



A Common Space of Historical Knowledge? *Russia* and Architectural Histories of Violence

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This field note responds to the EAHN Thematic Conference 'States in Between' and revisits a book by the author in light of the violence currently unfolding in Europe following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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‘States in Between’, the EAHN thematic conference held in Helsinki in June 2023, registered a shift in the conditions for writing histories of architecture and urbanism in Eastern Europe and Northeast Eurasia. The conference was originally planned to take place in St. Petersburg but relocated to Helsinki following the Russian Federation’s criminal and devastating invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, an escalation of the conflict that has been ongoing since 2014. In these circumstances, the relocation signified more than just a change of venue: it signalled an urgent need to reevaluate and rearticulate the conceptual geographies and power relations that underpin writing about the territories that have been dominated by Russian imperial and Soviet systems. The war in Ukraine compelled me to reassess my own writing on the architecture of the region. Aware of the perils of a Russo-centric lens, I went looking for blind spots in my own work with a perspective redefined by the violence unfolding in Europe. I reread my book *Russia: Modern Architectures in History* (2015), haunted by the thought that it might have been insufficiently critical of Russia’s imperial history and neo-colonial ambitions. I tried to read it against the grain with a viewpoint informed by the discussions that unfolded at ‘States in Between’ and the ideas presented at another event that preceded it by about 30 years, a symposium held in Moscow in April 1991.

I could not help drawing parallels between this overlooked but significant conference, which I knew about from its published proceedings, and ‘States in Between’. Convened by the Institute for the Theory and History of Architecture and Urban Planning, the Moscow Architecture Institute, and the Union of Soviet Architects, the conference was titled ‘Problems for the Study of the History of Soviet Architecture’. Its organisers — like the organisers of ‘States in Between’ — anticipated that historiography about architecture in Soviet Russia, the Union republics, and the USSR as a whole would be shaken by a major geopolitical event: the impending collapse of the Soviet Union. Most participants were based in Moscow, and the atmosphere of the conference enabled them to state previously unspeakable truths.¹ But nobody challenged the category of Soviet architecture with the same force as contributors from the Union republics, whose written contributions to the event appeared in the proceedings (*Vystupleniia, podannye v pis'mennom vide 1991*).

Through a case study of the career of Estonian architect Alar Kotli, Mart Kalm deftly showed that one of the problems for the study of Soviet architecture was how much continuity there was between national building traditions and architectural demands imposed by the Soviet system (*Vystupleniia, podannye v pis'mennom vide 1991*: 116–118). Jonas Minkevičius, author of the 1987 *Arkhitektura sovetskoi Litvy* (Architecture of Soviet Lithuania), pointed out that the Soviet period in Lithuanian architecture lasted exactly fifty years, coming to an end with Lithuania’s declaration of independence on 11 March 1990 (*Vystupleniia, podannye v pis'mennom vide 1991*: 132–133). The

key question had been answered as far as Minkevičius was concerned. He maintained that Lithuanian architecture of the Soviet period could only be understood as an act of ‘cultural and spiritual resistance’ to ‘Soviet imperial totalitarianism’ (Stenogramma kruglogo stola 16 aprelia 1991: 133).

The proceedings of the Moscow conference included a supplement that resonates with both the name and the themes of ‘States in Between.’ Compiled by Iurii Volchok, a Russian architectural historian and the general editor of the proceedings, this section was devoted to the ‘geography of history’ that underpinned research on Soviet architecture. It attempted to map architectural development across the USSR through 15 book reviews, each of which focused on a title from a 1987 series of volumes on the architecture of the Union republics (Figure 1). Most of these reviews were written by authors who worked in Moscow. In his review of the Ukrainian volume, I. Tsytovich bemoaned its lack of attention to historic preservation and the revival of interest in national architectural forms in the 1980s, which he maintained ‘strengthened the sense of a monolithic Soviet architecture’ conveyed by the book (1991: 190). The review of the Lithuanian volume, however, displayed nothing of the directness that Minkevičius brought to the table.

Considering its purchase on themes discussed during ‘States in Between’, it is worth dwelling on Volchok’s essay on the geography of history that framed these book



Figure 1: Covers of the fifteen books on the architecture of the Soviet republics published in Moscow by Stroizdat in 1987. Images from author’s collection.

reviews. He stressed the need to find a ‘common space of historical knowledge’ for the future study of Soviet architecture. But he thought the new sovereignty claimed by Union republics risked ‘cutting off “horizontal” connections among architectural cultures’, thus requiring the ‘formation of a common field of historical research on architecture in the republics’ (1991: 184). The imminent independence of the republics demanded the recognition of simple facts like the proximity and exchange between such countries as Estonia and Finland or Moldova and Romania. It is hard to disagree with such a minor revision of received patterns of Soviet architectural historiography.

The ‘common space of historical knowledge’ that Volchok envisioned had an additional precondition. The ‘stereotypical’ idea that the development of Soviet architecture proceeded along a ‘one-way route from the centre to the republics’ had to be rejected. Volchok insisted that ‘the masters of the capital’ — architects based in Moscow — ‘not only introduced a new quality of architecture to the periphery [*na mesta*] but also learned many new things by trying to understand local conditions’ (1991: 184).

This idea is difficult to endorse. Volchok pointed to Aleksei Shchusev’s work as evidence of this alleged transfer from the periphery to the centre, but it is hard to understand how Shchusev’s experience of designing the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Tbilisi (1933–1938) or the Alisher Navoiy Theatre in Tashkent (1933–1947), for example, either informed his designs for other sites or mitigated the asymmetry between ‘the masters of the capital’ and recipient republics (Figure 2). Concerns like those raised by Minkevičius in 1991 and the violence currently unfolding in Ukraine

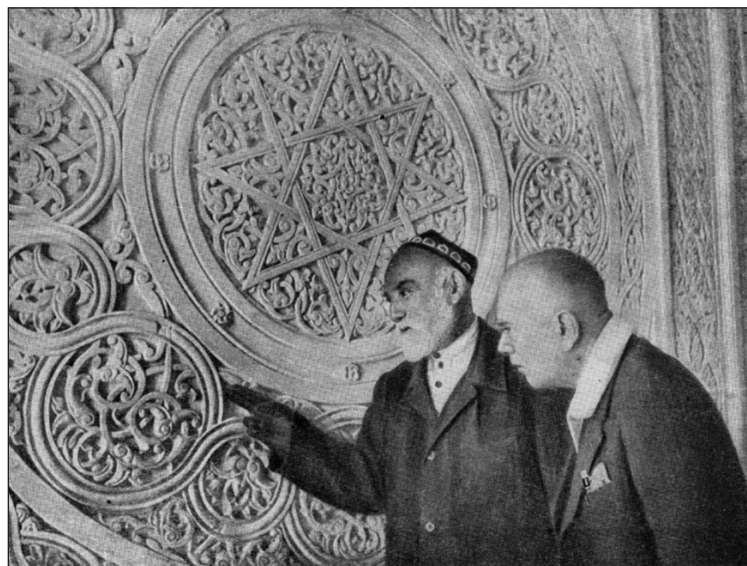


Figure 2: Aleksei Shchusev (right) with master craftsman Toshpo'lat Arslonqulov at the Alisher Navoiy Theatre in Tashkent. From Sokolov (1952).

push us to describe this line of thought in clearer terms: Volchok's assertion that local conditions and subjugated nations had an edifying influence on actors in Moscow sounds like a validation of colonial architectural relationships. This claim is not only unconvincing. It is also a form of violence.

But such problems were not Volchok's primary focus. He thought the real question facing historians was how to dissolve barriers between the study of architecture within the USSR and the rest of the world, especially given that in Moscow it was a well-established practice to teach histories of Soviet and foreign architecture as separate courses in schools of architecture.² Volchok appealed to Russia's long tradition of studying the dialogue between the East and West as a suitable framework for bridging this gap. But today one wonders if the centre and periphery and East and West dichotomies that Volchok relied on are adequate for mapping out the complex power relations that have shaped the territories in question. The loss of 'horizontal' connections that Volchok feared would follow in the wake of the USSR's collapse cannot be explained in terms of such binary oppositions. Volchok's idea of horizontality strikes me as very different from that of Piotr Piotrowski, whose proposal for a 'horizontal history of art' (2009) that might overcome binary modes of thinking framed many of the discussions at 'States in Between'.

Rereading Volchok's essay, I was struck by the fact that he cited Jean-Louis Cohen's *Le Corbusier et la mystique de l'URSS* (1987) as an exemplary model of scholarship. Cohen was present at every session of 'States in Between' and delivered its keynote lecture, thus linking two moments of crisis — the disintegration of the USSR and the Russian invasion of Ukraine — for historians concerned with the architecture and built environment of Eastern Europe and Eurasia. If we are to situate the study of Soviet architecture in a 'common space of historical knowledge', then we need to respond to the challenges raised by each of these crises in turn.

It was with such demands in mind that I returned to my book to evaluate my own effort in surveying architecture produced over the past 150 years under the Russian Empire, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, and the Russian Federation. The book is part of the series *Modern Architectures in History* published by Reaktion Books, which explores the many different national contexts in which modern architecture emerged. I conceived *Russia*, which I wrote between 2011 and 2014, as an international history of a national architecture. Its aim was to describe the architectural production of Russian institutions, including design offices, the Orthodox Church, the armed forces, and railways as well as schools that attracted and educated students from a wide range of places. Attention to the institutional dimensions of Russia's architecture allowed me to show how architecture and urbanism allowed the country

to traverse its own borders in myriad and complex ways. The book was conceived, in part, to heed Volchok's call that Russian and Soviet architecture be studied within an international context.

I also sought to bring specific features of Russian architectural production into focus. Rereading the book now, I noticed that I do consistently highlight the violence associated with state and party initiatives throughout the text. I describe Russia's colonial expansion into Manchuria, in present-day China, through the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway and the creation of new urban ensembles. In 1899, the Polish-Russian architect Kazimierz Skolimowski, who had studied in both Munich and St. Petersburg, began laying out the plan for the city of Dal'nyi, known today as Dalian, that incorporated racially segregated zones, one for Chinese and another for Europeans.³ I also outline how, during the 1930s, prison labour was used to construct the Moscow-Volga canal and how Moscow State University was built with the help of the gulag system in the 1940s and 1950s.⁴ Such episodes demonstrate that Russian architectural production has long been conditioned by the brutality of the country's leadership. On rereading my text, I thought that this brutality comes through to a degree, but I found myself wishing I had made such connections more explicit in certain cases. Although the building is not discussed in *Russia*, I should note that Shchusev's theatre in Tashkent was completed with the forced labour of prisoners from the Japanese Army (**Figure 3**).



Figure 3: Alisher Navoiy Theatre, Tashkent. Plaque commemorating Japanese soldiers who were deported to Tashkent and forced to work on the construction of the building from 1945 to 1946. Photo by author, 2016.

The violence of Soviet architectural production was particularly acute in Ukraine, and I could have made these connections clearer in *Russia*. The construction of the Dniprohes Hydroelectric Station in Zaporizhzhia is a case in point (**Figure 4**). It features in *Russia* because its design was delivered by Moscow architects Viktor Vesnin, Nikolai Kolli, and Georgii Orlov. In the book I outline how Joseph Stalin implemented policies intended to starve the countryside, creating the famines of the Holodomor that killed millions in Ukraine, and how the Communist Party turned the coal mines of the Donets Basin into tributaries for the USSR's campaign for industrialization, but I did not make the relationship between these processes and architectural and urban development explicit. If I were to rewrite these sections today, I would follow Serhii Plokyh and others who point out that population growth and urbanization in Zaporizhzhia were driven by the starvation of the countryside (2016: 246–248). Vesnin's design for the Dniprohes turbine hall was part of the project of forced industrialization that depended on the displacement of populations fleeing the starvation created by grain requisitions demanded by the Communist Party. That last sentence contains a long chain of relationships, but it has become more urgent than ever to render such connections visible.



Figure 4: Hydroelectric dam and turbine hall, Dniprohes, Zaporizhzhia, 1929–1931. Architectural design by Viktor Vesnin, Nikolai Kolli, and Georgii Orlov. From *SSSR na stroike*, no. 3 (1934); graphic design by Nikolai Troshin.

As I read *Russia* with a specific focus on the place of Ukraine in the text, I fastened on my inclusion of many projects that stand on Ukrainian territory. The buildings I discuss in Kharkiv, Kyiv, and Crimea serve to demonstrate the complex colonial relationships

that have shaped Russia's architecture. We find an example of how a colonial logic was internalised and propagated by Ukrainian architectural officials in the celebration of the 'tercentenary of the reunification of Ukraine with Russia' in 1954 — a series of events that commemorated the Pereiaslav Council of 1654, during which Bohdan Khmelnytsky accepted the protection of Muscovy. Serhy Yekelchuk calls the events of 1954 the final, posthumous, enactment of Stalinist models of remembrance (2004: 154). The Kyiv-based journal *Arkhitektura i budivnytstvo* (Architecture and construction) commemorated the occasion with articles praising the work of 'Russian' architects, including Shchusev, Vesnin, Ivan Fomin, Vladimir Shchuko, Lev Rudnev, and others, in Ukraine both before and after the October Revolution (*Vikovichna druzhba ukrains'koho i rosiis'koho narodiv 1954*). While the journal praised Shchusev's work — as Volchok would decades later — it failed to mention that he was born to a Ukrainian family in Chişinău, today the capital of Moldova but part of the Russian empire at the time of his birth (Shchusev [1938] 2011). *Arkhitektura i budivnytstvo* also summarised a session of the Academy of Architecture of the Ukrainian SSR that marked the tercentenary. The president of the academy, Volodymyr Zabolotnyi, concluded his remarks by stating that 'the participation of talented representatives of Russian Soviet Architecture in construction in Ukraine has had exceptional meaning for the further development of Soviet Ukrainian architecture, for elevating the level of professionalism of our architectural cadres' (*Nerushyma druzhba rosiis'kykh i ukrains'kykh zodchykh 1954*: 14). Such statements, and the tercentenary as a whole, served to reinforce the idea that Russia and Ukraine belonged together, with Russia serving as the model superior nation. It was this understanding of Russian and Ukrainian architectural relationships that Volchok had sought to complicate with his assertion, discussed above, of a two-way transfer of architectural knowledge between Moscow and the Union republics. But, caught in the binary opposition of centre and periphery, such a perspective served to reinforce the colonial relationships that underpinned Soviet models of historiography.

The architectural manifestations of events like the supposed Russo-Ukrainian tercentenary also register a much simpler fact: Ukraine has long served as a territory for the exercise of Russia's architectural ambitions, although the genealogies of 'Russian' architectural projects executed in Ukraine were at times more complex than they might initially seem. The Derzhprom building in Kharkiv is a prime example of the entanglement of myriad sites and cultures in a single building (**Figure 5**). The project features prominently in one of *Russia's* chapters, and Zabolotnyi included its lead designer, Sergei Serafimov, in his roster of 'Russian' architects who had made an impact on Ukraine. Serafimov was working in Leningrad when the competition for Derzhprom was announced in 1925, but he was born in Trabzon in the Ottoman Empire and moved across the Black Sea to train at the Odesa school of art before moving to St. Petersburg to

study at the imperial academy. The coauthors of the winning project for the Derzhprom competition also had rich biographies: Samuil Kravets was born in Vilnius and studied in Petrograd with Ivan Fomin, while Mark Fel'ger was born in Odesa and also studied at the imperial academy in St. Peterburg. These biographies call attention to the many layers of experience that contributed to a building like Derzhprom. It was designed for Ukraine from Russia, and it was the product of training at Russian institutions. We require finer analytical tools than the attribution of nationality to understand the relationships it manifests. The format and purpose of *Russia* as a survey text meant it could not elaborate of these types of questions in detail, but discussions at the 'States in Between' conference gave me the opportunity to examine them anew.



Figure 5: Derzhprom Building, Kharkiv, 1925–1928. Design by Sergei Serafimov, Mark Fel'ger, and Samuil Kravets. Photo by author, 2009.

As I reread *Russia*, I also noted the centrality of certain Ukrainian figures to architectural culture in Russia and the USSR as a whole. The historian, editor, and theorist Mykhailo Tsapenko served as the mouthpiece for ideological architectural confrontations between the USSR and the USA in the late 1940s and early 1950s. His 1952 book *O realisticheskikh osnovakh sovetskoï arkhitektury* (On the realist foundations of Soviet architecture) pitted the doctrine of socialist realism against modernist movements of the 1920s and the architecture of the 'capitalist West' (1952). This book was unlike any other work of architectural theory published in the late Stalin era, and its impact was felt throughout the USSR and beyond (Figure 6).⁵ Tsapenko was, of course, Ukrainian. He studied at the Moscow Architecture Institute and became a member of in the Moscow-based Academy of Architecture of the USSR in the 1930s. Ukrainian domestic architecture was the subject of some of his earliest articles. In the 1950s he moved to Kyiv and served as editor of *Arkhitektura i budivnytstvo* and director of the history and theory institute at Ukraine's architecture academy. Anatolii Polianskii's career offers a different perspective on the

Russo-Ukrainian architectural relationship. Born in Avdiivka, a theatre of the current war in Ukraine, Polianskii studied in Moscow. Some of his major works are in Crimea (Figure 7). The New Artek pioneer camp (begun 1959) is in Hurzuf, just north of Yalta. Polianskii, however, built his career in Moscow, where he served as general director of the Central Institute for Medicinal-Resort Buildings and later as secretary for the Union of Architects of the USSR. Tsapenko's and Polianskii's stories demonstrate the importance of Ukraine to Russia's architectural history.

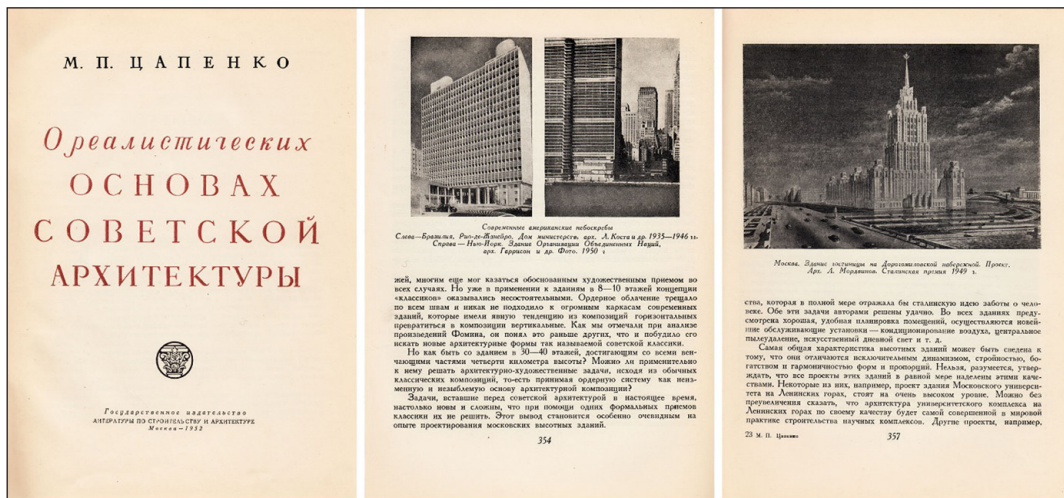


Figure 6: Pages from M. P. Tsapenko's *O realizaticheskikh osnovakh sovetskoi arkhitektury* (On the realist foundations of Soviet architecture [1952]): title page (left); page featuring critical comments on the Ministry of Education Building, Rio de Janeiro, and the United Nations Building, New York (centre); page featuring Hotel Ukraine, Moscow (right).



Figure 7: A. Polianskii, Artek pioneer camp, Hurzuf, Morskoi Section, 1959–1965. From Polianskii (1966).

I find myself hyperaware of imperfections in my published work. When reading *Russia* after 'States in Between' and during the war in Ukraine, the spelling of surnames and placenames became salient. In many cases I offered the Ukrainian spelling on first use (i.e., Kharkiv vs. Khar'kov), but in some instances the Russian spelling appears normative, the result of the fact that I was aiming to offer an account of Russia's architecture from the perspective of predominantly Russian source material. That led to one typo that has haunted me for years: at one point in drafting the text, I transcribed the name Revel' from a Russian source as Riga, swapping the German name for Tallinn (Reval) and the capital of Latvia. Such errors happen even with a team of proofreaders, but this one has always induced a feeling of compunction, as if a scholar writing on Russia showed a lack of care when working with subjugated territories. Does this error betray a colonialist bias embedded within my own training? Possibly. But the recognition of this possibility is essential if the ambition of the 'States in Between' conference to develop new ways of thinking and speaking about architecture in the region is to be realized.

At present, it is not possible to conclude these reflections. War is ongoing in Ukraine, and as Sofia Dyak has written, we should expect the coming postwar period to last a very long time (2023). The reevaluation of the historiography of the architecture of Eastern Europe and Northeast Eurasia will be a very long-term project. Today the 'common space of historical knowledge' that Volchok proposed as the horizon of possibility for studies of the Soviet architectural world seems distant. We need first to better understand the complex geographies and asymmetrical power relations that produced the architecture of territories subjected to Russian and Soviet domination. This short text is but a humble attempt to draw out of my own writing topics and problems provoked by the wide-ranging discussions that unfolded in Helsinki last year. For better or worse, the exercise reminded me that the violence wielded by the current Russian regime is not a new phenomenon. It is part of the history of its politics and its architecture.

Notes

- ¹ Andrei Kossinskii was particularly irreverent during the roundtable discussions of 16 April (Stenogramma kruglogo stola 16 apreliia 1991: 56).
- ² At the Moscow Architecture Institute, for example, I. I. Savitskii delivered a series of lectures on the architecture of capitalist countries at the same time that he offered a course on the history of Soviet architecture. Savitskii published a book (1973) that became a standard textbook for architecture students in many parts of the USSR.
- ³ Since *Russia* was written, more has been uncovered about Skolimowski's life and career. See Levoshko (2015).
- ⁴ Katherine Zubovich has described the 'urban Gulag' that contributed to the construction of Moscow's high-rises (2020: 163–168).
- ⁵ Excerpts from Tsapenko's writing were translated into a number of languages in the people's democracies in Europe. His text was also picked up as far away as Brazil, where João Batista Vilanova Artigas cited it in a 1954 article. I thank Anna Kats for highlighting the Brazilian reception of Tsapenko's work.

Competing Interests

The author was involved in preliminary discussions about the thematic conference that became 'States in Between', but he was not a member of the Scientific Committee. The author served as the respondent for one of the conference panels.

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