

The Russian Chamber Theatre at Prague

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Abstract

In the early of 1920s the multicultural scene in Prague was animated by the activity of the Russian Chamber Theatre. It was founded by two emigrants Sergey Strenkovsky and Ilya Surguchev. Its first plays, based on texts of Tolstoy, Andreev, Ostrovsky, had enthused the Prague audience. Very important had been the support of the Check author Karel Čapek. Ilya Surguchev had published also several essays about the cosmopolitan life at Prague based on the Slav solidarity with some anti-German sentiments. He had collaborated with the great poetess Marina Tsvetaeva, who had also emigrated to Prague. The Russian Chamber Theatre had started its production in 1921 but stopped it in 1923.

Keywords

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After the end of the First World War, and more precisely, after the Civil War in Russia, Europe had experienced an exodus of people unprecedented in modern times. Accurate statistics of refugees from the fallen Russian Empire, for obvious reasons, were not conducted. Historians are still hesitant to make an assessment of the exact number, but the approximate overall figure is very huge – from one to three million. In Russian historiography, this exodus is called the First wave of emigration (there followed a Second one, caused by the Second World War, and a Third, with its dissident character of the Cold War).

Sometimes the First wave is also called the ‘White’ emigration, which is inaccurate, since the Red Army born by the Bolshevik revolution fought not only with the White conservative movement, but also with various alternative left-wing revolutionaries – ‘greens’, anarchists, Socialist-Revolutionaries and so on.

The geography of the First wave was determined, first of all, by the presence of traditional historical and cultural ties, and by economic opportunities, therefore all major European centers such as Berlin and Paris were immediately overcrowded by emigrants. An exceptional history is represented by the mass emigration of Russians to Czechoslovakia and its capital.

This phenomenon was initiated by the post-war disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the formation of a new Czechoslovak statehood. Overall, the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was marked by the aspirations for the Slavic brotherhood of the peoples, many of whom were then under foreign yoke.

After Russia’s support to the Balkan Slavs in their fight against the Ottomans, the joint Slav struggle against Austrian-Hungarian domination came to the fore: the First World War began for the Russian Empire under that slogan. As a result, the Habsburg rule in

Czechoslovakia was over, but in a different way than the Romanovs thought – in November 1918, when the independence of Czechoslovakia was proclaimed, Bolsheviks had executed the Emperor Nicholas II.

At the helm of the new Slavic state was a prominent politician and scientist, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, a man who knew and loved Russian culture – his original treatise, *Russia and Europe*, was first published in German in 1913. Not only the pro-Russian sentiments of the first president of Czechoslovakia, but also the general mood of its cultural elite, led to the extraordinary ‘Russian action’ of helping refugees from the collapsed state. The ‘Russian action’ was announced in 1921, immediately after the defeat of the anti-Bolshevik resistance in Russia and after the beginning of the exodus.

Surprisingly, a small country experiencing serious political and economic difficulties somehow managed to allocate large budgetary funds in support of Russian refugees. As a result, various forms of Russian cultural presence – periodicals, clubs and cafes, singing and dance repertoires – began to appear in Prague in the early 1920s. Unique even under such turbulent life was the creation of a permanent Russian Drama theater; after all, theater requires an extensive and, most importantly, grateful and understanding public. The success of the Russian theater in Prague is a clear indication of the special cultural and political situation prevailing in the early 1920s in the capital of a new Slavic country.

The history of this theater is explored in several studies. One of the first to touch this topic was I.V. Inov. According to his reconstruction, the Kiev actor Vladimir Vladimirov (1890-1956), who used the stage name Khinkulov, stood at the beginning of the theater. In late 1920, he founded the First Prague Theater, where he invited amateur Russian actors.

Another quality the First Prague Russian Theater received a few months later, in the summer of 1921, was the arrival of a prominent professional director, Sergey Strenkovsky, who had previously worked in Saint Petersburg. For the *startup* production of the First Prague Theater, Strenkovsky had chosen Lev Tolstoy’s play *The Power of Darkness* (1886). This play, initially banned in the tsarist Russia, achieved success under the production of K. Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theater (1902). The deep respect for Tolstoy from President Masaryk also played a role – he had twice visited the Russian writer at his Yasnaya Polyana estate. With Tolstoy’s play, the First Prague Russian Theater successfully toured in various Czech cities in the summer and early autumn of 1921.

This success led Strenkovsky to the idea of creating a new theatrical organism, on a permanent, professional basis. The writer Ilya Surguchev, who arrived in Prague in August 1921, gave the final impulse to his project. His arrival was notified to the readers by the Russian émigré magazine *Ogni* (n. 5, 22/8):

A writer and playwright, author of *Autumn Violins*, I. Surguchev, came to Prague from Constantinople. He will be the closest collaborator of *Ogni*. Together with G.A. Alexinsky, A. Kuprin, I. Bunin, A. Yablonovsky, N.A. Teffi, B. Lazarevsky and others I. Surguchev will take part in the publication in Prague of the monthly almanac *Slavyanskíe Travy*. (2)

However, in Czechoslovakia, Surguchev initially paid more attention to the beloved theater than to fiction and journalism. Successful cooperation with Strenkovsky, who had already settled in Prague, was strengthened by the fact that these two persons were close during the previous stage of their refugee life in Istanbul, where they endured inactivity and half starvation. In the Czech capital, in an atmosphere of national expansion and Slavic solidarity, both Surguchev and Strenkovsky felt a surge of new creative forces.



Image 1. Ilya Surguchev in the 20s

Surguchev had described the historical prerequisites for a favorable atmosphere in the Czechoslovak Republic in such expressions:

The Czech regiments had fought against the Germans under the Russian command. The Czech legions had made a Siberian expedition. The Czech Army had been organized in Russia. A lot of officers and soldiers had married Russian women. The root of the languages, Russian and Czech, is the same. From Russia, the Czechs brought fervent love for her. They fell in love with our life, with our spaces, with our hospitality. They understand that only Great Russia will create a quiet life for their Republic. (Surguchev 140)

Surguchev develops his thesis about the priority of the Czechoslovak Republic among other places of the Russian diaspora:

What's the matter? Really thousands of Russian colonies could not justify, in effect, unpretentious expenses? If previously they were collecting a single thread from everyone and making a shirt for a naked one, then now, in spite of difficult circumstances, Russians, theatrical people of Europe, could not twice give a penny and create an émigré theater twice a week?

Could not. Maybe they did not want.

Yet the Russian theater was needed. It had to be. It could not have happened that emigration, which no revolution had ever seen since the time of the creation of the world, which drew out the cream of the intellectual forces of Russia, would not create its theater. However, it was necessary to focus not on the multiplicity of the Russian colony, not on its 'wealth' and not on the height of its 'intelligence'! It was necessary to focus on Russian culture itself. (139)

The writer's energy and conviction played a big role. The well-known researcher of theatre, N. Yanchevsky, found out that the Theater Commission of the Circle of Russian and Czechoslovak Writers and Artists, which was founded in the frames of the Administrative Center of the Russian emigrant colony in Prague, supported the initiative of Surguchev and Strenkovsky, and instructed them to compose a *Memorandum* on the organization of the Russian Chamber Theater in the Czech capital.

This *Memorandum*, signed by two emigrants, was sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak government expressed its will to provide the Russian theater not only with moral, but also with material support. Formation of the troupe and the administration of the theater concluded with the election of Surguchev as its director, and Strenkovsky as artistic director. As N. Yanchevsky writes, the Russian Chamber Theater "differed from other theaters by its organization; it resembled the old Russian theaters in that it had its own permanent troupe and a guaranteed monthly maintenance. The troupe consisted of E. Dniprova, N. Reshetnikova, V. Koretskaya, M. Reinhardt, S. Strenkovsky, A. Ranetsky, S. Dolinsky and P. Alekseev." (Yanchevsky 108)

The renowned Czech writer, Karel Čapek, responded to the establishment of the theater: "We can rejoice that Prague has a chance to become more and more like the center of Slavic creativity in the field of culture". In this phrase it is not difficult to notice the

glint of the general Pan-Slavic mood of that era.

The rapprochement of the Slavic cultures took place due to the opposition of the culture of the oppressors – the Germans and the Austrians. Surguchev, who left a series of Prague essays included in his recent book *Evropejskie siluety* (European Silhouettes), testified to the anti-German sentiments in Prague (this anti-Germanism could be exaggerated by Surguchev: the First World War significantly strengthened anti-German feelings in Russian society itself):

The Germans are an intelligent people. However, really, you need to have very little intelligence, so that, for example, you can be fed up with how tired they were to the Czechs during their 300-year reign.

How a Czech hates a German!

The other day, A.V. Nezhdanova, forgetting that ‘in many countries there are many customs’, sang in Prague, in Smetana’s hall, an aria in German. Oh my God! What happened to the Czechs, who just applauded enthusiastically the famous Moscow *umelkyna?* [in Czech: artist].

In the intermission, bursting into the restroom, they shouted:

“You forgot that this is Smetana’s hall! To sing in German? Here are Slavs, not Germans! Isn’t the Russian language not enough for you? We can assure you that this is a wonderful language, and we love it!”

Our local friends have barely settled the scandal. (Surguchev 140)

The Chamber Theater opened its activity on February 7, 1922 with the same Tolstoy’s play, *The Power of Darkness*, on the stage of the Prague Theater “Švandov”. At the opening of the season, Surguchev delivered a speech in which he thanked the Czech people for their hospitality and for the fact that Russian artists, in spite of their homeland disaster, had the opportunity to light the limelight in Prague.

The Czech society, which appreciated the Russian Chamber Theater, wished that only Russian plays were staged in it. A similar request was made when the actors staged the Molière comedies, translated into Russian. Therefore, the basis of the repertoire was the works of A. Sukhovo-Kobylin, A. Ostrovsky, M. Konstantinov, D. Fonvizin, A. Chekhov. The play *The Life of Man* by the recently deceased and little-known in Europe Leonid Andreev had received a special attention. Presenting the play to the public, Surguchev outlined the fate of this writer, who previously criticised the tsarist regime before 1917, but

perceived the arrival of Bolshevism as a political and spiritual catastrophe.

A researcher of Surguchev’s life, Professor Alexander Fokin, notes that freshness and relevance to the Chamber Theater were brought by the writer’s own works: a performance based on his staged fairy tale by Dickens *The Cricket on the Hearth* and the Surguchev’s drama *Torgovyj Dom* (Trading House), which had great success in pre-revolutionary



Image 2. The poster of the play *The Rivers of Babylon*

Russia (during the second season another his play was staged: *Osennie skripki* [Autumn Violins]).(Fokin 247-248)

On April 20, 1922 there was the theater premiere of the play *The Rivers of Babylon*, on the theme of Russian refugees, also written by Surguchev at Prague. He also prepared literary dramatizations of *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky, Goncharov's *Precipice*, Turgenev's *Noble's Nest*. In the theatrical season of 1922-1923, the 100th anniversary of the birth of the playwright Ostrovsky was widely celebrated. The theater staged the 'collected works' of the great Russian playwright – about ten of his plays.

The Russian Chamber Theater travelled several times, touring Germany and Bulgaria. But the best memories came from tours in Carpathians, on Hungarian lands populated by Slavs. For the actors, it was a kind of touch with their homeland.

A public apotheosis of the Theater could be considered the production of the verse drama by Alexander Kotomkin *Jan Hus* on July 6, 1922, on the stage of the National Theater. It was played on the occasion of the 550th anniversary of the birth of the great leader of the Czech Reformation. The fate of this poem is unique; its author, the peasant poet Alexander Kotomkin, being a participant of the White movement wrote this poem back in 1918. It was staged during the Russian Civil War on the occasion of the arrival to the Siberian White Army of T. Masaryk, who then invited Kotomkin, with his poem, to Prague. As a refugee, Kotomkin took advantage of this invitation. After the premiere of the poem he received the title of *Honorary Citizen of Prague*.



Image 3. Alexander Kotomkin in 1950s

However, by that time Surguchev became increasingly attracted to his writings. At the end of 1922, the Union of Russian Writers and Journalists was established in Prague, which Surguchev headed together with the great poetess Marina Tsvetaeva (and Arkady Averchenko). The Union made attempts to publish literary and artistic publications – the most famous was its almanac *Kovcheg*, with the works of Tsvetaeva.

The departure of Surguchev for Paris, which was more attractive for the author, predetermined the decline of the short but bright life of the Russian theater. Gradually, the attractiveness of the Slavic common idea was also rolled up, as it became evident that Soviet power in Russia was firmer than it seemed at the beginning of the exodus. In 1923, the theater gave its last performance, staging the play *Beyond the Law*, by a brilliant young writer and member of the group "Serapion Brothers" Leo Lunz (the author died in Hamburg next year).

The successor of the theater was a small Russian drama troupe, but it soon ceased to exist. Though the history of the permanent Russian theater in Prague had ended, theatrical relations continued. Through the 1920s and 30s, the Czech Republic saw many Russian actors on tour. The last glorious event happened in 1935 with the performance of a famous play by Alexander Griboyedov *Woe from Wit*, directed by Nikolay Evreinov, under the patronage of the daughter of Czechoslovak President Alisa Masaryk. Four years later the German troops entered in Prague interrupting any kind of Russian cultural activity there.

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