

Ivan and the Terrible Times

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Let me start with two modular typefaces. The first is a digital revival of a modular font sketched by Jan Tschichold in 1930 (**fig. 148**) which is used on the cover of Christopher Burke's *Active Literature*.¹ (**fig. 149**) Note the cover design's detachment from Modernist typography aesthetics. The book could well be a manual of medicine or a law lexicon, while still using a Modernist font for its title. This illustrates the inevitable disconnection between the context of creation of typefaces and their use. The second modular typeface is KTF Yermilov (2021), a grid-based font Oleś Gergun and I designed in 2021, which reconstructs sketches by the Soviet-Ukrainian avant-garde artist and designer Vasyl Yermilov. (**fig. 150**) In New York's Times Square, the viewer of the billboard "Be Brave like Ukraine" (**fig. 151**) knows nothing about either the circumstances in which KTF Yermilov was created or the reference on which it is based. (**fig. 152**) Instead, the audience focuses on the message: the bravery of Ukrainians in the face of Russian invasion.

These two typefaces are disconnected from their origins, and that is the theme of this essay – the uncoupling between an artefact and its context of creation – whether caused by lack of knowledge, misunderstanding, naïveté, romanticism, ignorance, or distance in space and time. For instance, Western scholars have held for decades a specific gaze at Constructivism or avant-garde in the USSR by consistently using the prefix "Russian". What these scholars and the public may sometimes forget is that the USSR was a multinational state formed on the territory of the Russian Empire. Thus, labelling the avant-garde coming from the territory of the former Soviet Union as simply "Russian" reduces a diverse ethnic landscape to one nation and ignores the existence of Ukrainian, Belarusian, Georgian, and Middle-Asian cultures, which all participated in the movement.

One important proxy of "Russian" avant-garde, the so-called *palochniy shrift* (a block typeface using mostly straight lines and angles, such as that appearing on fig. 5, is problematic. As part of the grand narrative, and for most Westerners, this font is an instant typographical "Russifier" which evokes "brutalism" or "rigid repetitiveness", as my Norwegian friend once said. I would like to ask instead: "What if these fonts only look 'Russian' because of the viewer's inability to read the language?" A better frame of understanding would be that of the international artistic Left of the 1920s, and their agenda which focused on breaking up with the old, reduction, economy, and purposefulness.

In 2014, another frame on the genre of *palochniy* was given by Vladimir Krichevsky in the book *Dva Shrifta Odnoy Revolucii* (Two Fonts of the Same Revolution), in which he argues that the block typeface's origins can be re-traced to pre-revolutionary times in the Russian Empire and was influenced

by German Jugendstil, thus signalling the finesse and frivolousness of the typeface.² By opposition, the

¹ Burke 2007.

² Krichevsky 2014: 9.

Constructivists saw these square letters as the most utilitarian and economic forms, and aligned with the political Left. The latter were not basing their work on other models. As Krichevsky says, “they started from scratch”.³ While he stresses parallel typeface developments in the USSR and the West, he insists on the USSR’s often non-professional and naive particularities, which contrasted with Western “finesse”. More importantly, and perhaps surprisingly, he later contradicts himself and denies any Western influence on *palochnyi*, arguing that “in the West, this happened both before our Constructivists and later – not without direct Russian influence. The Soviet innovators of the 1920s did not seem to need a reverse influence”.⁴

Krichevsky’s fixation on the antagonism between Russia and the West is omnipresent in his writings and public lectures. He seems to forget a crucial aspect of the internationalist artists’ *modus operandi*, namely the rapid and complementary flux of their multinational exchange in the wake of a global revolution attempt – with no exception for Soviet artists. One of the countries taking part in this exchange was the Weimar Republic, which was the first European state to recognise the Soviet regime as the only legitimate government of Russia in the Rapallo Treaty of 1922. El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg – like other Soviet artists – rented apartments in Berlin’s Charlottenburg, debated, allied, fought, and fell in love.⁵ Young Ivan Tschichold was also there. If Tom Tykwer ever decides to make a *Babylon Berlin* sequel, I hope it will be about avant-garde artists.

One of the frequent visitors to the German Reich was a scenographer of Swedish-Italian descent, Vadym Meller. **(fig. 153)** He was born in Saint Petersburg and spent his life in Soviet Ukraine. In 1927, he travelled to Cologne to work on the pompous USSR pavilion for the *Pressa* exhibition under Lissitzky’s supervision. **(fig. 154)** The aim of the pavilion was to show Europeans the modern achievements of the Soviet media, which proved to be a considerable success. In the journal *Chervony Shliakh* (Red Way), Meller reports on his trip to Berlin and reviews the latest German artistic developments. He admires the high level of craftsmanship in outdoor advertising and is overwhelmed by its penetrating presence, but criticises the lack of ideas behind advertisements, which only exist to create a differentiation on the market and sell aggressively. On Germany more generally, he ironises: “VERBOTEN”, he says, “stands everywhere, almost devalued in its initial meaning, and becoming a trademark” (...) “a patent for all things of good quality and accuracy”.⁶ *Verboten* (forbidden) was also imperative in Meller’s home country, for his colleague Vasyl Yermilov – who had co-created numerous installation objects for the aforementioned pavilion – was banned from leaving the USSR. Meller desperately wanted to come back to the USSR as soon as possible to realise big projects,⁷ one of which was designing the ambitious newspaper *Nova Generatsiia*⁸ (New Generation), perhaps the only printed undertaking of the Ukrainian avant-garde movement, called Panfuturism, that received a state financing.⁹ **(fig. 155)**

Apart from publishing poetry and theoretical articles in Ukrainian by

figures such as Kazimir Malevich (who wrote ten articles in total) and Dziga Vertov, to name a couple, *Nova Generatsiia* also offered translations of European articles into Ukrainian, thus opening a “window to the West” for those unfamiliar with foreign languages. Its multilingual format

3 *Ibid.*: 10

4 *Ibid.*

5 The fate of El Lissitzky’s wife Sofie Lissitzky-Küppers is explored in Samoilenko n.d.

6 Meller 1927: 180.

7 *Ibid.*: 183.

8 Sometimes transliterated as *Nova Generaciya* or *Nova Generaciya*.

9 Tsymbal n.d.

(Ukrainian, German, French and occasionally Esperanto) demonstrates the journal's ambition to take part in international discourse and a will for mutual permeation between the Ukrainian and European avant-gardes. It is therefore no major surprise that Tschichold's *Napoleon* movie poster, which he designed for the Phoebe Palast München, is reproduced in *Nova Generatsiia* 11 (October 1928).¹⁰ The same iconic references that were used in Tschichold's "little black book" appear on the pages of *Nova Generatsiia*: Piet Zwart, Kurt Schwitters, Otto Gedecker, and so on. (fig. 156)

With its small print run of 1000 copies, the journal's influence on the broader public must have been limited, and the role it played in disseminating Ivan Tschichold's work in the USSR remains unknown. However, this exemplifies the Soviet-Ukrainian left's attempts to introduce progressive Western typographic ideas to a local audience.

In his book, Krichevsky seems to know exactly the influence Moscow had on Ukrainian designers of the 1920s, but he does not bother with explanations. Instead, he uses disparaging irony when describing the idiosyncrasy of the Ukrainian artefacts he mentions. For instance, he muses whether examples of the letterform Я (ya) from Moscow, which he includes in his book, are "a contagious example of Ukrainians", or whether "a Muscovite independently came to such a decision".¹¹ (fig. 157) Strikingly, Krichevsky uses the Ukrainian adverb *samostyino* (independent, self-reliant) to describe the artefact. The term is used disapprovingly in Russian to describe something obstinate or unauthorised and is often employed in the context of Ukrainian independence as something unnatural and wrong. The year 2014, when Krichevsky's book was published, was also the year Russia annexed Crimea, which gives a whole new context to this kind of "irony". I encountered Krichevsky's texts relatively late, but I was attracted by his well-articulated, non-conformist style in design critique. Still, I could not take his vocabulary light-heartedly and my curiosity led to a short correspondence with him in 2022. One week before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he wrote to me: "I am convinced that there will be no war because this cannot happen. Don't forget that Russia (unlike, say, the Yankees) has never attacked anyone".¹² Famous last words. What had originally attracted me in his texts suddenly became a blunt manifestation of the Weimar Syndrome, teaching us another history lesson. On 24 February 2022, I sent him an image of a nine-story building, partly burned after a drone was shot down over it, commenting that Russia had attacked Kyiv. His reply: "Aren't your words 'Russia attacked' naive?" I have not heard that he changed his mind since; someone please let me know.

Ironically, Krichevsky's book is typeset in Shkol'naya, a typeface of "Yankee" origins whose Cyrillic version was developed in 1937–1939 by the type design department of NII Poligrafmash (the Polygraphmash Research Institute). It was based on a design by Linn Boyd Benton and Morris Fuller-Benton,

better known as "Century Schoolbook" (1918).¹³ Polygraphmash was a state research institute and the only type foundry in the USSR. After the October Revolution of 1917, all typefaces were expropriated from private enterprises and became state-owned. According to the plan-based economy, all the industries, including printing and

¹⁰ Mudrak 2018: 260. Mudrak erroneously mentions *Nova Generatsiia* 12.

¹¹ Krichevsky 2014: 69. Krichevsky seems to be referring to a stylistic difference between letter constructions, which were sometimes exaggerated in Ukrainian cases, and tended to be recognisably different from Soviet Russia.

¹² Vladimir Krichevsky, email message to the author, 23 February 2022.

¹³ Bolshakov, Grechiho and Shizgal 1964.

type-making, were a matter of revision and centralization. For this purpose, the OCT 1337 commission was created, which was formed of printing and type specialists. Only thirty-one typefaces passed the revision.¹⁴ The outcasted types were remelted for other purposes, and the missing ones had to be designed by the comrades at Polygraphmash. One of the new assignments was to create a font for schoolbooks, that later became known as “Shkol’naya”. Its history covers five decades of intensive usage, proving to be a success.

As one of the Polygraphmash designers, Mikhail Rovensky, recalled: “With the joint efforts of the Polygraphmash [...] our country not only got rid of the import of fonts and matrices, but also became an exporter itself”. The life of Shkol’naya continued at Paratype. The foundry began its activities during the Perestroika and was initially a department of ParaGraph, an IT company, before launching independently in 1989 with many former Polygraphmash employees as its staff. Paratype was licensed to manufacture and distribute Polygraphmash typefaces. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, followed by the economic disaster and business opportunities of the unfolding free market, Paratype skilfully revamped the typographic heritage from Polygraphmash for the newly emerging era of desktop publishing and became a quasi-monopoly in the field of Cyrillic type design. In the spirit of Rovenskiy’s quote above, Paratype took advantage of a policy called “import substitution”. The policy was implemented following the imposition of international sanctions on Russia after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, sanctions which also covered typefaces. After these sanctions were imposed, Monotype refused to license Times New Roman, used thus far by Russia as the mandatory typeface for official documents. Paratype soon developed its own, metric-compatible substitute, based on PT Serif, an open-source typeface bearing a certain resemblance to Times New Roman. These events led the type designer Frank Adebiaye to declare: “It is probably not exaggerated to talk about a new Cold War in type”.¹⁵

Far from being concerned with fonts, at the beginning of April 2022 we were facing the evidence of the mass killing of civilians in Bucha, a town near Kyiv, discovered after the Russian army retreated. In a public conversation on Facebook, the head of Paratype Anna Yakupova denied the mass killing, saying it must have been staged.¹⁶ Moreover, in September 2022, she welcomed the referenda held in the occupied territories of Ukraine, which were largely considered void by the international community.¹⁷ Yet I look at photographs of the DniproHES (Dnipro Hydroelectric Station) turbine hall and see “Yankee” generators with metal plaques bearing the General Electric logo. DniproHES was launched in 1932, and there is a photograph of El Lissitzky in front of huge waterfalls coming out of concrete structures adorned, of course, with *palochniy*, perhaps on the day of its opening ceremony.¹⁸ **(fig. 158)** The Holodomor, the man-made famine which began the same year in Ukraine, took 3.5 to 5 million people’s lives and is recognised by many governments as a genocide or at least a crime against humanity. Today, 28 May 2023, I still see Paratype’s fonts as part of MyFonts, Google Fonts (where PT Sans is the thirteenth most viewed font), and Adobe fonts libraries; they are still sold online. The company is now registered in the US, its director supports a state

sponsor of terrorism, and we want justice for Ukraine. And, perhaps, a New Typography for the country, supported by the Cyrillic type – made in Ukraine.

¹⁴ Golovchenko 2014.

¹⁵ Adebiaye n.d.

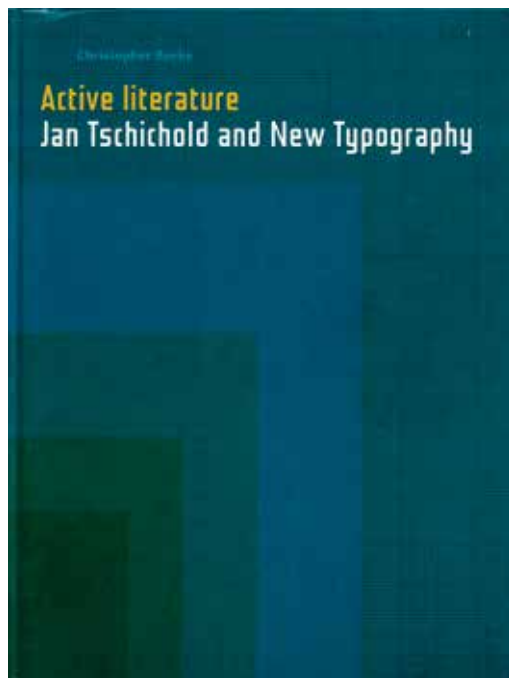
¹⁶ Rasskazov 2022.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Lissitzky-Küppers 1967: 60.



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fig. 148

Tschichold's sketch for the title of *Typo Foto Grafik* magazine, 1930. Tschichold planned this magazine, for which he saw himself as editor, but it was never realised.

fig. 149

The cover of Christopher Burke's *Active Literature* (2007), which features a revival of Jan Tschichold's modular typeface. Photo by Yevgen Anfalov



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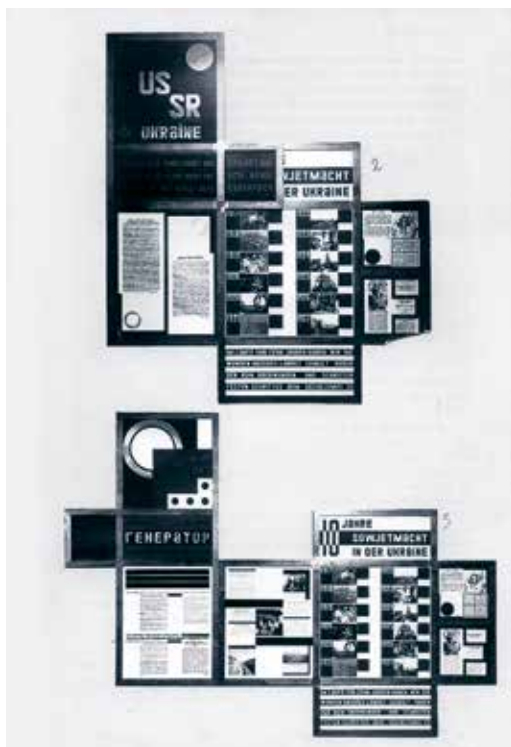

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fig. 150

KTF Yermilov, a modular display font following the typographical practice of Kharkiv avant-garde artist and designer Vasyl Yermilov, designed by Yevgen Anfalov and Oleś Gergun in 2021.

fig. 151

View of the billboard “Be Brave like Ukraine” in Times Square, New York City, April 2022.



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fig. 152 Vasyl Yermilov, *Kanatka*, wall newspaper, 1928, as published in Mudrak 2018. The typeface used here became the source for KTF Yermilov. Photo by Yevgen Anfalov



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fig. 153 Vadym Meller's set design – featuring *palochniy shrift* – for Les Kurbas's 1924 production of *Macbeth* at the Berezil Theatre in Kyiv.



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fig. 154

View of the Ukrainian section of the Soviet pavilion at the 1928 *Pressa*, an international press exhibition held in Cologne in 1928. The pavilion was overseen by Lissitzky, who supervised designers including Aleksandr Naumov, Sergei Senkin, Gustav Klutskis and Vadym Meller.





fig. 156

Tschichold's "Napoleon" movie poster as featured in *Nova Generatsiia*, 11, October 1928.

Русский палочный шрифт нередко предстаёт в особых формах, не лишенных конструктивистской логики, но всё-таки отклоняющихся от стилизованного стандарта диктату. Судя по таким графическим приёмам и приемам дизайнеров, особые манеры присутствия не собственно конструктивистам. В заголовке *Нижегородская армарка* обращают на себя внимание знаки Я, Ж и особенно Ж, смахивающие на фигуру какого-то экзотического идола. Задачей является пример уравнивания или москвичи самостоятельно дошли до прямых углов? Кстати, вот вам и нехитрый способ пространственного свёртывания длинного слова.

Очередной Фронт писал контрастным шрифтом со странным изгибанием. У Р. Мавля, художника, вдохновлённого узорами туркменских ковров, страшно всё (см. также пример 107).



В надписи *Ило* буквы расчленены, что знаменует органическое родство палочных и трафаретных построений. Но это всего лишь стилизация. К своему удивлению, я не знаю случая, чтобы кто-нибудь из палочников демонстративно набил шрифт по реальному шаблону.

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fig. 157 The page from the book *Dva Shrifta Odnoy Revolucii 1918–1919* (Two Fonts of the Same Revolution 1918–1919) by Vladimir Krichevsky (Moscow 2014) features an example of exaggerated letter constructions (see the letters Я, Ж and К for example).

fig. 158 El Lissitzky and Max Alpert (?) in front of the DniproHES dam, Zaporizhzhia, 1932. The letters on the dam are typical of *palochniy shrift*.

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