The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

From Silver Age to Stupidity

By Alexei Bayer

May 02, 2011



Last week, there was an unmarked anniversary: 120 years since the birth of an extraordinary Russian, Nikolai Bruni. The only reason he is remembered at all is because he belonged to an illustrious family descending from a Swiss-Italian nobleman who moved to Russia in the early 19th century. It is an artistic dynasty whose members remain active on the Russian arts scene to this day.

Bruni was 47 when he was killed in 1938. His life puts a human face both on Russia's artistic, cultural and technological efflorescence in the early 20th century and, in one of history's strangest twists, on a deliberate destruction of the nation's best and brightest and a senseless squandering of its potential.

Bruni was one of the first graduates of a St. Petersburg lyceum founded by Prince Vyacheslav Tenishev. Its other students included writer Vladimir Nabokov and poet Osip Mandelstam. Bruni spoke several languages, finished the St. Petersburg Conservatory and in his early 20s became an accomplished poet in a fertile artistic movement known as Russia's Silver Age.

Today, the country's culture is a provincial backwater. Few people in the world know any Russian actors, watch Russian films, listen to Russian music, give high-profile commissions to Russian architects or are aware of Russian visual arts. Russian writers have a marginal presence, at best, in world literature.

It was not so at the start of the 20th century. Leo Tolstoy was a worldwide literary giant, plays by Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky were staged in theaters around the world, Igor Stravinsky shined in music, and the artistic achievements of Vasily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich, among others, determined the course of development in visual arts.

According to Karl Marx, culture is but the tip of a firmament comprised of economics, science and technology. In these areas, too, Russia excelled and was poised for greatness. It started developing later than the United States and Germany, but after its 1905 defeat in the Russian-Japanese war it covered a lot of ground in less than 10 years. It was a continent-sized country with boundless natural resources and a large population and offered excellent education for those who had a chance to go to school.

It was also a melting pot not unlike the United States, in which numerous nationalities from the periphery of its empire assimilated into Russian culture. When World War I broke out in 1914, Bruni volunteered and was eventually sent to a flight school. He became a hero pilot, earning a St. George's Cross for exceptional bravery and flying skills. He learned enough about airplanes to become an engineer and designer, working on early helicopters and teaching at the Moscow Aviation Institute.

During the 1930s, Bruni was repeatedly arrested and exiled, first on charges of espionage and then, when he was ordained as an Orthodox priest, for his religious beliefs. He was executed in the gulag, and the fact that he had been a pioneer of Soviet aviation and had fought for the Reds during the Civil War didn't help him. His wife and six children lived in exile, not learning about his fate until 1956. Actually, they were never told that he had been shot, only that he died at a labor camp.

Bruni came of age in a country that had all the potential of becoming a leading world power. Why it decided to turn upon itself and destroy this enormous potential will probably always remain a mystery. Bruni was one of tens of thousands of brilliant, educated and accomplished young men who fell victim to Russia's own criminal stupidity.

Alexei Bayer, a native Muscovite, is a New York-based economist.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/05/02/from-silver-age-to-stupidity-a6698