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## CHAPTER 8

### Mirror images

#### On Soviet-Western reflections in children's books of the 1920s and 1930s

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This chapter compares the Soviet and the Western children's books of the 1920s–1930s. The creative output of the Soviet innovative artists and writers was in many respects isomorphic to the production of the modernist left artists and educators in the West. The various kinds of formal experiments in the sphere of visual representation are considered in detail. An important topic that is investigated is the “production book”, the genre of children's books about machines and about how things are made. It corresponds with the idea of “here and now” proclaimed by the American educator Lucy Sprague Mitchell. A special emphasis is placed on the demonstration of similarities in the concepts of the New Man (Soviet) and the New Generation (American).

It is usually taken for granted that the Russian avant-garde of the 1910s to the 1920s was one of the world's brightest artistic trends of that time. However, in the last few years, this movement has been increasingly reassessed in the context of the international history of art, and its exclusivity has rightly been diminished. In numerous publications, Russian and European artists have been scrutinized side by side, and similarities in style, movements, and cultural context have been highlighted. Regarding children's picturebooks and illustrated books, however, this work has barely begun. Therefore, I intend to investigate the mutual dependencies and confluences of artists who worked on children's books in Soviet Russia, Western Europe, and the USA; this includes European and American artists, as well as Russian émigrés. This chapter will demonstrate that, beneath official (or, shall we say, asserted ideological differences, there was a certain unifying *Zeitgeist* shared by most avant-garde and modernist artists and writers. Here, it is appropriate to clarify the distinction: to avoid a conflation of avant-garde and Modernism,

I identify “avant-garde” as a concrete expression of Modernism – a broad pan-European flow that began in the last third of the nineteenth century – that was most radical and innovatively charged and had its heyday in the 1910s and early 1920s.

Modernism, however, refers to the art from the mid-twenties and thirties, most often to Constructivist (in the USSR) and Art Deco (in Western Europe and the USA) stylistics. Moreover, it is also important to demarcate the notions ‘modernist’ and ‘left’. These two terms are often used interchangeably. However, some artists used many formal features of Modernism while possessing, at the same time, quite bourgeois and traditional tastes in their social life. In contrast, some left revolutionaries in politics could be traditional and even aesthetically archaic (take, for instance, the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, also known as AKhRR in the Russian abbreviation, which chose to resurrect the worn-out clichés of Russian Realism of the 1860s-1880s).

If the Soviet experience was not unique, and Soviet and American illustrations and poems for children, for example, were somehow similar to each other, might there have been a similar ideology at work? If this was the case, why did America and Western European countries never experience what happened to art and society in Russia – which had practically ceased to exist as the Russia known before the revolution had mutated into the USSR? The short and blunt answer is that radical art in countries other than Russia did not receive state support and legitimization, and it remained a private experiment. The social background was different, and only in Russia was artistic and social radicalism ushered so hurriedly into the mainstream. Given this, the similarities in the development of a new aesthetics in the USSR and in the West are quite spectacular and deserve a detailed explanation. These correspondences were multifaceted and genetically and typologically alike.

Furthermore, before analyzing the most typical examples and turning points, the following three crucial aspects should be taken into consideration: Firstly, modernist tendencies determine Russian and Western artists and authors. Secondly, works by Russian Soviet artists exerted a direct influence on those by Western artists. This influence was, in most cases, channeled through exhibitions and bookstores. For example, there was a famous exhibition of Soviet children’s books in Paris in 1929, with an introductory article to the catalogue written by Blaise Cendrars.<sup>1</sup> The article was wildly enthusiastic. The exhibition was organized

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1. *Exposition le Livre d'Enfant en U.R.S.S: 27 avril-22 mai*/Paris: Editions Bonaparte. 1929. By the way, in the opinion of Béatrice Michielsen, the French specialist in Soviet children’s books, Cendrars most probably did not see the exhibition and wrote his accolades as an expression of his *bolchévisant* persuasion (from an e-mail letter to the author from 22 March 2011).

in the bookstore “Editions Bonaparte”, on rue Bonaparte, 12. Across the street was another popular bookstore belonging to a publisher, Jacques (Yakov) Povolozky, who sold Soviet books alongside his own. He took part in the preparation of that exhibition too. Similar large exhibitions by the Soviet state publishing house Gosizdat (where the Children’s Department had been quite prominent since 1924) were held in the same year of 1929 in Berlin, Essen, Zurich, and Amsterdam.<sup>2</sup> (The whole series of exhibitions in America is detailed later on.)

Finally, Russian émigré artists played a seminal role in the Western artistic and publishing process. Thus, in France the impact of Russian artists on children’s books was clearly discernible. Young artists of Russian extraction, Nathalie Parain (née Natalia Chelpanova), Hélène (Elena) Guertik, Rojan (Feodor Rojankovsky), Nathan Altman, Chem (Alexandre Chemetov) and Yury Cherkosov, worked for the popular series of “Les Albums du Père Castor”, issued by the Flammarion publishing house. The mature avant-garde artist Alexandra Exter also collaborated there. In the USA, many Russian artists were involved in illustrating and designing children’s books too; these included Constantin Alajalov, Boris Artzybasheff, Vladimir Bobri (Bobrinsky), Vera Bok, Samuel Glanskoff, Nadezhda Grishina, Ben Kucher, Nikolai Mordvinoff, Fedor Nadezhin, Feodor Rojankovsky, Esphyr Slobodkina, and others. These artists had varying degrees of talent and innovation, but three of the above mentioned were recipients of the prestigious Caldecott Medal for the best work of the year in children’s book illustration. As for Esphyr Slobodkina, she was a prominent abstract painter who served for many years as the chairperson of the board of the American Abstract Artists Association.

### Let us be as children, or the cruel games of the avant-garde

“The avant-garde harps on the theme of the child” wrote, rather acerbically, Esther Averill in Paris in 1930 (Averill 1930:89). From their first manifestos, Futurists declared an affinity between avant-garde and youth. “Make room for youth, for violence, for daring!” wrote Umberto Boccioni et al. (Boccioni et al. 1910). In Russia, where the Union of Youth artistic association was organized in 1912, the interest in childhood amongst avant-garde artists and authors was all-embracing, from Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov to Alexei Kruchenykh.<sup>3</sup> The child,

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2. See the chapter by Albert Lemmens and Serge Aljosha Stommels on the Amsterdam exhibition in this volume.

3. The infantist aesthetics of neo-primitivist artists and cubofuturist poets has been analyzed in Sara Pankenier’s dissertation (Pankenier 2006:91–159).

as imagined by avant-gardists, was perceived as an alluring image of the past that has slipped away – either their own childhood or the blessed folkloric childhood of the people. At the same time, the child was an image of the bright, mechanized future, which, thanks to technological progress, would be relieved of the burdens of the present. For adults, the looming advent of machines and mechanisms could not be void of anxiety, for the machines were radically changing their lives, and coping with this was both psychologically and intellectually challenging. The fear (even if only a reverential awe) experienced when standing in front of a machine might produce not only an urge to adjust oneself to it and serve it, but also a desire (albeit subconscious) to destroy it. But if the machine is indestructible – because the power and the future are on its side – there appears to be an urge to destroy everything else in order to make room for the machine and to collaborate with it. Unlike the frustrated grown-ups and the young not-quite adults, the child perceives technological innovations as the natural “configuration of nature”, as Walter Benjamin noted perspicaciously (Benjamin 1999: 390). Hence, the power and the future belong to the child; ergo, “Become as little children, for theirs is the kingdom of the Machine”.

The instability of the mechanized and dehumanized life of the twentieth century, felt so acutely by young artists entering the world, gave birth to one peculiar aspect of their creative self-reflection: a regression into childhood and attempts to rationalize and rid themselves of early phobias and complexes. Moreover, non-involvement in the wider world provoked a specific “poetics of recollection”: a call to early memories and attempts at artistic reconstruction of the world of childhood by means of introspection. As Vyacheslav V. Ivanov recently writes,

one of the features common to the science and culture of the modern epoch, especially in the last few decades, is the interest in reconstruction of the initial periods [...]. Recreation of childhood, especially childhood's traumas and complexes, became one of the characteristics of the century that began with the publishing of Freud's book on interpretations of dreams and continued in many fine pieces of literature that aimed to reconstruct the early complexes.

(Ivanov 2009: 332)

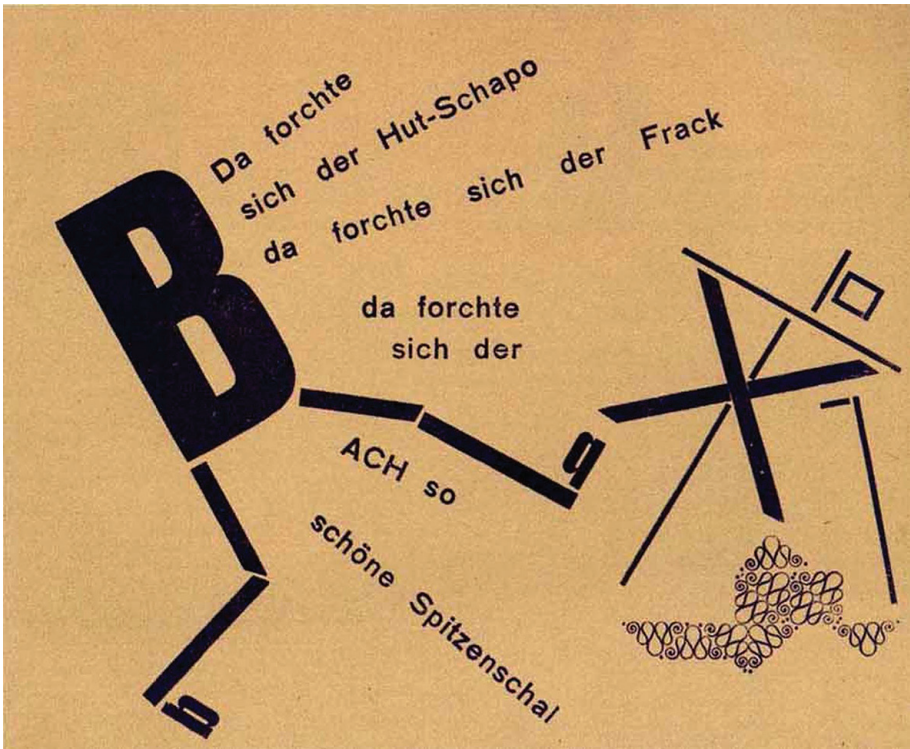
### **The battle of letters, or the triumph of typesetting: How the scarecrow was criss-crossed**

The German artist Kurt Schwitters enjoyed, like many others, the absurd and machinery. During the First World War he worked as a draftsman in a factory and, as he confessed later, “found his love for the wheel and understood that a machine is an abstraction of the human spirit” (see Dietrich 1993: 86). One of Schwitters’

most interesting creations was made in the field of book design, more specifically, in several children's books. He worked practically in parallel with his friend El Lissitzky, sometimes following in Lissitzky's trail and sometimes blazing his own. Schwitters' book *Die Scheuche Märchen* (The Scarecrow Fairy Tale, 1925) was one of the most remarkable avant-garde improvisations with the typesetter's box. The text was written by Schwitters himself, while the design was a collaborative creation by Schwitters, Käte Steinitz and Theo van Doesburg. Actually, the idea belonged to van Doesburg, who, shortly before, had published the Dutch translation of El Lissitzky's *Suprematic Tale of Two Squares*, and who suggested producing a book even more radical than Lissitzky's by using only elements of the typesetter's box (Steinitz 1968: 41). One should mention the name of the typesetter – Paul Focht – because the typesetting is in fact the most important artistic element of this book.

The story in *The Scarecrow* is simple yet quite characteristic of the avant-garde mindset. A farmer makes a scarecrow and dresses it in old but quite decent clothes. The scarecrow puts on haughty airs and considers itself a boss. Then along came a rooster and a hen with chickens, who make fun of the scarecrow and peck at the grain and – to humble the scarecrow – its cane. Then along comes the farmer, who gets angry, beats the scarecrow and takes its cane. Then enters a boy, who beats up the farmer and takes the cane for himself. The meaning of this tale or parable I will discuss later but, for now, one should mention that all the figures are composed of large and small letters and other elements of the printer's set. Thus, the scarecrow consists of a fat letter X with the addition of a few lines, both straight and curvilinear. There is also a lace scarf executed with a number of decorative vignettes. The farmer is composed of a large letter B with shaky legs attached to it (see Figure 1). B, I believe, was chosen because it is suggestive of *Bauer* (farmer) and *Bauch* (belly).

Schwitters was not the first to play with the typesetter's box. It is clear that, besides Lissitzky, he gained inspiration from Dadaist typography, exercises by Marinetti and Soffici, Apollinaire's calligrams, etc. As for the subject, he was probably familiar with Vladimir Lebedev's *Chuch-lo* (Scarecrow, 1922). Scholars and critics who wrote about Schwitters' work emphasized its aesthetic qualities and class subtext. But there is one more interesting level of meaning. The combination of the letter X, with a thin vertical line inserted in the middle for the body, and the hat resembles the combination of two Greek letters: X and P (with the latter turned 90 degrees counterclockwise). In the scene where the farmer assaults the scarecrow, its hat, falling off its head, turns 90 degrees clockwise and looks like a perfect P. In other words, the body of the scarecrow is composed of the monogram XP, that is, *chrismon* ⌘, or the symbol of Christ. Thus, the scene depicting the attack on the scarecrow appears to be a scene depicting an attack on God. The theomachistic character of the story is also revealed in the text. Some consider it a



**Figure 1.** Illustration by Kurt Schwitters, Käte Steinitz & Theo van Doesburg from *Die Scheuche Märchen*. Hannover: Aposch Verlag, 1925. Used by permission of the Kurt and Ernst Schwitters Stiftung

barely meaningful Dadaist collage, but it is quite comprehensible. The lines radiating from the farmer's figure read as follows:

Da forchte sich der Hut-Schapo

Da forchte sich der Frack

Da forchte sich der ACH so schöne Spitzenschal (Schwitters et al. 1925: n.pag.)

The word *forchte* is not common in modern German. *Da forchte sich...* was borrowed by Schwitters from the old editions of the Lutheran translation of the Bible: “Da forchte sich Saul...” (Samuel 1, 18:29) – “Saul became still more afraid of him”. Thus, these verses mean

The hat-chapeau became still more afraid

The frock coat became still more afraid

The, oh so beautiful lace scarf became still more afraid



This is the ironic attitude of a worker towards a dandy who, as a result of the turn of the wheel of history and the ensuing social marginalization, has become a scarecrow – not scary enough even to repel chickens.

After he has broken the scarecrow, the farmer takes away its cane or staff – a symbol of authority – but he does not keep it for long. Along comes the B-shaped boy (*Bursch*) who takes the stick away from the farmer, thus reflecting a revolution by youth against outdated elders and *grossbauers* (or peasant bourgeoisie). In other words, the farmer, representing the people, gets rid of the God-boss-dandy, but he in turn is overthrown by a boy, a young revolutionary force of the future. As Leslie Atzmon writes,

*Die Scheuche* had a radical, but practical, purpose: exposing children to a piece of collaborative De Stijl plus Dada art/design/poetry of the type Van Doesburg and Schwitters believed helped advance their ultimate goal of a brave new world.

(Atzmon 1996: 28)

Finally, one should mention that, three years later, Schwitters' comrade-in-arms El Lissitzky used the formal discoveries of Schwitters and van Doesburg and created an even more open and propagandistic version of a book on the class struggle and letter-men: *Chetyre Arifmeticheskikh Deistviya* (Four Arithmetic Operations, 1928). All the figures in this book are made of letters and represent different classes of society (see more in Steiner 1999: 33–36).

### Africans, animals and dolls: The games of émigrés and surrealists

European modernists emphasized, in children's books, formal moments that go back to the revolutionary avant-garde and its second, 'left' wave. Thus, the images of Nathalie Parain, who before 1928 was known as Natalia Chelpanova, were barely distinguishable from Soviet constructivist images, well known to her, with their simple and generalized outlines, flat colors, and laconic compositions. Some of her works, such as *Ronds et Carrés* (Circles & Squares, 1932), paid homage to the founding fathers of Cubism of the beginning of the century.

Of the Surrealists who left their traces in children's books, one should first mention Joan Miró. In 1928, he illustrated a tale by Lise Deharme (née Anne-Marie Hirtz), *Il était une petite pie* (There Was a Little Magpie). This was the only book (out of about thirty) that Miró illustrated specifically for children. In it he presented a dense Surrealist style, not diluted *ad usum delphini*. Eight full-page illustrations are executed with a stencil technique and show bright gouache circles and ovals. Esther Averill wrote sarcastically that the Surrealists were all ecstatic about it, but parents tried to protect their children, viewing this book as though



it were a scarlatina virus (Averill 1930:90). It is interesting to compare this book with a Soviet picturebook, *Figury* (Figures, 1926), illustrated and designed by Maria Shatalova-Rakhmanova. It shows various geometric figures, amongst them numerous colored circles and rings in different sizes and combinations. Different strains of Modernism (Surrealism and Constructivism) and different social situations nevertheless resulted in similar visual representations.

In the same year of 1928, a Surrealist of a younger generation, Pierre Pinsard, illustrated a book with a text by Blaise Cendrars, *Petits contes nègres pour les enfants des blancs* (Little Black Stories for Little White Children) (Figure 2). The illustrations were executed in the woodblock technique and for the most part show silhouettes of exotic animals and “funny little” Africans. The figures are void of background and details, conveying a certain native and primitivist aura. These days, some of these compositions would probably not pass the filter of political correctness, and some PC zealots would label them “orientalist” or even “racist”. Historically speaking, these potential accusations appear rather ironic because, to a large degree, the popularity of African and South Pacific art amongst Surrealists was generated by the desire to counter-attack the colonial West by conquering it with non-European art. (This strategy appeared to be rather successful.) These subjects – African and Asian themes – were popular in Soviet children’s books too. They were part of the official discourse of proletarian internationalism. In quite a number of books published in the 1920s in the USSR, Africans and Asians were represented rather paternalistically, like children, with a figure of a Soviet boy teaching them class wisdom. As a typical and very prolific author, Lev Zilov, writes in the book *Mai i Oktyabrina* (Mai and Oktyabrina,<sup>4</sup> 1924),

The children will help

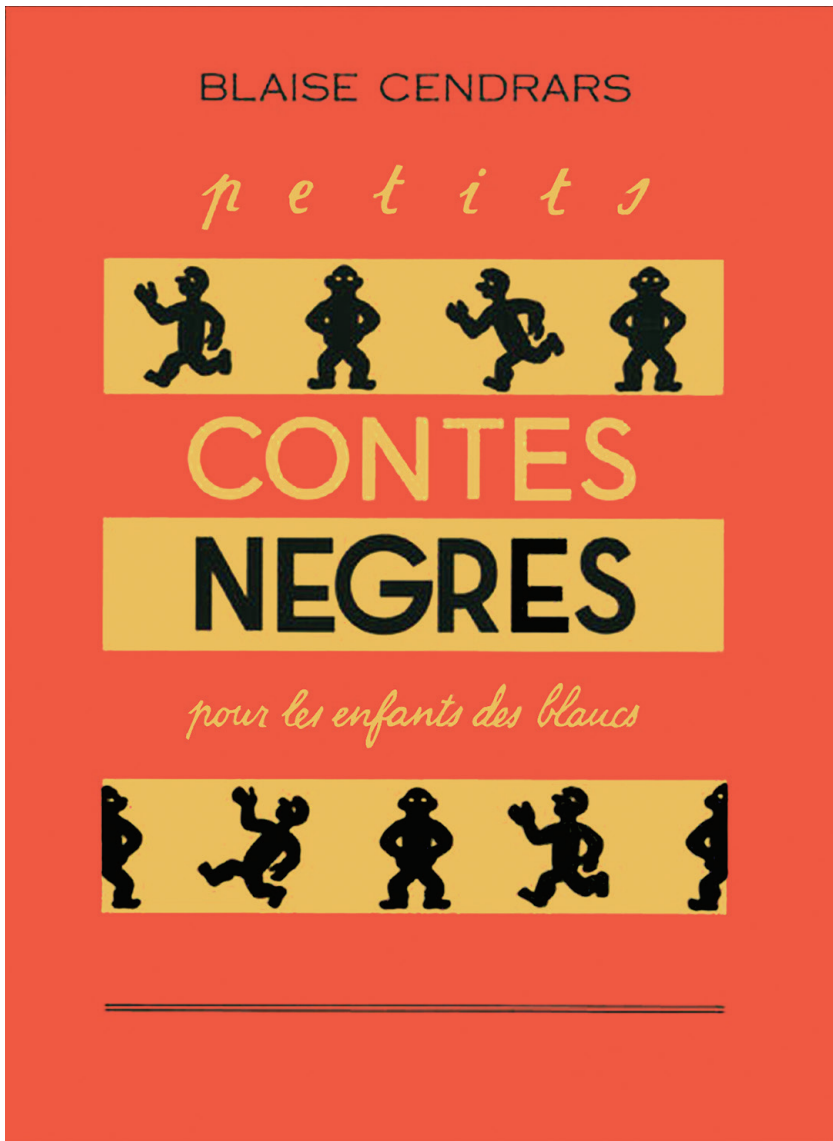
The Negroes, Indians, Chinese.

(Zilov 1924: 40)

An interesting treatment of the African anticolonialist theme is given in the book *Malen’kii Chorny Murzuk* (Little Black Murzuk, text by Nikolai Agnivtsev, illustrations by Samuil Adlivankin, 1926). There the Africans look like big children, and are sometimes grotesque, but are depicted with undeniable sympathy, which correlates with Pinsard’s images (Figure 3). The Soviet artist here treats the subject with a double-edged irony: he makes a joke of simple-minded “children of nature” who are jubilant because of free booze, beads and striped pants, and of the Western capitalists whose satirical depiction in high hats and striped pants was a *locus communis* in the revolutionary visual discourse of those days. These images fulfilled

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4. These children’s names were new, politically motivated inventions: Mai refers to May (the 1st of) and Oktyabrina is a feminine form of October (October revolution).



**Figure 2.** Book cover by Pierre Pinsard from Blaise Cendrars: *Petits contes nègres pour les enfants des blancs*. Paris: Les Éditions des Portiques, 1928

the purpose of attracting children by representing funny exotic characters, and the style of these images reinforced the comical effect by the usage of the type of mixed-up details so popular in classic children's rhymes: here this role is played by starched cuffs (a typically bourgeois accoutrement) put on Africans' legs.



**Figure 3.** Agnivitsev, Nikolai: *Malen'kii Chorny Murzuk* (Little Black Murzuk). Illus. Samuil Adlivankin. Moscow: Mol. Gvardiya, 1926. Used by permission of Tatyana Mikhailovna Kryukova, the heir of the artist

Sometimes the treatment of the international theme was not merely paternalistic but unmistakably cruel and rather ugly – as in the books of the prominent modernist artist Sergei Chekhonin such as *Detki-Raznotzvetki* (Kids of Many Colors, 1927) with a text by S. Poltavsky and those of the lesser-known and negligibly talented A. Kalinichenko such as *Vanya v Kitae* (Vanya in China, 1927) with a text by G. Shaposhnikov (See ill. in Steiner 1999: 101 and 108).

This non-reflective cruelty is another point that links children and modernists. The violence propagated by the manifestos was believed to be an unavoidable part of the innovative strategy because creation of the new cannot be accomplished without destruction of the old. A model of this Modernism was

found in the mind of the child. Children like to break toys, tear books or flowers, and rip legs off insects. This is usually explained as ingrained curiosity and innocent clumsiness. That is true, but alongside this, there may also be a certain primordial cruelty, not yet smoothed away by upbringing and the cultivation of the social being or suppressed by cultural frames. As Margaret Higonnet shrewdly notes, “The creative impact of children’s play on Modernism, I suggest, lies at least in part in the pleasure of taking things apart” (Higonnet 2009: 93). In a broader context, there is a parallel between children’s games and modernists’ preoccupation with the retreat into a (pseudo) childhood world, artistic games and play activities, into modeling the world for fun, for make-believe. These play activities and toys have been studied and some were exhibited recently at a large exhibition in the Museo Picasso in Malaga – of course, Picasso himself also made toys (see Stales & Pérez 2010). Quite naturally, artists did not merely play with toys themselves. As stated in the annotation to this exhibition, it “explores how artists have used childhood objects to project their own ideas onto young minds”.<sup>5</sup>

### The left “here and now” for American and Soviet children

In the second half of the 1920s, i.e. during the *Sturm und Drang* of the Soviet innovations in children’s books, the pioneers of creation of the new children’s books in the United States devised the following slogan: “The cultural redemption of America is through children’s books”.<sup>6</sup> This slogan now looks somewhat idealistic but it clearly shows the energetic neophyte fervor of young American Kulturträgers – publishers, authors, and artists. It coincided very neatly with the aspirations of their Soviet counterparts. The parallel development of the world of children’s literature in the USA and USSR is spectacular and sometimes simply amazing.

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5. ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/2010/10/101019\\_strand\\_toys\\_gallery.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/2010/10/101019_strand_toys_gallery.shtml)) (23 November 2014).

6. This slogan was coined by May Masee, a renowned educator and editor. Her role in American publishing for children can be likened to the roles of both Samuil Marshak and Vladimir Lebedev in the Soviet Union. A supporter of new contemporary subjects, she was also very interested in innovative book design and the art of typography. See Wright (1928) and Hearn (1996: 28).

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| 1918 | The first Week of Children's Books takes place in New York. Organization of the Department of Children's Books at McMillan & Co. Publishing House (New York).              | Organization of the book cooperative <i>Segodnya</i> (Today) in Petrograd, which published important avant-garde children's books.  |
| 1919 |  | Organization of the Committee for Children's Books and Children's Reading at the Narkompros (Ministry of Enlightenment) (evolved in 1920 into the Institute for Children's Reading; in 1923, the name was changed to the Department of Children's Reading).                         |
| 1922 | Organization of the Department of Children's Books at Doubleday, Page and Co. (Garden City, NJ). The establishment of the John Newbery Medal for the best children's book. | The famous private publishing house <i>Raduga</i> (Rainbow) is founded in Petrograd, specializing in innovative children's books (about 400 titles were published before 1930).   |
| 1923 | The first exhibition "Fifty Best Books of the Year," organized by the American Institute of Graphic Arts.  | The monthly children's magazine <i>Vorobei</i> (Sparrow) is founded in Petrograd. <i>Novye Detskie Knigi</i> (New Children's Books), non-periodical collections of reviews, are published (5 issues before 1929).   |
| 1924 | <i>Horn Book</i> , the first magazine devoted to children's books, founded in Boston.  | The magazine <i>Novy Robinzon</i> (The New Robinson [Crusoe]), an expanded version of <i>Vorobei</i> , is founded. Children's Department organized at the State Publishing House (Leningrad). The Museum of Children's Books and Drawings (existed until 1935) organized in Moscow. |

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As in the USSR, in the USA there were lively debates about the role of 'production' books, about the effectiveness of socialization of the child by means of book art, about the ideological impact of various kinds of stories, and about the acceptability of the depiction of animated machines and mechanisms.

Why did commentators talk about the "redemption" of America through children's books? This was a time when influential social psychologists and cultural anthropologists believed that human nature was endlessly flexible and malleable; therefore, if directed properly and at the proper time, a better generation could be formed, which would save civilization. The Marxist social historian Arthur Wallace Calhoun, in his well-known article "The Child Mind as a Social Product", claimed: "it is clear that the mind of childhood and youth is the pivot of successful social transformation" (quoted in Mickenberg (2010:112)). The article appeared in the book of collected essays *The New Generation* (Calverton & Schmalhausen 1930).

The term “new generation” meant something very close to the Soviet concept of New Man: The child born into a new social organization, properly educated to live in the new society, and accustomed to coexisting with sophisticated machinery that radically changes life.<sup>7</sup> This similarity was not a coincidence: Many authors of this book discussed the Soviet experience – or, perhaps, declarations rather than experience – and considered it a positive and inspiring example. These parallels are well described by Julia Mickenberg (2010) in her article “The New Generation and the New Russia: Modern Childhood as Collective Fantasy”. In her closing remarks she writes:

The dream of wisely engineered machinery liberating people – “who know [the machine] as a splendid toy and not a hateful tyrant,” in the words of Greenwich Village radical Floyd Dell – had animated Americans since the beginning of the industrial era.  
(Mickenberg 2010: 112)

One of the most typical genres of early Soviet modernist children’s books was the ‘production’ book. It was a genre of children’s books about how machines work and how things are made. As far as I know, the earliest usage of this term (1922) appears in the memoirs of Galina Chichagova, one of the Chichagov sisters, who were Constructivist artists and early proponents of this genre: “We begin. [We are] creating ‘production children’s books’” (Kalinin 1995: 39). In the middle of that decade the genre was actively debated: see Flerina (1926). In English it was introduced by the present author.<sup>8</sup> I translate the Russian “proizvodstvennaya kniga” as “production book”; it can also be rendered as “industrial book”. American books on how things are made and how machines work run closely parallel to this type of book. They were called “factual books”. Perhaps the main propagandist of this genre in the United States was Lucy Sprague Mitchell, an educator and a driving force behind the Bank Street School movement, which she founded in 1916 as the Bureau of Educational Experiments. She professed a “here and now” methodology, which involved children learning about the world by studying the phenomena of the surrounding reality, especially modern technical things, and playing with real objects. Mitchell was a great admirer of Soviet Russia, having a high regard for its pedagogical experiments, and she enjoyed recognition in Russia as well. Her books about steam engines, skyscrapers and water plumbing were widely translated and published in the USSR with illustrations by Russian artists. One of the key figures in Russian children’s literature and publishing, Kornei Chukovsky, referred to her

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7. See more on the concept of New Man in Steiner (2014: 98–100).

8. See Steiner (1999, Ch. Three): “The Production Book: Locomotives and All the Rest” (111–167).



in his works as the “American researcher of children’s psychology” (Chukovsky 1963:362). Rather ironically, Mitchell’s books were considered entirely suitable for the proletarian child: “To replace an old book, a new one is being born; it takes into consideration the psychological peculiarities of the age as well as the new way of life, new impressions and interests of a proletarian child – *Our Kindergarten*, [...] *Morning, Our Squirrel*, Mitchell’s books” (Sverdlova 1925:119).

The most frequently occurring and most typical character in the Soviet production book was a steam engine – in a way, a new lyrical hero in the literature of the victorious class. Engines were also very popular in American children’s books. Among the typical and highly influential books of that epoch one might mention Hildegard Hoyt Swift’s *Little Blacknose: The Story of a Pioneer* (1929), Watty Piper’s *The Little Engine That Could* (1930), Virginia Lee Burton’s *Choo Choo: The Story of a Little Engine Who Ran Away* (1935)<sup>9</sup> and others. For the most part, the illustrations in these books were variations on modernist styles going back to Futurism, Expressionism, and Constructivism within the common paradigm of Art Deco: sharp contrasts of black and white, dynamic angles, unusual points of view and a predilection for diagonal lines. Artists such as Wilfred Jones, who wrote texts to his own pictures, or Lynd Ward were prominent in this respect. In Ward’s black and white engravings, one can clearly discern the influence of German expressionists (he studied in Germany) and of Frans Masereel. Ward himself admitted his relationship with European book artists. In the Boston magazine of children’s literature, *Horn Book*, he wrote in 1930 about his and his fellow artists’ work: “Inspired by the revolution that was already won in Europe, we slowly, cautiously, and discreetly revolted” (see Mahony & Whitney 1930:1).

What were the channels that enabled American artists to become familiar with new European and Russian trends? In addition to their voyages to Europe and long sojourns there (for example, Clement Hurd studied in Paris under Fernand Léger and collaborated with Gertrude Stein on the book *The World Is Round* (1939)), they knew trans-Atlantic Modernism quite well from the pre-war times. The foundations were laid by the Armory Show (1913). For instance, Marcel Duchamp’s painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912, now at the Philadelphia Art Museum) was possibly a source of inspiration for the book by John McMahon *In and Out, Up and Down: A Door Book* (1922). Duchamp and Francis Picabia moved to New York two years after the show (1915), exhibiting ready-mades (Duchamp) and artefacts of “machine aesthetics” (Picabia). In 1920, Duchamp and Katherine Dreier founded a gallery, *Société anonyme*, to exhibit

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9. It featured his elder Russian brother *Parovoz-gulyaka* (The Gadabout Engine, 1925) by Nadezhda Pavlovich, a story about a runaway train.



works by European modernists. In 1924, an exhibition of contemporary Russian art was staged there, and another Russian exhibition took place in the same year in Grand Central Palace. A year before, the Brooklyn Museum had organized a big exhibition of Russian art.

All these, as well as Karel Capek's drama *R.U.R.* (1920) about the revolt of android machines which he called "robots" (staged in New York in 1922), must surely have influenced the young New York socialite, author, and illustrator Mary Liddell. Bertha Mahony, a key figure in American publishing for children, called her unique and ahead of her time (Mahony 1929: 131).

Mary Liddell wrote a book about a miraculous creature called Little Machinery.

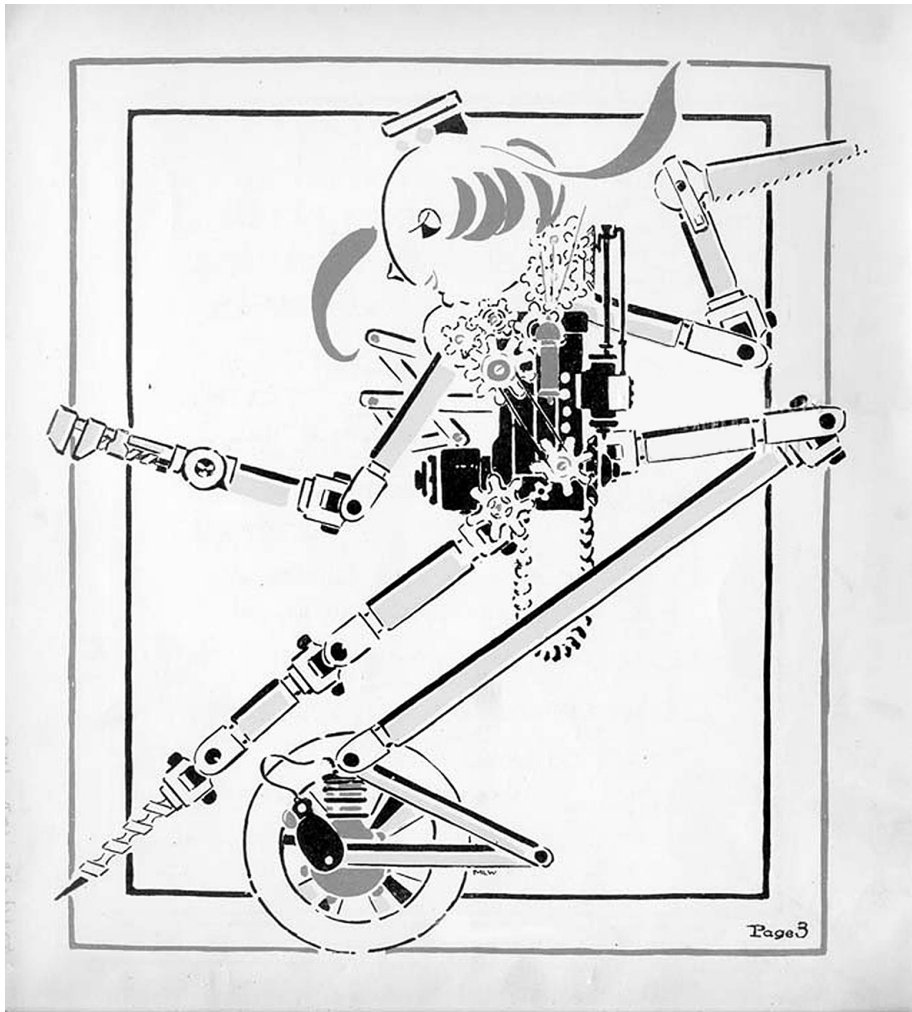
Somewhere there is a Little Machinery, a magic creature. He grew up out of some pieces of a steam engine that was in a wreck, an old trolley car that couldn't run any more, and a broken automobile. This Little Machinery would rather work than anything in the world. He does things by steam like the steam engine. Or by electricity like the electric car whichever he chooses. And he rides merrily along on a little automobile wheel that goes by gasoline. // And the Little Machinery lives in a wood that grows beside a railroad track. And in the wood are a lot of animals that he plays with. He makes things for them by machinery. And they love him and follow him all about watching him work. (Liddell 1926: 2–5)

One leg of Little Machinery ends as a car wheel, the other as a drill. His left hand is furnished with a saw and the right one with a wrench. The body consists of enigmatic mechanical details and cogwheels. All this is crowned by an ideally round head with mischievous locks, big eyes, foretelling the advent of anime,<sup>10</sup> and a broad smile (Figure 4). The visual image of Little Machinery might have been inspired by all the above mentioned examples of high European Modernism, but its closest, perhaps frightening, similarity is to the robot Topotun, created by Mikhail Tsekhanovsky in Leningrad in the same year of 1926 (Figure 5).

Since both robots appeared in the same year, we should exclude the possibility of direct borrowing. And this fact strikingly reflects the parallel visual thinking of the American artist (well-to-do socially – and liberal because of that) and of the Soviet Constructivist. However, there is a significant difference that relates not to the language of visual forms but to the content. American Little Machinery

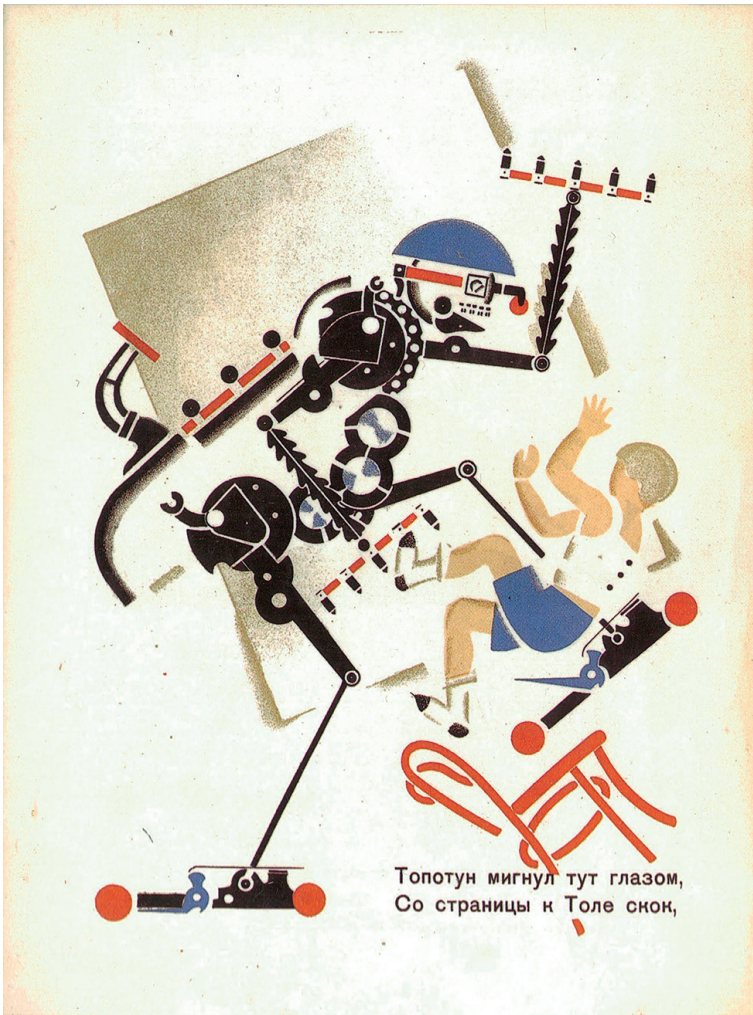
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10. About anime or, rather, animation: one more parallel with the visual image of Little Machinery and of sources of inspiration for Mary Liddell could be a film by Fernand Léger and his assistant Dudley Murphy, *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), with its rotating wheels and rolling details. In this film, the perfectly cubist figure of Charlot (Charlie Chaplin as a Little Tramp) with its movements of a marionette puppet opens the credits and also dances for the last minute.



**Figure 4.** Illustration by Mary Liddell from *Little Machinery*. Garden Town (NJ): Doubleday, Page and Co., 1926. Used by permission of the family of Mary Liddell Wehle

always smiles and works (for free) for forest animals and birds, whereas the Soviet robot Topotun (his name literally means Stomper) merely sermonizes on how to behave and threatens those who disobey. The American one personifies a rather naïve idea that machines provide alleviation and improvement of life in nature – thus, *Little Machinery* makes birdhouses and feeding trays for hares, and sharpens the claws of eagles. Meanwhile, the Soviet robot represents the iron order and iron will, according to which communist idealists of the time tried to refashion nature



**Figure 5.** Illustration by Mikhail Tsekhanovsky from Ilya Ionov: *Topotun*. Leningrad: Raduga, 1926

and attempted, with an iron hand, to corral humankind into happiness.<sup>11</sup> However, the American robot also plays the role of a single active force vis-à-vis passive wild beasts that wait for his help and improvements – as children expect from adults. Thus, Little Machinery makes a wooden cot for a little bear and makes clay cups

11. This is the translation of a Soviet slogan that first appeared on an agitation poster in 1918.

for all the animals, enabling them to drink without dipping their muzzles in the water. The animals accept all this and start to become civilized little by little. They are active only in one thing: when they hinder his work by, for example, stealing his shiny cogwheels (see Liddell 1926: 12–13). So, in fact, the American and Soviet versions of robots are similar not only in their visual appearance but also in their role and goal: to teach and help injudicious and far-from-ideal biological creatures – capricious children and silly little animals. In such an attitude there was a reflection of, as Susan Buck-Morss puts it, “the utopian dream that industrial modernity could and would provide happiness for the masses” (Buck-Morss 2002: XIV). This quality, as well as the fact that Little Machinery does not need any food or rest, or anything personal, makes him an ideal worker on the one hand, and shows his supra-biological (and thus superhuman) nature on the other. He is stronger and more effective than those he helps, but he decides for himself what to do, how to do it and for whom he will work. The little animals accept this and obey. This essence – potentially totalitarian – was noted in an article by Nathalie op de Beeck:

In Little Machinery, the automaton benevolently rules over all living things. The tale establishes an implicit hierarchy in which the Little Machinery need not defer to anyone or anything, and this artificial imbalance exposes the Machinery’s totalitarian potential. The Machinery exercises unquestioned authority over his flesh-and-blood minions, which do not exhibit much personality beyond their avid curiosity and tendency to make mischief. (op de Beeck 2004: 53)

Concluding the discussion of Mary Liddell’s books, one should mention that, after *Little Machinery*, she continued the theme of an animated puppet by illustrating two books about a wooden boy: *Pinocchio in America* (1928) and *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1930), both written by Angelo Patri.

Summing up this story of (nearly) identical twins, one American and one Soviet, I would like to use the words of Julia Mickenberg: “Many U.S. liberals ..., like the Bolsheviks, believed that technology and children, properly managed, were keys to a better future” (Mickenberg 2010: 107).

Other books told stories of friendship and cooperation between man and machine, such as Cornelia Meigs’ *The Wonderful Locomotive* (1928), or Virginia Lee Burton’s *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* (1939), and their various Soviet counterparts such as Aleksandr Vvedensky’s *Zheleznaya Doroga* (Railroad, 1929). In these books, the illustrations (by Bertha and Elmer Hader in *The Wonderful Locomotive* or Alisa Poret in *Railroad*) share a similar minimalist style peculiar to the Modernism of the 1920s.

I would like to stress once more the left-wing and occasionally explicitly proletarian or even communist sympathies of many active participants in the American cultural scene of those years – the radical art was connected to radical

social views. A number of illustrators, including Wanda Gag and Jan Matulka, collaborated with a Marxist magazine, *New Masses*. Besides the fellow travelers (many future classic American authors), there were openly left-wing authors such as Max Eastman, Joseph Freeman and Michael Gold. Jan Matulka belonged to the latter group. Authors and artists contributing to this magazine, which by 1929 had become utterly Stalinist and anti-Trotskyite, tried to create a radical all-people culture as an antidote to the existing popular culture, which was petit-bourgeois in their opinion. Michael Denning called this period a “Second American Renaissance” due to the fact that it significantly changed American Modernism (Denning 1996: XIX–XX).

Jan Matulka started working for *New Masses* in 1926; before that, from 1919, he divided his time between New York and Paris, where he had a studio, became a member of Gertrude Stein’s circle and was friendly with many modernists. In 1919 he illustrated Czechoslovak fairy tales (Fillmore 1919). Many of the compositions look like semi-abstract geometric vignettes built on sharp contrasts of black and white, with very active backgrounds consisting of dynamic zigzags and rings. In general, this is reminiscent of experimental Russian avant-garde artists of the 1910s; however, his style can also be traced back to East European folklore pictures as processed by the fragmented vision of the contemporary Cubism and Futurism.

Boris Artzybasheff worked in a similar manner during those years. He was born in the Russian Empire and came to New York in 1919 after fighting in the White Army. His early works were characterized by diagonal unstable elements, an absence of halftones and a preoccupation with macabre subjects. A good example is his illustrations for Dhan Gopal Mukerji’s *Gay-Neck* (1928), which won a John Newbery Medal as the best book of the year. Later, after the Second World War, Artzybasheff published a book, *As I See* (1954), featuring a large series of pictures called *Machinalia*. As a typical young man of the 1920s he writes in the introduction:

I am thrilled by machinery’s force, precision and willingness to work at any task, no matter how arduous or monotonous it may be. I would rather watch a thousand ton dredge dig a canal than see it done by a thousand spent slaves lashed into submission. I like machines. (Artzybasheff 1954: VII)

His anthropomorphized machines appear to be in the best traditions of Surrealism, but besides this modernist attitude with the animation of metal monsters, Artzybasheff was most probably influenced by his work with fairy tale subjects in children’s books.

The universal – from the Russian white émigré to American intellectuals – fascination with machines and the faith in social engineering through the operating of machines and children’s upbringing in the 1920s, just before the great



Depression, and even in the 1930s (notwithstanding the Great Depression and, in a way, thanks to it) demonstrates the impressive isomorphism of modernist cultural trends in the USA and the USSR. A good example of such isomorphism is the activity of the aforementioned Lucy Sprague Mitchell and her publishing house, Bank Street Books. According to her “here and now” principle of children’s education, the new subjects of books had to be found in the new technical marvels. This idea is very close to the Soviet teaching of pedology (or, rather, a Soviet brand of this American teaching), popular in the 1920s, which rejected fairy tales and urged their substitution with “the real things”. In the book *Tvoi Mashinnye Druz’ya* (Your Mechanical Friends, 1926) (see Figure 6), Nikolai Agnivitsev, a popular children’s author of the 1920s, addresses the classic characters of children’s books thus:

For hundreds of years/You could not be pulled away/From the pages of children’s books./Because of this,/Now it’s time for us, machines,/To play with children.

On the next page he continues:

Farewell, kittens,/Chickens,/Puppies,/Monkeys,/and Mice./Here –/in children’s books/Come/Mechanical,/Springy,/Oily/People!/Here we are!/Hello!

(Agnivitsev 1926: n.pag.)

One of the most prominent Soviet authors of children’s literature, Samuil Marshak, although not directly connected with pedologists, wrote stories perfectly suited to the “here and now” trend: *Vchera i Segodnya* (Yesterday & Today, 1925), *Sem’ Chudes* (The Seven Wonders, 1927) and many others. His brother Michail Il’in also wrote many books about technical marvels and simple things in the immediate environment. Among them, one occasionally encountered rather bizarre subjects, such as *Karmanny Tovarishch* (Pocket Comrade, 1927) – about a penknife). Il’in also wrote a highly influential book, *Rasskaz o Velikom Plane* (The Story about the Great Plan, 1930), which was published in English in New York the following year under the title *New Russia’s Primer: The Story of the Five-Year Plan*. As Julia Mickenberg writes in the abovementioned article, progressive Americans were totally enamored with it and with the way in which revolutionary Russia educated its children. Interestingly, the Stalinist magazine *New Masses* played a significant role in promoting it in the American market. And, of course, it is important to bear in mind what Il’in himself said about his book: “I am unable not to write, and I cannot write in a calm and neutral way. [...] For I am not just telling about the [5-year] plan, I am recruiting people for this work” (Segal 1962: 277). His recruitment of left-wing American intellectuals was quite successful.

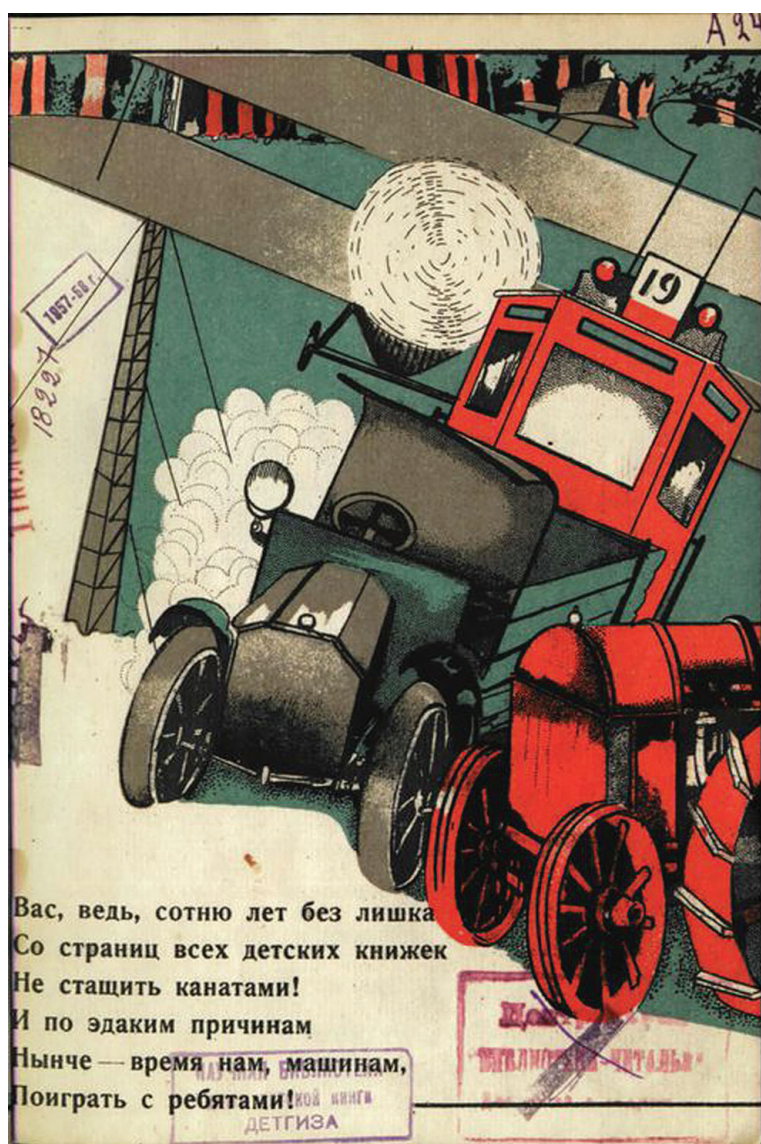


Figure 6. Illustration by Alexey Efimov from Nikolai Agnivitsev: *Tvoi Mashinnye Druz'ya*. Moscow: Raduga, 1926

In the opposite direction, books by Mitchell were translated into Russian in many thousands of copies: *Pesenka Novogo Parovoza* (How the Engine Learned His Knowing Song, 1925), *Neboskreb* (Skyscraper, 1925), *Kak Borya Gulyal po Nyu*



*Yorku* (Boris Walks Every Way in New York, 1927), *Kak Voda Popala v Vannu* (How the Singing Water Got to the Tub, 1929), and even a large collection of stories under the title *Kniga Rasskazov pro Zdes' i Teper' dlya Detei ot 2 do 7 Let* (The Book of Stories about Here and Now for Children from 2 to 7, 1925).<sup>12</sup>

In a rather paradoxical way, this introduction to the real world was provided by young modernist artists. In the USSR it was initially done by Lebedev and his school, while in America it was accomplished by Esphyr Slobodkina and her friends, who worked for the publishing house William Scott & Co, which evolved from Bank Street Books. Slobodkina, who was born in Siberia and came to the USA via China at a young age, was a radical artist, a founder and for many years a chairperson of the American Abstract Artists Association. Like many early Soviet avant-garde artists, Slobodkina first started to write children's books in order to be able to pay her bills, but she remained in the field for decades. As she wrote in her late memoirs, she quickly understood that illustrations for children gave her a brilliant opportunity to combine her passion for abstract art with her natural penchant for telling stories. She showed her semi-abstract geometric collages to a young editor and author, Margaret Wise Brown of William Scott & Co. The book *The Little Fireman* (1938), with a text by Brown, was the first American children's book to be made with the technique of colored paper collage. It can also be considered a paragon of artistic simplicity, striking composition and integrity. These pictures could easily pass for Soviet productions executed eight or ten years earlier.

## Conclusion

The stylistic and ideological context of Soviet and Western children's books of the 1920s and 1930s can be broadened to the common, interbellum, modernist Zeitgeist. I can only agree with Nathalie op de Beeck, who writes:

The machine-centric picture books of the '30s and '40s appear in the context of a radically altered U.S. and international culture, where proletarian concerns and world tensions strongly inflect the domestic form of children's literature.

(op de Beeck 2004: 55)

The social and modernist infantilism<sup>13</sup> coupled with the left-wing political inclinations began to fade away from mainstream art in America and Europe from the

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12. Originally it was published as *Here and Now Story Book. Two-to Seven-Year-olds*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company Inc., 1921.

13. See Bates (1932) for early reflections on this problem.

second half of the 1930s. The new maturity of many, if not all, radicals was ushered in by the Great Depression, the political trials in the USSR and the increasingly evident degeneration of starry-eyed socialism into Stalinism, Fascism and Nazism. Experiments with radically modernist illustrations and designs and with machine-centered subjects diminished significantly. However, the publishing mainstream appropriated these experiments and used them in a diluted form.

The artistic and ideological processes that took place in countries with such different political systems as the USSR and the West were less antagonistic than it might appear. Modernist artists and writers, who were often at odds with officialdom in their countries, showed that the world was more united than politicians often claim.

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