

Article

The Western Artist in Stalin's Moscow: The Case of Albin Amelin

Katarina Lopatkina

The Finnish Labour Museum Werstas, 33210 Tampere, Finland; katarina.lopatkina@tyovaenmuseo.fi

Abstract: This article is a reconstruction of travel experiences of Swedish artist Albin Amelin in Moscow in 1937–1938, based on archival materials. It focuses on the exchange between the Soviet Union and Western artists in the interwar period and shows international Soviet art contacts as part of the state's diplomatic work. This case study enables a detailed observation of the elements of the Soviet hospitality industry, and a description of various practical aspects of the artist's stay in Moscow.

Keywords: art diplomacy; Sweden; Soviet Union; 1930s; industry of hospitality; the Great Terror

1. Introduction

In the year 1938, three prominent figures, namely French poet André Breton, Mexican artist Diego Rivera, and Russian revolutionary Lev Trotsky, found themselves simultaneously in Mexico. Trotsky had arrived in 1937 in search of asylum, André Breton arrived in 1938 to deliver lectures, and Diego Rivera was by occasion not traveling much that year. The fruit of their collaborative efforts materialized in the form of the manifesto titled "Towards Free Revolutionary Art" (1938), which addressed the repressive nature of German fascism and Soviet totalitarianism. They stated the following: "The totalitarian regime of the U.S.S.R., working through the so-called 'cultural' organizations it controls in other countries, has spread over the entire world a deep twilight hostile to every sort of spiritual value. A twilight of filth and blood in which, disguised as intellectuals and artists, those men steep themselves who have made servility a career, of lying for pay a custom, and of the palliation of crime a source of pleasure. The official art of Stalinism mirrors with a blatancy unexampled in history their efforts to put a good face on their mercenary profession". And they also stated the following: "The regime of Hitler, now that it has rid Germany of all those artists whose work expressed the slightest sympathy for liberty, however superficial, has reduced those who still consent to take up pen or brush to the status of domestic servants of the regime, whose task it is to glorify it on order, according to the worst possible aesthetic conventions. If reports may be believed, it is the same in the Soviet Union, where Thermidorean reaction is now reaching its climax" (Danchev 2011).

Swedish artist Albin Amelin (1902–1975) made two visits to the Soviet Union during the same period that Trotsky, Breton, and Rivera wrote about. His first visit occurred in June–July 1937, in connection with the preparation of his exhibition at the State Museum of New Western Art (Gosudarstvennyj Muzej Novogo Zapadnogo Iskusstva, GMNZI), and his second visit took place from 2 December 1938 to 7 January 1939.

The examination of the case of Albin Amelin started with questions about how a Western artist was still able to have a solo exhibition and travel to the Soviet Union during the time of the Great Terror and what he witnessed during his travels. This research was undertaken based on a body of documents related to the Swedish–Soviet cultural contacts in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvenni Arhiv Rossiiskoi Federacii, GARF) and in the State Archive of Literature and Arts (Gosudarstvenni Arhiv Literaturi I Iskusstva, RGALI) and was conducted using the microhistorical method.



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Using texts of correspondence, records, and reports of Soviet organizations, as well as collected translations of interviews with the artist, I attempted to reconstruct Amelin's travel chronology and his experiences in Moscow. During this work, the studies of Michal David-Fox ([David-Fox 2012](#)), Katerina Clark ([Clark 2011](#)), Aleksandr Golubev ([Golubev 2004](#)), and Nina Yavorskaya ([Yavorskaya 1978, 2012](#)) on the Soviet system of cultural display, as well as published official directives and articles about the Soviet art establishment of the 1930s, clarified the context of the time. Figuring out the details of Amelin's visits, spanning from pragmatic to artistic dimensions, helped to reveal features of the work of the Soviet institutions for cultural exchange in the late 1930s, at the peak of repressions inside the country.

2. Albin Amelin in Moscow

2.1. *International Exhibitions in the USSR of the 1930s*

Contrary to the prevalent notion of the absolute insularity of Soviet culture during the 1930s, international artistic connections were, during this period, quite numerous, involving the participation of several Soviet institutions. Prior to 1933, exhibitions of foreign artists in the USSR often took on a predominantly individualistic character, with the closest artistic ties being established with Germany. During this time, exhibitions featuring German industrial graphics (1930), Bauhaus by Hannes Meyer (1931), John Heartfield (1931), Heinrich Vogeler (1932), Käthe Kollwitz (1932), Heinrich Ehmsen (1932), contemporary German architecture (1932), and Erich Borchert (1933) were held. German served as the primary foreign language in the first two decades of Soviet rule (1917–1941), mainly owing to its status as the language of the Comintern, whose headquarters were in Berlin. Furthermore, starting in the 1920s, the Soviet Union established its closest contacts with German intellectuals. The first exhibition of Soviet artists abroad took place in Berlin, and the "First All-German Exhibition" in 1924 occurred in Moscow, marking the very first international exhibition in Soviet Moscow. Following the rise to power of the National Socialists, the significance of the German language persisted, as antifascism became the official course of action of the Soviet government ([Clark 2011](#)).

After 1933, exhibitions primarily transitioned into group displays and more frequently took on a national rather than thematic character, showcasing the art of the Netherlands (1932), Poland (1933), Latvia (1934), Finland (1934), Estonia (1935), Belgium (1937), Czechoslovakia (1937), and Spain (1939). They became one of the tools of Soviet diplomatic efforts in the prewar years, and this role became firmly established in the postwar period. Solo exhibitions persisted but were limited in scope, with only a small circle of artists having the opportunity to organize them. In the 1930s, both national and solo types of foreign artist exhibitions formally aspired to reflect the latest trends in art, as evidenced by their titles, such as "Contemporary Polish" (1933), "Contemporary Latvian" (1934), "Contemporary Estonian" (1935), and "Contemporary Czechoslovak" art (1937).

A significant number of exhibitions in the first half of the 1930s were organized with the support of the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (Vsesoyú znoe óbshchestvo kul'túrnoj svyázi s zagranicej, VOKS). Established in 1925 as a society with many collective members, it was originally intended to operate on the principles of public cooperation. However, from its inception, it functioned as a Soviet cultural institution, encountering various challenges, primarily bureaucratic obstacles, underfunding, and intensified control by the party and state security apparatus. At the same time, empowered with extensive authority, VOKS sought a monopoly in the development of cultural relations and exclusive control over cultural imports and exports. This aspiration was articulated, notably, during one of the interdepartmental meetings in 1927: "Given the impossibility of allowing uncontrolled infiltration of controversial or foreign cultural trends from abroad, VOKS should serve as the filtering and controlling body. The absence of these functions may lead to support for cultural currents abroad that are not purely Soviet and with which we engage in cultural struggle" ([Golubev 2004](#), pp. 104–5).

Exhibitions constituted just one facet of the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries' activities and were far from being the most significant. The focus on opinion leaders and their systematic engagement was considered not only a more ideologically effective but also a more economically advantageous form of activity. Nonetheless, the Society established an exhibition department tasked with facilitating the participation of Soviet artists in international exhibitions and organizing Soviet exhibitions abroad. The department's efforts were primarily directed externally: the presentation of Soviet scientific, cultural, and artistic accomplishments formed a crucial part of the "education of foreigners" in how to perceive the Soviet reality. Exhibition items were selected in accordance with the fundamental directive of the production plan of the artistic sector of VOKS, where the paramount objective was the "promotion and popularization abroad of the fundamental achievements of socialist system through artistic representations". Preliminary exhibition reviews took place in the presence of representatives from the Unified State Political Administration (Ob'edinyonnoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie, OGPU) and the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), the outcome of which determined the approval or disapproval of the exhibition (Anatsheva 1994, p. 109).

The number of politically oriented exhibitions organized by it steadily increased each year, at the expense of artistic projects. By the late 1930s, exhibitions held abroad were exclusively political and informational in nature. Over time, not only the exhibition projects but also the disseminated informational materials increasingly veered away from matters related to cultural development in the USSR. Instead, their content largely reflected the successes in the fields of economy, science, and education. Nonetheless, in the first half of the 1930s several major exhibitions were organized with the support of the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. In 1931, there were the "Bauhaus by Hannes Meyer" exhibition, an exhibition of Austrian engravings from the Albertina Museum collection, and exhibitions of works by American artist Minna Harkavy and German photomontage artist John Heartfield. In 1932, there were exhibitions of artists from the John Reed Club, Dutch revolutionary artists, and German artist Heinrich Ehmsen. In 1933, there was an exhibition of Polish art, and in 1934, one featuring Finnish art.

At that time, significant efforts to organize international exhibitions were also undertaken by the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists (Mezhdunarodnoe Byuro Revolyucionnyh Hudozhnikov, MBRH), established at the Second International Conference of Revolutionary Writers in Kharkiv in 1930. The Bureau became one of the sections of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (Mezhdunarodnoe Ob'edinenie Revolyucionnyh Pisatelej, MORP), an organization aimed at uniting proletarian and revolutionary writers worldwide. Membership in the Bureau was open to any writer opposing fascism, the threat of imperialist war, and white terror. The work was conducted through national sections and groups, with participation from figures such as Louis Aragon, Johannes Becher, Theodore Dreiser, Henri Barbusse, Bertolt Brecht, and others (Efros 1969, p. 610). In 1935, the organization ceased to exist, and its functions were taken over by the International Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture (Paris 1935). The International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists ceased its operations a year later, in June–July 1936.

The primary mission of the Bureau was to facilitate the inclusion of artworks of artist-members in Soviet exhibitions and actively promote them. The Bureau ensured the participation of foreign artists in significant milestone shows, such as the "15 Years of the Red Army". Most often, the Bureau was advocating for artworks by artists from the John Reed Club (1929–1935). The John Reed Club was an American federation of left-leaning writers, artists, and intellectuals named in honor of the American journalist and activist John Reed. Artists from the John Reed Club (including Albert Abramovich, William Gropper, Eitaro Isigaki, Louis Lozowick, Minna Harkavy, Fred Ellis, and Mitchell Fields) constituted the American section of the Bureau. Their works were displayed more frequently than those of other artists in the Soviet Union, as they were continuously showcased in thematic, group, and solo shows at various Soviet institutions from 1931 to 1936. Additionally, their

works were widely published in art magazines (“*Za proletarskoe iskusstvo*”, “*Rabis*”, “*Brigada hudozhnikov*”) and literary journals associated with the International Association of Revolutionary Writers and the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists, namely “*Vestnik inostrannoĭ literatury*”, “*Literatura mirovoj revolyucii*” (1931–1932), and “*Internatsional’naya literatura*” (1933–1935): from 1928 to 1935, these publications featured the reproduction of approximately 380 works by 97 artists from America, Europe, and Asia (Efros 1969, p. 614).

In 1936, the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists concluded its activities, and its entire structure and established connections over the course of four years were incorporated into and formed the foundation of the Foreign Commission of the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists (1936–1938). Similar to the Bureau, the Foreign Commission was corresponding with artists and organizing lectures, but the intensity of its exhibition projects decreased. Nevertheless, it managed to organize an exhibition of English antifascist graphics (1937) and solo exhibitions of the Latvian artist Wilhelm Jakub and Albin Amelin (both 1937).

In December 1935, the All-Union Committee for Arts Affairs was established, tasked with overseeing “all matters related to the arts, including theaters, film organizations, musical and visual arts, sculpture, and other institutions”. According to this resolution, the Arts Affairs Committee commenced its operations in January 1936, assuming responsibility for the development of international exhibition projects. In 1937, the committee organized two exhibitions, “*Contemporary Belgian Art*” and “*Contemporary Czechoslovak Art*” (both held at the State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow and subsequently at the Hermitage in Leningrad), which marked the last major prewar Western art exhibitions in the USSR.

Some of these organizations were also working with local foreigners, for example with Latvian artists. In the Soviet Union, Latvian artists such as Jānis Kalniņš, Gustav Klucis, Alexander Drevin, Karl Johanson, Karl Veideman, Voldemar Anderson, Paul Irbit, Jan Rinke, Wilhelm Jakub, Cecilia Gustav, Ernst Grinwald, Karl Meikula, Albert Berzin, Yakov Grikis, and Eduard Ratzenais primarily resided and worked in Moscow. It was in this city that they developed creatively, including their education at higher state artistic and technical studios (*Vysshie khudozhestvenno-tekhicheskie masterskie, VKhUTEMAS*), and held their exhibitions with the support of the Prometejs society.

The Latvian Enlightenment Society Prometejs was founded in February 1924. By 1935, twelve Latvian clubs and four theaters were actively operating in major Soviet cities. The society had several sections, including one dedicated to the visual arts. In addition to preserving the Latvian and Latgalian languages, Prometejs primarily focused on the Sovietization of the Latvian diaspora and the promotion of communist ideals within it. In 1936, Prometejs and the All-Russian cooperative association of artists (*Vserossijskoe kooperativnoe ob’edinenie “Hudozhnik”, short title “Vsekhudozhnik”*) were aiming to coproduce the “*First United Exhibition of Works by Latvian Artists in the USSR*”, scheduled for early 1937. “The vibrant growth of socialism in the USSR, the concern for art demonstrated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks), the government, and the leader of nations, Comrade Stalin, created exceptionally favorable conditions for the advancement of art in our country, including for Latvian artists . . . Our art will become accessible and comprehensible to the widest masses, and Latvian artists, through their works, will contribute to the resolution of the grand task—the re-education of the masses in the spirit of Lenin-Stalin doctrine and their mobilization for the realization of new goals in building a socialist economy, culture, and safeguarding the borders of our homeland, the USSR”, as stated the introductory text of the catalogue for the exhibition of Anderson in 1936 (*Vystavka Kartin 1936*, p. 10).

The “*First United Exhibition of Works by Latvian Artists in the USSR*” in 1937 was not held, but an exhibition of Latvian artist Vilhelm Jakub did take place, organized jointly by Prometejs and the Foreign Section of the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists. And in December 1937, arrests of Latvians commenced. These were part of “the national operations” of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD)—a series of mass repressive campaigns

conducted by Soviet authorities in 1937–1938. These operations were primarily aimed at individuals of foreign nationalities residing in the USSR, including Poles, Germans, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Finns, Greeks, Romanians, Bulgarians, Chinese, Iranians, Afghans, and others. Kalninš, Drevin, Irbit, Anderson, Veideman, Rinke, Jakub, Klucis, Berzin, Grikis, Ratzenais, Gustav, Grinwald, and Meikula were imprisoned. All of them were accused of belonging to a counter-revolutionary fascist terrorist organization that, according to the NKVD, operated within Prometejs (Butovskij Polygon 2004, pp. 275–77). During interrogations accompanied by torture, artists were forced to testify against each other. Irbit was coerced into admitting that he “produced paintings with an anti-Soviet content”, and Jakub, testifying against Anderson, Irbit, and Drevin, stated that “We, the artists, are directly involved in the “Industry of Socialism” exhibition and are preparing our paintings for it. Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, and other Politburo members will visit the “Industry of Socialism’ exhibition”. During their visit, one of us, positioned close to the stands, must shoot. Beforehand, each of us is obliged to have firearms, which Lasis was supposed to provide, and as Anderson told me, one of the leaders of the fascist organization Strauss. Irbit proposed committing a terrorist act on Red Square on 1 May or 7 November 1937, when columns of demonstrators pass by the Mausoleum” (Shafranskaya 2021). Irbit, Anderson, Drevin, Veideman, Klucis, Ratzenais, and Jakub were sentenced to capital punishment in February 1938. According to the minutes of the meeting of the Board of the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists on 15 February 1938, the question of expelling Latvian artists from its ranks “due to their arrest and expulsion from Moscow” was resolved in the affirmative and with unanimous agreement (RGALI 1938, p. 3).

2.2. Albin Amelin: First Visit and Solo Exhibition in Moscow

Albin Amelin can be characterized by an aesthetic that is expressive, colorful, naive, and socially engaged. Despite the latter point, as well as his membership in the Communist Party of Sweden since 1929, his exhibition in Moscow resulted from a series of contingencies. Negotiations for the Swedish exhibition began as early as 1935. Initially, the discussion revolved around a group show featuring several artists, then shifted to an exhibition of the “Färg och Form” association, and only later did Amelin’s name come up in the correspondence (Lidén 1975, p. 96). Amelin’s primary correspondent in Moscow was Alfred Durus. Durus, originally bearing the Hungarian name Kemény (1895–1945), was a Hungarian publicist and literary and art critic. In the 1920s, he emigrated to Germany, where he joined the Communist Party in 1923, and in 1934, he relocated from Germany to the USSR. In 1935–1936, he served as the secretary responsible for the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists (MBRH), and in 1936–1937, he acted as the representative of the Foreign Commission of the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists (MOSSKh).

In March 1937, Durus sent a series of letters to Amelin discussing the exhibition’s opening date, set for May 1937. In response, the artist immediately began preparations and sent his works to Moscow well in advance, while also applying for a visa. However, he only managed to obtain the visa in May and arrived in Moscow on 9 June. It is worth noting that due to the actions of Soviet organizers, the exhibition’s opening date was repeatedly postponed.

Amelin spent a month wandering around in Moscow. How was it in this month? In this regard, the statement made by translators E. Eriksson and S. Carlsson regarding Albin Amelin’s arrival in Moscow, essentially a complaint dated 3 July 1937 to the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), is noteworthy. In their statement, they described numerous misadventures of the artist and constant neglect of his needs by his hosts: “On June 9, Mr. Amelin arrived in Moscow. He was met at the station by representatives of MOSSKh headed by the leader of the Foreign Commission, Durus. Right from the start, Mr. Amelin, confident in the letters he had received, indicating that he was invited as a guest of the Soviet Union, was surprised when Durus asked him where he was staying. Amelin was taken to the “Moskva” hotel, where he has remained ever since. During this entire period, the MOSSKh leadership, particularly Mr. Durus, failed to take

any steps either for cultural support or for providing financial assistance to Mr. Amelin . . . Mr. Amelin repeatedly appealed to MOSSKh with several requests: (1) to attend the theater, (2) to attend the congress of architects in which Scandinavian architects who were personally acquainted with Mr. Amelin were participating, (3) to obtain permission to sketch Moscow's views, (4) to provide information about the lives of Soviet artists (work with youth, photographic materials, etc.). None of these requests were granted. At the request of MOSSKh, a representative of the Swedish Communist Party with the Comintern provided a translator, who, although not very familiar with Moscow himself, had to take on the entire responsibility for organizing Mr. Amelin's cultural support as far as possible. The MOSSKh leadership now claims post facto that they were misunderstood, and that Mr. Amelin should have only come after the exhibition, at which point he could have lived within means from the sale of paintings. Mr. Amelin stated that regardless of the circumstances, since he was here, he could not leave without accomplishing anything and requested assistance, even a small loan, until the paintings were sold, as well as a more affordable room (the cost of the room at the "Moskva" hotel doubles after a 15-day stay). MOSSKh did eventually find a room, but it was in such a state that it was embarrassing to show it to Mr. Amelin. As for money (in exchange), MOSSKh literally had to be squeezed, and in extremely paltry sums. There was a case where the translator had to sell his own suit to rectify the situation. Furthermore, it was discovered that MOSSKh was not authorized to organize exhibitions at all. MOSSKh does not have the right to invite foreign artists for exhibition purposes; only the Committee for Arts Affairs under the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR has that authority. Mr. Amelin's paintings arrived in the USSR on 7 June, in Moscow on 23 June, and they were received by MOSSKh from customs on 29 June. Finally, on 2 July, an expert was called in from the museum to determine the feasibility of organizing the exhibition. Only after this a report to be submitted to the Committee for Arts Affairs requesting permission for the exhibition. From all that has been outlined above, it is evident how irresponsibly MOSSKh handled its correspondence with Mr. Amelin and his invitation. Drawing your attention to this, we believe that in the future, to avoid misunderstandings and the discrediting of the Soviet Union, such important matters as correspondence and the invitation of foreign artists should be entrusted to more appropriate organizations" (GARF 1937, pp. 21–26).

Amelin himself gave his observations about his time in the USSR in a very mild and complimentary manner—at least publicly—as in an interview to the "Socialdemokrat" newspaper, which was published in July 1937 under the eye-catching headline "Tremendous Interest in Art".

"In the Soviet Union, there is tremendous interest in art," says artist Albin Amelin, who has just returned from Moscow, where he was preparing an exhibition of his paintings scheduled for the upcoming fall. Even in schools, children receive artistic education and learn to appreciate and understand art. In a few years, the Soviet audience will undoubtedly have a better understanding of art than anyone else. Russian artists arguably have a better standard of living than Swedish ones, and the authorities actively support and cooperate with them. As an example, I can mention that when it comes to presenting a project for decorating and designing an exhibition or some other event—there are often various anniversaries in the Soviet Union—the artists are provided with full support, materials, and so on while they are working on their projects. I have become friends with many of my Soviet colleagues, and their honesty made a particular impression on me. As an example of this, I can mention that I was asked to give my opinion on contemporary Soviet painting, and since it did not particularly impress me, I spoke directly and honestly. They responded to me with a smile: we are glad to hear an honest opinion, unlike all the polite phrases.

Contemporary Soviet art has its weaknesses, and unfortunately, it lags behind the immense achievements that the Union has in other fields. The works of Soviet artists do not exhibit the propagandistic style that is commonly believed to be

characteristic of them. Artists there depict flowers, houses, and whatever they please. However, there is no need to doubt the future of Soviet art, as with such opportunities and surrounded by such care, our colleagues in the USSR will undoubtedly achieve genuine success.

-Did your trip to Moscow provide you with any inspiration for your work?

The Basques from Bilbao played football in Moscow, and when the match began, a multitude of airplanes suddenly appeared over the field, dropping red roses and other flowers. The Basques were both astonished and moved, as they were accustomed to entirely different items being dropped from airplanes back in their homeland. It was a captivating spectacle, and as soon as I find the time, I will attempt to recreate it in my artwork . . . I hope to have the opportunity to return to Moscow soon", the artist concludes, "as this city holds great value from an artist's perspective". (RGALI 1937a, pp. 1–2).

Albin Amelin had the opportunity to attend one of the matches during the Basque national team's tour of the Soviet Union in 1937. In total, the Basques played nine matches in the Soviet Union, with four of them taking place in Moscow. The excitement surrounding these games was immense. The first one, played with Moscow team "Lokomotiv" on 24 June, had approximately 1 million ticket applications submitted. And 90,000 lucky spectators were at the match, one of whom was Amelin. The newspaper "Krasny Sport" published an article, narrating an event that moved the artist deeply: "As we descended to within 500, 300, 200 m from the ground, the pilot raised his hand, and a huge bouquet of peonies, violets, and carnations descended. The rapid descent of the flowers was slowed by the deployed parachute, on the white silk canopy of which was written: 'Greetings to the sons of heroic Spain. To the footballers of the Basque Country from the newspaper 'Krasny Sport' and the agit air squadron named after Maxim Gorky.' The parachute with the bouquet of flowers landed, and the flowers were presented to the team captain, Regeiro" (Lebedev 1937, p. 1).

The exhibition finally opened on 15 August 1937, at the Museum of New Western Art. The artist had returned to Sweden approximately a month before the exhibition's opening. As it was shown he gave his observations about his time in the USSR in a gracious and praising tone. For Soviet cultural figures, interviews with foreign visitors upon their return home were an important source of information and a tool for influencing public opinion abroad. Therefore, the Press Department of VOKS (the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) diligently monitored and collected them. Likewise, the artist expressed satisfaction both with the outcome of his exhibition and with the quantity and quality of publications that followed. In their correspondence, Durus mentioned articles that appeared in the newspapers "Literaturnaya Gazeta" and "Sovetskoye Iskusstvo". In a review of the exhibition published in "Sovetskoye Iskusstvo" No. 38 (384) on 17 August 1937, Amelin was described as a "leading Western artist approaching realistic art and significant political themes, although he had not entirely shed formalism" (Shvarz 1937). As Durus informed Amelin, coverage of the exhibition also appeared in the "Prager Presse", a German newspaper published in Prague from 1921 to 1939.

2.3. *The Acquisition of Amelin's Paintings and His Second Visit to the Soviet Union*

Prior to Albin Amelin's first visit to the USSR and the staging of his exhibition, it was clear to the organizers that some of the artist's works would be purchased. This was a standard practice—from each solo exhibition of a foreign artist, between 2 to 4 works were acquired, and from group exhibitions, up to 40 works, primarily graphics, were procured, 1 piece from each participating artist. For instance, this practice was followed after the Finnish exhibition of 1934 and the Belgian exhibition of 1937.

The decisions to purchase artworks from international shows were political, made by the leadership of cultural institutions rather than curators or museum professionals.

The goal of such acquisitions was not to strengthen or diversify the collections of Soviet museums or expand the representation of art from a specific country. Instead, it was to create a favorable impression on foreign artists and provide them with another reason to speak positively about the Soviet Union in the press. The acquired works from these exhibitions were stored in museum vaults for decades, not displayed in exhibitions, not published, and not studied.

The request for the purchase of Amelin's paintings typically began with a statement like "Amelin is one of the leading anti-fascist artists in Sweden, so the decision to acquire his paintings carries significant political importance" (GARF 1937, pp. 1–2). To underscore this point, Durus quoted a letter from Amelin, thereby demonstrating and confirming the artist's loyalty: "I am very grateful to you for your efforts related to my exhibition. The positive results of the exhibition and the sale of works have significantly increased interest in the Soviet Union . . . Objective criticism in the Soviet press was very timely, especially after recent events in the field of visual arts in fascist Germany, which have caused ridicule and resentment here. I am convinced that the exhibition's results will contribute to interest in the activities of the Soviet Union in the fields of culture and human rights. I will do everything possible to organize an exhibition of Soviet artists' paintings here in Sweden. The opportunities for this are favorable. I will exhibit a large canvas, an allegory of construction in the USSR, in Gothenburg" (GARF 1937, p. 1; RGALI 1937b, p. 23).

We could assume that Amelin was aware that in the USSR he would be able to sell some of his paintings. This understanding was established as early as March 1937, well in advance of his visit and exhibition, when he was provided with a comprehensive explanation of the practical aspects of this process in the Soviet Union. Durus wrote: "Payment for the sold paintings is made in Soviet currency. Furthermore, artists whose works are sold in our country are given the opportunity to come here and spend the received amount on the spot. Only those paintings that you unequivocally agree to sell will indeed be sold. The sum received from the sale of paintings will be deposited into a savings account, and we will be very pleased to welcome you here as our guest" (GARF 1937, p. 11).

Such a payment scheme was the sole option available in the USSR at that time. The country operated under a state monopoly on currency trading, and since January 1937, the right to purchase and possess foreign currency was restricted to the State Bank of the USSR. All other organizations and private individuals were prohibited from engaging in such transactions under the threat of arrest.

In the procurement committee of the All-Union Committee for Arts Affairs, Durus petitioned for the purchase of four works by Amelin: "Civilization of General Franco" (6000 rubles), "Women at the Window" (5000 rubles), "Sunset" (2000 rubles), and "Sleeping Boy" (400 rubles). However, it appears that only three of these works were acquired: two large canvases, "Civilization of General Franco" (1936) and "Women at the Window" (1936), along with the lithograph "Sleeping Boy" (1936)¹. Additionally, the situation regarding the impossibility of paying the artist in any currency other than rubles was attributed to Amelin's own preference: "Amelin would like to spend the money received from the sale of his paintings in Moscow and confidently anticipates returning here. He would be deeply offended if we were unable to facilitate this" (GARF 1937, p. 2).

Hence, from the very beginning, the artist was "destined" to make a second trip to the Soviet Union. And as the situation unfolded in this manner, he had far-reaching intentions and concrete plans for this trip. In an interview with the Swedish communist newspaper "Ny Dag" under the headline "Amelin Returns to the USSR. Intends to Depict Social Construction", he shared his plans to initially visit Moscow and then travel to the Black Sea coast, expressing his desire to "depict the work and construction in the USSR" (GARF 1939, p. 49).

However, not everything went as smoothly as expected. According to the report from the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries on 8 January 1939, "Amelin's stay in Moscow went relatively well, although we had difficulties obtaining a

work permit, which did not go unnoticed by Amelin. We had to accompany him on the trip to the South, as a work permit for Yalta could not be obtained. We explained to Amelin that work on the Black Sea coast is associated with significant difficulties (border zone), and the chosen time of year was not favorable (cold, etc.). In Moscow, Amelin sketched Theatre Square, Stakhanovites of Metrostroy, and the Stalin Factory. Amelin visited several museums, theaters, factories, and other enterprises. Due to the cold, Amelin declined to visit a collective farm . . . It should be noted that Amelin's external calmness often does not contribute to close interaction with him . . . Undoubtedly, Amelin has a positive attitude toward the Soviet Union, but at the same time, it is impossible not to notice his political backwardness, even in matters related to his specialty. He has a peculiar, characteristic of the petite bourgeoisie, view on art and painting, from which he reluctantly, after lengthy discussions, refrains" (GARF 1939, p. 35).

Furthermore, the attempt to circumvent the customs authorities and somehow export the earnings to Sweden ended in failure. In December 1938, VOKS requested the Main Customs Administration to "allow the artist Amelin to export to Sweden one women's fur coat and exempt him from paying duty for the export" (GARF 1939, p. 47). However, the response from the Customs Administration was concise: "Considering that the export of furs and fur products from the USSR is prohibited, the Main Customs Administration does not find it possible to issue a permit for the duty-free export (or even with duty payment) of one squirrel fur coat for Mr. A. Amelin" (GARF 1939, p. 39).

3. Conclusions

All the organizers, including Durus, were trying to meet Amelin's expectations from the trip and provide him with the best they could obtain. In 1937–1938, the local Soviet foreigners were no longer important to the state and were seen as hostile. Foreign visitors were still regarded as a valuable source of pressure on public opinion in their native countries. VOKS called the artist taciturn and his attitude to art bourgeoisie, but in 1939, they kept in touch with Amelin. They sent him materials for his lecture about the life of Soviet artists, lithographs with Stalin images, and photographs of Stakhanovites "at work and at home" (GARF 1939, p. 13), and collected Amelin's interviews and publications. This proves once again that the system of art exchange managed by Soviet organizations had no independent purposes and was serving the diplomatic and propagandist goals of the Soviet state to form opinions and shape attitudes toward the socialist system.

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Note

- ¹ Nina Yavorskaya mentioned that in addition to the aforementioned works, one tempera painting, one ink drawing, and two lithographs were acquired for the collection of the State Museum of New Western Art (Yavorskaya 2012, p. 315). Currently, the artworks "Two Women at the Window" and "Civilization of General Franco" are in the collection of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, while the "Sleeping Child" lithograph is part of the graphic collection of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow.

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