forbidden under the Soviet regime. With a relative "thaw" under Khrushchev, the works of Sergei Esenin, Ivan Bunin and some of Marina Tsvetaeva's works became available. Today, after the fall of the Soviet regime, what used to be forbidden is now widely published often in cheap editions. What used to be elite culture has become mass culture. However, it unclear how the culture of the Silver Age can address the problems of today's extremely politicized Russia. A similar problematic faces the new wave of interest for other cultural trends, which have also garnered the particular interest of Russian society: the culture and literature of Russian emigration and the literature of the Underground.

## RÉSUMÉ

La culture de l'Age d'argent en Russie (1890-1917) a pris sa place dans l'histoire des arts du pays après avoir été interdite sous le régime soviétique. Avec le « dégel » relatif sous Khrouchtchev, les oeuvres de Sergei Esenine, d'Ivan Bounine et une partie de celle de Marina Tsvetaeva est devenue disponible.

Aujourd'hui, après la chute du régime soviétique, ce qui était interdit est devenu largement publié souvent dans des éditions de piètre qualité. Ce qui était culture d'élite est devenu culture de masse. Cependant, il n'est pas clair que la culture de l'Age d'argent puisse répondre aux problèmes de la Russie extrêmement politisée que l'on connaît aujourd'hui. L'intérêt grandissant pour d'autres tendances culturelles aura à prendre en compte la même problématique. C'est le cas de l'intérêt pour la culture et la littérature des émigrés russes et pour la littérature dite « underground ».

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## 1.

The term "The Silver Age" is well known to every educated person in Russia. Appearing a few decades ago, this term is accepted and widely employed today by many, not only by specialists of Russian culture. What does it mean?

At the beginning of the 20th century Russian culture experienced a period of flowering. An entire pleiade of talented writers, artists, musicians, and directors appeared whose names are known worldwide today: Dimitri Merezhkovsky and Alexander Blok, Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Achmatova, Vasily Kandinsky and Mark Chagall, Skriabin and Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Diagilev and Vaclav Nizhinsky (the list could continue with other equally famous names).

The philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev who belonged to this epoch remembered: "In those years Russia was sent many gifts. In Russia this was the period of the emergence of independent philosophical thought, the flowering of poetry, the intensification of aesthetic sensibilities, religious anxiety and searching, and interest in mysticism and the occult." Berdiaev, however, was not inclined to idealize this epoch. He wrote about the seclusion of the artistic elite and its sharp isolation from the broad social currents of the time. "Russian people of that period lived on different floors and even in different countries."

Thus, the Silver Age is a period of Russian culture covering approximately 1890-1917. This period, sometimes referred to as a "romantic" (or a "neo-romantic") one, is usually contrasted with the classical

period of Russian culture--its "Golden Age" (i.e., the Age of Pushkin). On the other hand, the Silver Age is often contrasted with the entire 19th century (the "Iron century") with its industrial - technical progress, pragmatic thinking, the bourgeois man, philistinism, etc.

The Russian Silver Age was not homogeneous. There was much in it that is usually linked to "decadence" (an interest in the occult, Satanism, eroticism). It united tendencies that were at times contradictory in spirit: Symbolism and Futurism, populism and urbanism, Nietzschean individualism and collective "sobornost" (i.e., the cult of the national soul) etc. At the same time it absorbed all the best elements that accumulated over the previous century in Russia--whether in the realm of literature and art or in social, philosophical and religious thought. And despite its elitism and aesthetic refinement, the Silver Age was a period of surprising artistic freedom, and the pre-revolutionary generation breathed that freedom like air.

## 2.

The Bolshevik dictatorship with its militant spirit of class warfare was obviously incompatible with the principles instilled in Russian society by the Silver Age. Along with all of thinking Russia, the Silver Age was pushed up against the wall, brought to its knees, thrown in labor camps or forced into emigration. Not only were people destroyed and persecuted, but also the works of their hands, minds, and talents. Manuscripts and books, documents and letters, photographs and paintings were obliterated. Untold numbers of enormously significant and cultural artifacts were confiscated during searches and thrust into nonexistence. For many decades our country was plunged into an abyss of physical and spiritual slavery.

The Soviet enforcement agencies vigilantly guarded the country from "bourgeois" and "decadent" influences. For about thirty years, from the late 1920s to the Khrushchev "thaw" in the 1950s, it was as if the Silver Age had never existed. It was a closed or semi-closed field even for specialists, historians of culture, literary critics, art critics and bibliographers. The study of Russian symbolism--the main stream inside the culture of the Silver Age--even the work of Alexander Blok, or Valery Briusov (two symbolist poets who accepted and even glorified the Bolshevik revolution) was not encouraged, to put it mildly. One could not even think of studying the artists who had emigrated. Of course, it would have been seen as outright subversion to refer to

the works of Nikolai Gumilev and Nikolai Kliuev who were executed, of Sergei Esenin and Marina Tsvetaeva who hanged themselves, or of Osip Mandelstam who perished in a labor camp.

The culture of the Silver Age was in a sense elite. In a slightly different sense, it remained just as elite over seven Soviet decades when only the "chosen" received the right of access, that is, only those who truly and acutely needed it. Unfortunately, these "chosen" had to pay for their excessive passion for the Silver Age - and it was expensive. Old pre-revolutionary editions and books published in Russian in the West--all garnered the special attention of the Soviet secret police. (There are many known cases when a slim volume of Gumilev's poetry, the works of Freud or, let's say, André Bergson and even old postcards depicting members of the imperial family were confiscated during searches). Even for the superfluous attachment to the "silver" period of Russian culture one could be sent to a concentration camp (and such cases did occur!).

### 3.

The situation changed slightly in the second half of the 1950s. The "thaw" restored the works of Esenin, Bunin and some of Tsvetaeva writings, although restrictions remained in effect for them--primarily on the foreign editions that managed to reach us from abroad. Confiscation of Russian books (including Nabokov, Mandelstam, Akhmatova and others) routinely continued: they were automatically seized during any search--to say nothing of Russian philosophy (Nikolai Berdiaev, Lev Shestov, Semen Frank and others).

But in 1987-1988 everything turned upside-down. What yesterday had been forbidden (or "half-forbidden") became generally accessible or at least permitted. The Silver Age was no longer in "short supply." On the contrary, it was advertised, propagandized, and distributed. The academic study of the Silver Age began to enjoy financial and other support (both within Russia and beyond its boundaries). Hundreds of publications, names and titles flooded the book market all at once. New readers in a new Russia--millions of people with various social and cultural backgrounds, young people as well the older generation, from the capital and the provinces, in the cities and in the country--all received the opportunity at long last to hear (on the radio), to see (on TV) and to read what they had earlier not known or had surreptitiously known or heard. Historians of *perestroika* have yet to interpret and evaluate the social

role performed by these books, journals and article collections, which, though altogether plain, poorly designed and cheap looking (if not cheap costing), bore the revered almost mythological and tabooed names: Merezhkovsky, Berdiaev, Gumilev, Nabokov. So, the contemporary generation of Russian readers met the culture of Silver Age, and this long-awaited encounter disappointed nobody. On the contrary, it brought profound joy. Everything connected to the Silver Age continues to be published right up to the present day (1996) and to meet a wide demand.

#### 4.

And so we found ourselves the witnesses of an altogether curious historical phenomenon – the *swift transformation of elite culture into mass culture*. The same process of restoration of artificially disrupted cultural and other traditions have also seized, to varying degrees, other countries recently liberated from totalitarianism. Such a process seems fully natural and even unavoidable: any striking trend or name in culture begins usually with a small number of "admirers", that steadily increases. The "accursed," persecuted and repudiated poets and artists (poètes maudits) conclude their journey as universally recognized academicians and maîtres. But this process, according to its very essence, can only proceed gradually, without artificial decelerations or accelerations.

In Russia the process was rushed. The return of the Silver Age after a long and agonizing break has proven to be too sudden and, perhaps, too importunate in today's Russia. The removal of the barriers of censorship unleashed a powerful avalanche of names and works that were banned and almost inaccessible until recently. Of course, we all welcomed this sudden breakthrough to freedom. And we did not notice right away that the repeated eulogizing of the same names, like the quantity of printed production piling up around them, was beginning to reflect badly on their quality.

The problem, of course, is not that Mandelstam's poetry or Nabokov's novels ceased to belong to a narrow circle of *intelligentsia* and acquired hundreds of thousands of readers among the most diverse social classes. The problem was and is that the number of readers proved for many publishers to be an end in itself, and they are prepared to engage in profanation in order to achieve it. What has become really depressing is not the mass production, but the cheapness, not the high price, but the low level of the book. Now and then one can see that

a Silver Age book has a cover like a spicy detective story or a mediocre piece of erotica. Indeed, it is sad and somewhat awkward to see the works of Tsvetaeva, Mikhail Kuzmin and Fedor Sologub jumbled together in an anthology entitled *Russian Eros*!

## 5.

At the same time new problems have arisen that no one could have conceived earlier. Do we actually have the capability of adequately assimilating our spiritual heritage? Has not, after all, a new historical era begun? More than one generation with another morality and a different relationship of life and culture has grown up in Russia. The Russian public (in the broad sense and not simply its refined and educated stratum) can only with difficulty grasp the poetry of Viacheslav Ivanov or the paintings of Kandinsky. Have we not found ourselves in the position of those young children who were taken away from their parents and raised in orphanages and children's colonies, and now fully grown are given the possibility to see their "forefathers"? Is it all not too late?

The vexing question emerged at the dawn of perestroika. In about 1987–1988 some commentators complained that an excessive fascination with our past--particularly with the Silver Age, was leaving its mark on the contemporary, literary process, and not a beneficial one. "By adopting the stepsons of the past epoch, wrote Alla Latymina, one of the prominent literary critics in Russia, perhaps we are turning the sons of today into stepsons." That thesis seemed to be borne out. In reality, what had the *perestroika* era, rightfully called "revolutionary," given us? Where are its bards and artists? Where are the plethora of new names, the diversity of styles? There were none.

So, a double incongruity arose: on the one hand, aesthetic, and on the other, social-psychological. Regarding the entire or almost the entire Soviet period, when true creative self-expression was not possible, the Russian public greedily embraced the culture of Russian modernism that had finally been "permitted." But this was a completely different public than the readers or spectators of 1913–1914--the last "peaceful" year of the old Russia. The entire tenor of life in the Soviet Union that took shape toward the end of the 1980s hardly recalled that of Russian society on the eve of the First World War. Notions, ideas and values had all changed. The quandaries, themes, aesthetics, and artistic styles of that time all belong to the past. They form our history, our memory, and our tradition. The crux of the matter is

not that the average cultural level of the contemporary generation is lower than that of 1914, as is often asserted. It is simply structurally different. This is the reason why the Silver Age turned out to be an anachronism. The wild enthusiasm of the "first meeting" was displaced by certain indifference and even weariness. To be sure, we can rejoice at a triumphant justice: the "high" culture of the Silver Age finally occupies the historical and spiritual place long ordained for it. At the same time, one should not forget that the culture of the Silver Age is not able to reflect or satisfy the problems of today's extremely politicized Russia.

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Is it possible for an enormous country to return eighty years later to the path from which it strayed? Is it possible for its past culture to be instilled naturally into a new time? Has not the "spinal fracture" experienced by Russia in the twentieth century proven fatal for her spiritual condition?

And another point, in what does the crisis of Russian culture today consist? What are its reasons? And is it really a crisis? Perhaps, we are, finally, and for the first time in modern Russian history entering a new, more "mature" period when literature is considered as literature and nothing more? Having lost its religious and social pathos, which was particularly characteristic of the Russian tradition, literature now begins to serve as a source of information, education or, simply entertainment. We are beginning to resemble others – is this a loss or progress? And if in general, our spiritual situation is in a state of crisis, is it, in reality, a crisis of our culture, or more likely a crisis of our illusions?

All these questions and doubts unwillingly come to mind when one attempts to investigate what is happening today in Russia with her "culture-retuned", and most of all with the culture of the Silver Age.

## **Postscript**

Everything that I asserted in my paper is, of course, applicable to other cultures not only to the culture of the Silver Age. By the beginning of Perestroika, there were at least two other cultural trends, which also garnered the particular interest of Russian society: the culture and



literature of Russian emigration and, then, that of the Underground. However, neither the emigrants of the First Wave of the Great Russian Exodus (say, Merezhkovski or even Nabokov) or the generation of the 'sixties (Vasili Aksenov, for example, or Vladimir Voinovich) could organically enter the cultural scene of postperestroika Russia. The same is also true for nonconformist literature, which--despite the end of the censorship--has not only failed to reach a wide audience, but has actually lost much of its former support from the public, that is, from the liberal (or half-liberal) intelligentsia that was generally oppositional-minded. As a matter of fact, there remained by now only a narrow circle of specialists and devotees who discuss and follow the so-called "post modernism" (or, to say more precisely, what in modern art passes for "post modernism").

So, the process I discussed in my paper has, therefore, an altogether broad character. But the questions arise: what has actually happened in Russia? And why?

The transition from one epoch to another turned out to be its own kind of "castling" in Russia (to take a metaphor from chess). During the Soviet period that kind of Silver Age culture could exist only in secret as a kind of unreality, an imaginary world. Reality was other--it was official: official life and official culture. Real, genuine culture was banned or half-banned, and, for this very reason it possessed a certain magnetic power ("forbidden fruits are sweeter"). These cultural "fruits" became a distant and inaccessible ideal in the course of time, a *metaphysical* category that gave meaning to the educated majority in our country; where it was well known, most prefer to live in dreams rather than reality (because reality was--and still remains--so pathetic, so shameful, so pitiful). And as soon as the secret essence of this culture lost its "underground" status and became generally accessible, it was exposed to a swift devaluation. Having become reality, this forbidden (hidden or *disguised*) culture lost its previous fascination (the illusion, the "mystery") and, inevitably, could no longer evoke the same emotions as before. The magnetic attraction of that culture was established in another epoch and determined more by social than aesthetic impulses.

So, the long-awaited changes finally arrived, and that which had been hidden was made manifest. And the opposite happened: the official culture of the Soviet period fell into disfavor and became an object of despise and derision. And as soon as it became the past, it began to evoke feelings of nostalgia. The collective unconscious

is now concentrated on illusions of a precisely similar nature: on the discredited symbols, songs and poems that were artificially propagated in the old days, on mythic words and names that have long lost their original meanings and are, so to say, symbolic: socialism, Leningrad, Stalin etc.--more reminiscences or associations than real notions. It is curious that historians of Russian culture (and, by the way, not only in Russia!) are increasingly drawn to the study of the cultural context of the Soviet era (as they were earlier attached, in the first line, to the study of the Silver Age).

We are still a metaphysical country, voting in favor of "darkness rather than "light" and choosing the "hidden" rather than the "manifest". And this, most likely, is the reason for our current problems and contradictions (including our political situation). And still, the turning point is upon us. In Russia it has become more interesting to live than to read--more interesting to act than to dream. Reality is becoming more important than culture, and the Current Age seems to us more important than the Silver Age. If these trends triumph, if they get the upper hand in Russia one day, then we have a chance to become just like other civilized countries--where a real culture ("high culture") is the lot of the few, and where there is almost nothing left that remains "illicit". In this case reality becomes a positive social affair, and it is no longer necessary to feel shame for it. Will Russia take this path?

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