

THE SOVIET ARCHITECTURE PURGE

By Peter Blake*

FOR the past year the Soviet Government has been carrying out a drastic purge of the USSR Academy of Architecture because of the allegedly “pro-Western, pro-American and general cosmopolitan outlook of its leading members.” The purge was initiated on September 25th, 1948, in a *Pravda* article innocently entitled “Pending Questions of Soviet Architecture.” Stripped of several thousand words of doubletalk, the article put an end to modern architecture in the Soviet Union, banishing once and for all the “pessimistic formalism” of the West, and ushering in the “optimistic socialist realism” of a new “Soviet Victory Style.” Among the well-known architects who—to use, the *Pravda* euphemism—are now “pending,” there are such men as Karo Alabyan, D. E. Arkin, Boris Yofan, and others of their calibre.

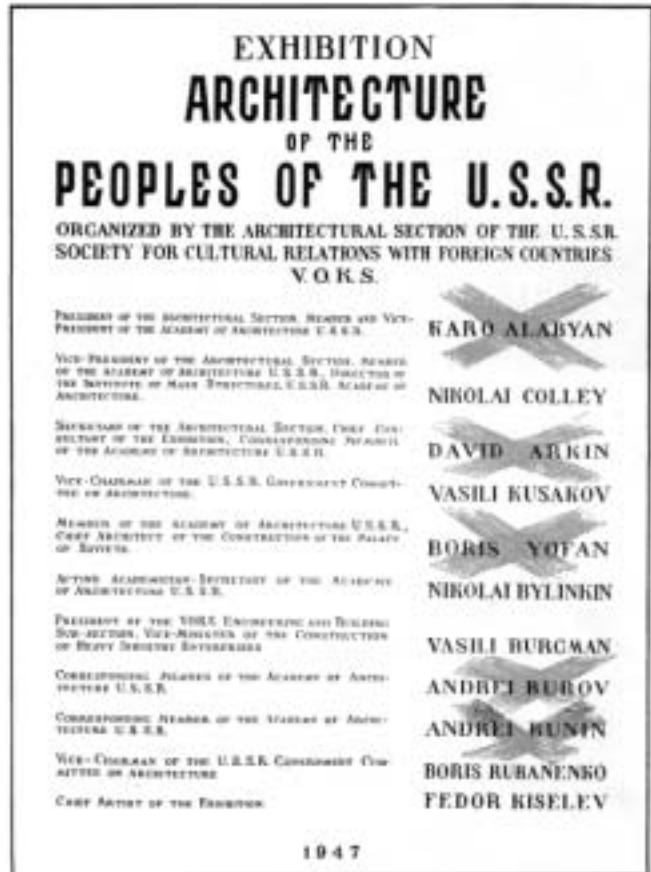
To understand this purge in architecture it is necessary to go back to the year 1931 when the competition for the new Soviet Palace was won by an “Italian Renaissance” monument—over the entries of Le Corbusier and others. Its reactionary eclecticism has had a profound influence upon Soviet work from that time until, roughly, the Nazi invasion.

Many Russian architects who showed the highest promise during the late Twenties were ordered by the Central Committee of the Party to turn to the classical orders, and the safe formulae tested in the “bourgeois” West. Topping their marble wedding cakes with gigantic talismans of Josef Stalin (“our wise leader and teacher, the greatest scholar of our epoch”), Soviet architects felt reasonably sure that they were taking all necessary precautions against the GPU. They had failed to realize, however, how terrified police states are of the freedom of thought of their own intellectuals. Party lines had to be modified and reversed, and artists had to be made to eat their own words and to recant their “sins” to prove their complete subservience.

At the end of the war, then, the Soviet regime switched once more and started along the road toward what the architect Loukouski has dubbed the “Soviet Victory Style.” Its appeal is three-fold: Neo-classicism, regionalism (preferably Byzantine), and “Socialist Realism” (which, in plain language means more 50-foot Stalins on the roof). But the most important aspect of this new style is its rejection of everything Western and its espousal of everything Eastern. Yalta’s palaces, in other words, rather than those of Florence.

This kind of switch was not as easy to make as it may appear. Let us examine the case of architect V. Shkvarikov, who visited Switzerland in the Spring of 1948 only to report (*Moscow New Times*, Aug. 4th, 1948) on the “amazingly poor

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Soviet propaganda exhibit was circulated among Western architectural groups in 1947. Its organizers, listed above, included prominent architects now in official disgrace (names crossed)

taste and architecturally low calibre” of Swiss construction work. He had a special jibe for Le Corbusier’s *Clarté* apartments in Geneva: “Against the background of the picturesque Swiss landscape the building looked like an absurd, alien growth . . . nothing in common with the people . . . doomed to wither away.” If Shkvarikov was trying to make sure that he would not be suspected of capitalist infection, he failed miserably. Barely two months after his return from the picturesque Swiss landscape, *Pravda* sailed into poor Shkvarikov’s book on city planning: “This ‘work’ does not reveal either the



The Palace of Soviets. Architects B. Yofan, V. Gelfreich and V. Shchuko won 1931 competition. Birth of "Soviet Realism."



Central Theatre of the Soviet Army. Architects K. Alabyan and V. Simbirtsev. The Red Star shaped plan was approved.



Foreground: "Socialist Realism." Background: Agricultural Mechanization Building by architect Andreyev. Foreground has won out



Architects' Club in Moscow. Architect A. Burov interprets architectural Party Line

nature, or the principles, or the vast achievements of Soviet architecture which are the expression of Stalinist care for humanity . . . it does not disclose the degeneration of bourgeois architectural science . . . faulty ideological positions . . . slavish prostration . . . antiscientific . . . ideological poverty . . ." the *Pravda* review sputters on through several hundred increasingly incoherent and venomous words written by none other than Shkvarikov's "traveling companion to Switzerland, the architect A.V. Vlassov.

The tirade against Shkvarikov was no exception. The archi-

itects Tsires and Gabrichevski are also "pending." *Pravda* accused them of "lack of political consciousness . . . bourgeois objectivity and formalism . . . faulty anti-Marxist ideas." The school of Zholtovski is said to have "assisted the growth of formalistic tendencies, the development of an ideology repugnant to us fostered the perverted training of future architects. The architect Polyakov built "a series of . . . frightful projects . . . of bad artistic taste . . ." Brod and Khrakov's work "reminds one of a soulless barracks." Velikanov's projects "are akin to that which the Soviet people long ago christened 'box style',"—and so forth.[†]

Next, we have the architect A. K. Burov, a brilliant former editor of Soviet magazines on modern architecture, and a man renowned for his excellent work on prefabrication. He had innocently written that the Soviet "perception of architecture is overburdened with historical sediments . . . In America, new ideas in architecture, freed from nihilism . . . and working through industry, began to germinate new organic architectural forms, a simple, clear language . . ." To architect Burov *Pravda* said that his "clear expression of the anti-popular ideology of neo-constructivism is an example of the slavish deference to the decadent art of architecture in America, a slander on Soviet art and on our building industry!" A little farther on the editors of *Pravda* get caught up in their own nonsense:—It is to be regretted," they regret, "that the Union of Architects . . . is not fond of creative discussion and criticism." No one seems to know what is meant by "creative" or by "criticism." Karo Alabyan, for example, as President of the Union in 1946, tried to be creative and mildly critical when he said: "So far we have no systematized work on the theory of architecture. . . . This has a negative effect on our architectural-constructive practice." On March 21st, 1949, this started to have "a negative effect" on Alabyan! On that day he and

[†] I wish to express my appreciation to the New York office of TASS, the official Soviet News Agency, which provided me with the copy of *Pravda* which contained the statements quoted above. P. B.

five colleagues were told that they had “hampered the development of true Soviet architectural science by having continued to grovel before the bourgeois models . . . of the U.S. . . .” Among this particular group of “pending” architects was D. F. Arkin who had only a year earlier indignantly told the editors of the Architectural Review that “architecture in the USSR, socialist in content, is developing in national forms . . . free from the corrupting influence of the capitalist market . . .” How Stalinist does an architect have to be in the USSR, one wonders, to please Josef Stalin? The answer is, perhaps, not too hard to find. The Soviet regime has long ago liquidated all those who objected to it on questions of principle. The two dozen-odd architects who have been under continuous and merciless attack since September, 1948** are probably denounced as the “Titos” of architecture—men with whom there is no basic quarrel of principle, but only a quarrel of loyalties. Their crime is to have looked to the West for inspiration, rather than to the walls of the Kremlin. They forgot that in the USSR there are not only travel restrictions upon men, but also upon men’s thoughts.

However vague some Western architects may be on the facts of this situation, the editors of *Pravda* are admirably candid. Of modern Western architecture they say: “It has arrived at a hopeless impasse of formalistic perversions and box-like, soulless building, behind which hide complete poverty of spirit and nihilism. . . . This architecture has clearly degenerated into the fashion of serving only the perverted, diseased tastes of bankers, and coupon clippers.” And lest the architects of the USSR harbor any doubts, the editors of *Pravda* unmistakably hold out their mailed fist: “We must . . . frankly disclose,” they warn, “serious perversions in the theory and practice of architecture, resolutely and swiftly root them out, and confidently advance our Soviet architecture on the road appointed by the Party and the Government!”

To students of the purge trials, this is familiar prosecutor’s talk. Not so familiar is the fact that it has also become an accepted form of Soviet art criticism. At the All-Union con-

**Among them are: K. S. Atobyan, D. E. Arkin, D. A. Aronovitch, Z. Brod, A. Bunin, A. K. Burov, A. Gabrichevski, S. A. Kaufman, B. Y. Khiger, A. Khrakov, M. Polyakov, V. Shkvarikov, U. Sherdayev, A. Tsires, M. Varshch, A. Velikonov, B. Yofon, Z. Zakharov, and Zlobin.

Design for apartments. Architect Alabyan “hampered development of Soviet architecture . . . groveled before U. S. models”



ference of Dramatists, in November, 1946, Soviet artists were told by propagandist Constantin Simonov: “Too often have we failed to realize that we have fought, are fighting, and will continue to fight; and that our art is no museum of historical arms, but an *arsenal intended for war!*”



Barvikha Sanatorium. Architect B. Yofan. Relapse into “poverty of spirit and nihilism.”



Design for Power Station at Kiev. Architect Burov is accused of “slavish deference to . . . decadent . . . architecture” in U. S.

Pravda, whose editors abhor modern architecture, is printed in this “perverted, and soulless barracks—of bad artistic taste.”

