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Kasper Braskén

International Communism and Transnational Solidarity in the Context of the First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin

When the First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin opened its doors at the Galerie van Diemen on October 15, 1922, the exhibition catalogue informed visitors that it was jointly co-organized by the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) and an international organization called the *Auslandskomitee zur Organisierung der Arbeiterhilfe für die Hungernden in Rußland* [International Workers' Relief Committee for the Starving Russians], an international body created by the Communist International in August 1921 that was led by the German communist Wilhelm "Willi" Münzenberg.¹ While previous contributions on the exhibition have focused on the Soviet cultural diplomacy or the activity of individual Russian artists, the role of the Workers' Relief organization has remained less explored.² This essay will analyze how Workers' Relief made the exhibition intelligible from the perspective of communist internationalism and review its role in the creation of new forms of transnational solidarity between the West and Soviet Russia. Like many of the Russian artists involved in organizing the exhibition, among them Naum Gabo, David Shterenberg, and Natan Altman, Workers' Relief represents another manifestation of transcultural agency that further linked Weimar Germany with the new Russia.³

Farewell to the Revolution in the West

The exhibition in Berlin was organized in the midst of a dramatic transformation process within the international communist movement. After years of revolutionary upsurge, western capitalism was eventually showing signs of stabilization, thus dampening revolutionary optimism in Europe and leaving the outlook uncertain. The Third International, an international organization advocating world communism and most often referred to as the Communist International (Comintern), had been created in March 1919 to spearhead the global revolution.⁴

¹ Kasper Braskén, *The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity: Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

² Ewa Bérard, "The 'First Exhibition of Russian Art' in Berlin: The Transnational Origins of Bolshevik Cultural Diplomacy, 1921–1922," *Contemporary European History* 30, no. 2 (2021): 164–80.

³ Susanne Marten-Finnis, "Art as Refuge: Jewish Publishers as Cultural Brokers in Early 1920s Russian Berlin," *Transcultural Studies*, no. 1 (2016): 9–42.

⁴ Brigitte Studer, *Reisende der Weltrevolution: Eine Globalgeschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020).

Its predecessor, the Second International, imploded with the beginning of the First World War after the constituent social democratic parties chose not to stand up in united opposition to the conflict, but instead supported their own respective governments' war efforts. The war paved the way for a completely redrawn political map in Central and Eastern Europe that was accompanied by the collapse of both the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Romanov dynasties. The most dramatic event was the successful realization of the October Revolution in November 1917, which catapulted Lenin and a vanguard of Bolshevik revolutionaries to power in Russia. Moreover, after a series of revolutionary events, the German Empire (Kaiserreich) collapsed in November 1918, resulting in the founding of the Weimar Republic. Imperial Germany was dismantled, and a new democratic Germany emerged with Berlin as the primary European center for radical cultural initiatives and politics—a global point of convergence for the revolutionary networks and intense connections to Soviet Russia.

As a consequence of the war, the German socialists finally split up, with the revolutionary Spartacus League (Spartakusbund), in December 1918 renamed the German Communist Party (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD), assuming the vanguard of the revolutionary movement. The reformist Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD) advocated a democratic transition to socialism and looked aghast at the violent, revolutionary turmoil taking place in Russia. The KPD became one of the strongest communist parties beyond Russia and one of the most important early actors beyond Soviet Russia that presented the Russian Revolution in a supportive and emphatic light. The German communists did not lack their own revolutionary credentials, but their leading members, including Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches, and Franz Mehring, all perished in early 1919. The KPD continued to carry the revolutionary torch up until the so-called March Action in 1921, when they, along with the other far-left organizations, called for open insurrection in central Germany. It quickly became apparent that the party had pushed forward without the support of the German working class and the revolt was rapidly crushed. Although the traditional periodization of the KPD and Comintern's history describes the period from 1919 to October 1923 as the revolutionary postwar period in Germany, the March Action of 1921 represented in several respects a transformative event.⁵ Given the slow abatement of postwar social and political instability in Central and Eastern Europe, the Comintern was forced to

⁵ Hermann Weber, "Zum Verhältnis von Komintern, Sowjetstaat und KPD. Eine historische Einführung" [On the Relationship between the Comintern, the Soviet State, and the KPD: A Historical Introduction], in *Deutschland-Russland-Komintern: I. Überblicke, Analysen, Diskussionen. Neue Perspektiven auf die Geschichte der KPD und die Deutsch-Russischen Beziehungen (1918–1943)*, ed. Hermann Weber et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 17–48.

reconsider its goal of striving for immediate revolutionary developments in Europe and especially Germany. The ultimate consequence of this bitter realization was Soviet Russia's active search for trade agreements with the capitalist countries and the establishment of a peaceful coexistence that would provide time for Soviet development.⁶ In 1923, as a consequence of the dramatic Ruhr occupation and the hyperinflation crisis in Germany, revolution was suddenly, but only temporarily, brought back to the table by the KPD and Moscow. It culminated in a failed attempt to stage a "German October," whereafter revolutionary pessimism became dominant again.⁷

Although during these early years the Comintern's international activities and Soviet Russia's foreign policy were highly intertwined, the main focus here will remain on the Comintern, especially the often overlooked transnational solidarity work promoted by Workers' Relief. A major caesura for international communism took place when members of the Comintern gathered for the Third World Congress, in Moscow from June 22 to July 12, 1921. For the first time, the Comintern found it necessary to take a step back from its "tactic of assault" and focus on the masses instead. The new task of the Comintern and all national communist parties was to gain more influence in working class circles and win the upper hand from the social democratic parties and reformist trade unions through a united front. In Germany, the KPD needed, in other words, to maintain a radical pose, but refrain from premature action and focus on winning over larger sections of the working class.⁸

Winning the Masses through Solidarity

At the same time as external developments abroad were causing havoc with the revolutionary course of history, a horrific societal crisis was developing within Soviet borders. Amidst the activities of the Third World Congress, rumors were circulating that a devastating famine was unfolding in the Volga countryside. Official details were finally made public the day after the congress ended, on July 13, when Maxim Gorki was permitted to dispatch an international appeal for famine relief "To All Honest People."⁹ In July, Gorki functioned as an intermediary between Lenin and the Russian intelligentsia and managed even to secure Lenin's consent for the establishment of the All-Russian Public Committee to Aid the Hungry. News of its

⁶ Lionel Kochan, "The Russian Road to Rapallo," *Soviet Studies* 2, no. 2 (1950): 109–22.

⁷ Bernhard H. Bayerlein et al., eds., *Deutscher Oktober 1923: Ein Revolutionsplan und sein Scheitern* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2003); see also Braskén, *International Workers' Relief*, 77–97.

⁸ Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International 1919–1943: Documents I, 1919–1922* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 224–25.

⁹ A transcript of the appeal is reprinted in Orlando Figes, *A Peoples Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891–1924* (London: Pimclio, 1997).

establishment caused excitement among liberals and anti-Bolsheviks in the West as it included world-renowned Russian intellectuals who finally were permitted to re-emerge from the shadows. Ekaterina Kuskova, one of the leading voices on the public committee, noted that in such a devastating moment of crisis, it was their moral duty as Russian intellectuals to make an appeal for foreign aid. There was a sense that the humanitarians of the world would more willingly respond if the appeal came from public figures not associated with the Soviet regime. Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration (ARA), however, was not interested in collaborating with the public committee and insisted on arranging the US relief effort through an official Soviet agency. It was therefore the All-Russian Central Executive Committee's Central Commission to Aid the Starving (Tsentral'naia komissiiia pomoshchi golodaiushchim pri VTsIKe), established on July 21, that assumed responsibility on the Soviet side. When the ARA signed a relief agreement with the Soviet government on August 20, the Bolshevik tolerance for the public committee was finished; its fate was sealed when wild rumors in the West insinuated that the public committee would form the basis of a post-Bolshevik proto-government. At its next meeting on August 27, most of the intellectuals were arrested, exiled, and expelled. However, the public committee had from its founding included several leading Bolsheviks, including Lev Kamenev, Aleksei Rykov and Anatolii Lunacharskii, who continued their famine relief work within the framework of the state's Central Commission to Aid the Starving that co-ordinated the relief arriving from abroad.¹⁰ Gorki was appalled by the treatment of the Russian intellectuals and left for Germany where he continued to liason with intellectuals and artists.¹¹

To counterbalance the aid from the capitalist countries, Lenin initiated an international workers' famine relief that was based on the belief that the workers of the world would, unlike the capitalist countries, provide practical aid to Soviet Russia without any strings attached. The initiative was launched through the Comintern and Willi Münzenberg was selected to coordinate the workers' relief from Berlin. Münzenberg had ample experience with international work as he had been the secretary of the Communist Youth International. During his years in the international youth movement, he became personally acquainted with Lenin and many other leading Bolshevik exiles in Switzerland, which provided him with access to the leadership of both the Comintern and Soviet Russia. In mid-August 1921, Münzenberg founded

¹⁰ Stuart Finkel, *On the Ideological Front: The Russian Intelligentsia and the Making of the Soviet Public Sphere* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 19–39.

¹¹ Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Bridge and the Abyss: The Troubled Friendship of Maxim Gorky and V. I. Lenin* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1967), 107–16; 136–40.

the provisional Workers' Relief organization in Berlin. Its main mission was to coordinate and centralize aid collected via the workers movement beyond Soviet Russia, irrespective of whether it originated from syndicalists, anarchists, communists, social democratic parties, or reformist trade unions. However, instead of unifying the relief efforts of the workers' movement, the powerful social democratic parties and unions abstained from collaborating with Workers' Relief and organized their own separate fundraising efforts. Although Workers' Relief failed to unite all working-class organizations in the famine relief, Münzenberg still proudly called it "the first practical attempt to implement the united front."¹² In this process, Workers' Relief established itself as a significant new transnational actor in Berlin whose influence reached well beyond communist and immediate working-class circles. Through Münzenberg's initiative and with the full support of the Comintern apparatus, it connected with the communist parties of the world to establish local famine relief committees. The funds available to the workers of the world may have been limited, but it was pivotal for the mobilization of moral support.¹³

Significantly, Workers' Relief did not initially present a glorious image of Soviet Russia but articulated a message of desperation and despair that even speculated on the imminent collapse of Soviet Russia. The relief effort was thus not only about famine relief, but equally about saving Soviet Russia and the world revolution. As the Workers' Relief press slogan on August 18, 1921, declared: "The collapse of Soviet Russia would be the collapse of your revolution, too: Help Soviet Russia and you help yourself!"¹⁴ The campaign transmitted an urgent distress call for solidarity, urging workers to take action before it was too late. According to Münzenberg, workers instinctively understood that there was much more at stake than simply aiding famine victims: namely the preservation and development of "the first workers and peasants' state in world history."¹⁵ This made Workers' Relief efforts distinct from charity and

¹² "es war der erste praktische Versuch, die Einheitsfront durchzuführen". Erweiterte Exekutiv-Sitzung. III Internationale, 14. Sitzung, 1. März 1922 (Abendsitzung), Münzenberg: Bericht über die Hungerhilfe, [Extended Executive Meeting. Third International, 14th Session, March 1, 1922 (evening session), Münzenberg: Report on famine relief], Moscow, RGASPI 495/159/35, 4.

¹³ Kasper Braskén, "In Pursuit of Global International Solidarity? The Transnational Networks of the International Workers' Relief, 1921–1935," in *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity. Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939*, ed. Holger Weiss (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 130–67.

¹⁴ "Wenn Sowjetrußland zusammenbricht, bricht auch deine Revolution zusammen: Hilf Sowjetrußland und Du hilfst dir selber!" [If Soviet Russia collapses, your revolution collapses: Help Soviet Russia and you help yourself!], *Bulletin des Auslandskomitees zur Organisation der Arbeiterhilfe für die Hungernden in Rußland (Bulletin)*, no. 2, August 18, 1921.

¹⁵ [..., daß es um den Bestand und die Weiterentwicklung des ersten Arbeiter- und Bauernstaates in der Weltgeschichte geht.] Willi Münzenberg, "Der internationale Kampf der Proletarier gegen den Hunger in Rußland" [The international fight of proletarians against hunger in Russia], *Bulletin* 3, August 19, 1921.

philanthropy, as it stressed the importance of a worker solidarity that bound the fate of the international working class together with that of Soviet Russia.

Although Workers' Relief was intended to coordinate aid and support from the working class, it embraced from the beginning artists and intellectuals sympathetic to Soviet Russia. On August 19, only a few days after the organization's establishment, a parallel relief effort by German artists, the *Deutsche Künstlerhilfe für die Hungernden in Russland* [German Artists' Relief for the Starving in Russia], was founded in Berlin. The initiative was started by Käthe Kollwitz, Arthur Holitscher, Georg Grosz, Wieland Herzfelde, and Max Barthel,¹⁶ by January 15, 1922, Maxim Gorki was included in the honorary presidium.¹⁷ Both Grosz and Kollwitz contributed original art works to the campaign, and Kollwitz designed the first campaign poster for Workers' Relief, which depicted a falling man (Russia) surrounded by helping hands (the workers of the world) reaching out toward him.¹⁸ The print run in Germany, however, seems to have been limited, which was partly explained by Münzenberg, who warned the Comintern in Moscow that they needed to be mindful about operational costs: the workers were attentive to the need that the collected funds were not to be spent on posters, but given to the hungry.¹⁹

INSERT FIGS. 1+2 HERE NEXT TO EACH OTHER

Fig. 1: *Sowjet-Russland im Bild*, no. 3, December 20, 2021

Fig. 2: *Sowjet-Russland im Bild*, no. 4, January 20, 2022

Toward a large cultural-political campaign for Soviet Russia

Workers' Relief needed visual ways to depict Soviet Russia and the famine crisis, and Münzenberg especially was convinced about the importance of using images in the formation of transnational solidarity, be it through art, photographs, or film.²⁰ For this purpose, Workers' Relief initiated a monthly workers' magazine called *Sowjet-Rußland im Bild* [Soviet Russia in Pictures]. The first issue was published on November 7, 1921, and the profits from its sale were

¹⁶ "Deutsche Künstlerhilfe" [German artists' aid], *Bulletin* 4, August 22, 1921.

¹⁷ "Deutsche Künstlerhilfe: XXX" [German artists' aid: Honorary presidium], *Bulletin* 36, January 15, 1922.

¹⁸ Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1989), 508.

¹⁹ Münzenberg's report about the famine relief in "Protokoll der Sitzung der Kom. Internationale vom 21. November 1921" [Minutes of the Comintern Executive Committee's Meeting, November 21, 1921], Moscow, RGASPI 495/1/44, 68.

²⁰ Willi Münzenberg, "Die Propaganda für die Hungerhilfe durch das Bild" [The use of pictures in the propaganda for the starving], *Inprekorr* 10, 1922, 84–85.

to be used only for famine relief.²¹ One year later the name was changed to *Sichel und Hammer* [Sickle and Hammer] before it became the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (AIZ) in 1925.²²

The main goal of the famine relief campaign's first phase was to collect as much money and foodstuffs as possible. However, as hardship prevailed in most other parts of Europe, too, the results of the fundraising were necessarily going to be limited; Münzenberg estimated that the political gains would, in the end, outweigh the material side of the campaign.²³ In a similar tone, Münzenberg reported to the Comintern on November 21, 1921 that "The greatest gain is not a few wagons of grain, but moral success."²⁴

Significantly for the First Russian Art Exhibition, in 1922 Workers' Relief altered its original purpose to reflect a new kind of aid, intuitively called "productive economic assistance," that set its focus on reconstructing the Soviet economy in the famine-stricken areas, thereby also collectively working to "build socialism" in Soviet Russia.²⁵ Münzenberg informed Lenin on December 22, 1921, that Workers' Relief was "beginning to turn the campaign into a large-scale political campaign in support of Soviet Russia, i.e., the recognition of the Soviet government and the unrestricted provision of long-term commercial loans, etc."²⁶ Moreover, the Comintern needed a stronger response to the cultural events being realized by non-Bolshevik Russian émigrés in Berlin, which included variety and cabaret shows, plays at the Russian theatre, and the organization of Russian art evenings and song recitals. Münzenberg suggested to Lenin that a well-organized Russian art exhibition could function as an effective counterweight.²⁷ In his letter to the Comintern, he indicated that the organization of a large art exhibition had already been discussed with him when he was in Moscow in November 1921.

²¹ On the cover of *Sowjetrußland im Bild* 1 (November 7, 1921) it was stated that the net proceeds are set aside for the starving in Russia.

²² Riccardo Bavaj, "'Revolutionierung der Augen': Politische Massenmobilisierung in der Weimarer Republik und der Münzenberg-Konzern" ["Revolutionizing the Eyes:" Political Mass Mobilization in the Weimar Republic and the Münzenberg Group], in *Politische Kultur und Medienwirklichkeiten in den 1920er Jahren* ed. Ute Daniel et al. (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2010), 81–100.

²³ Untitled and undated [late July 1921] document on the organisation of the Comintern's famine relief campaign. Moscow, RGASPI 495/60/1, 10–11.

²⁴ "Der grösste Gewinn ist nicht die paar Waggons Getreide, sondern der moralische Erfolg." Protokoll der Sitzung der Kom. Internationale vom 21. November 1921 [Minutes of the Comintern Executive Committee's Meeting, November 21, 1921], Moscow, RGASPI 495/1/44, 42–72, here 71.

²⁵ The first official mention of the turn to productive assistance was made in January 1922. See Willi Münzenberg, "Hungerhilfe = Wirtschaftshilfe" [Famine relief = economic aid], *Bulletin* 36, January 15, 1922.

²⁶ "Mehr und mehr beginnen wir die Aktion in eine grosse politische Aktion zu Gunsten Sowjetrusslands, d.h. der Anerkennung der Sowjetregierung und uneingeschränkten Handelsgewährung langfristiger Kredite usw. ausmünden zu lassen." Letter from Münzenberg to Lenin, Berlin, December 22, 1921, Moscow, RGASPI 5/3/202, 1.

²⁷ Münzenberg to Lenin, Berlin, December 22, 1921, Moscow, RGASPI 5/3/202, 1. See also Braskén, *International Workers' Relief*, 58–76.

In January 1922, Münzenberg reassured Moscow that the largest possible exhibition of works would be arranged so as to attract interest well beyond working-class circles.²⁸

The idea fit well with Workers' Relief's turn toward a solidarity movement intent on building the future socialist society. With this transition, which effectively transformed a movement based on desparation into a much more positive narrative, the priority became the desire to demonstrate to German workers and other sympathizers what the "new Russia" entailed and what the international form of Soviet society could look like. In the communist newspaper *Internationale Presse-Korrespondenz* [*Inprekorr*; International Press Correspondence], Münzenberg maintained in early January 1922 that all enlightened comrades had understood from the very beginning that if the West European working class "really wanted to help," aid could not be limited to simple famine relief, but needed to support economic reconstruction.²⁹ Although the catastrophic weather conditions in the Volga basin had been the work of nature, Soviet Russia's capability to respond had been severely hampered by the collapse of the Russian economy after years of "war, blockade, and sabotage by the counterrevolution."³⁰ European workers, themselves living under severe hardship, could of course not save the Russian economy, but they had the power to pressure western governments to resume full trade with Russia.³¹ Here the interests of the Comintern, the international communist movement, and Soviet Russia converged in significant ways which also gave a new momentum to the campaign.

The political importance of this campaign was clearly defined and emphasized by Münzenberg in order to convince an initially skeptical Comintern leadership in Moscow. At the Executive Committee's meeting on March 1, 1922, Münzenberg stressed that the objective of the new campaign was to achieve a maximum amount of support from the international working class, apply pressure on Western governments, create a united workers' front, and to mobilize the full power of the workers to assist Soviet Russia during its financial crisis. At the same time, Münzenberg explained that the forthcoming exhibition of Soviet art also had two further distinct

²⁸ Letter from Münzenberg to the Comintern's Secretariat, January 12, 1922, Moscow, RGASPI 538/2/9, 19.

²⁹ "daß sich die Aktion nicht auf eine unmittelbar begrenzte Lebensmittelhilfe beschränken dürfte, sondern daß westeuropäische Proletariat darüber hinaus, wenn es wirklich helfen will, Anstrengungen einer weitgehenden Unterstützung bei dem Wiederaufbau des russischen Wirtschaftslebens machen muß." Wilhelm Münzenberg, "Hungerhilfe – Wirtschaftshilfe" [Famine relief—economic aid], *Inprekorr* 4, January 1922, 31.

³⁰ "infolge der jahrelangen Kriege, Blockade, Sabotage der Konterrevolution usw." *Ibid.*, 31–32.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

objectives: to achieve moral support for Soviet Russia, and to attract further financial support for the Workers' Relief effort.³²

German Artists' Relief circles seem to have been crucial in connecting Workers' Relief with revolutionary artists in Berlin. The creator of proletarian theatre, Erwin Piscator, was elected the secretary of Artists' Relief. Piscator was well connected, having joined the Dada group in late 1918 and forging fruitful connections with Georg Grosz, John Heartfield, the poet and song-writer Walter Mehring, and the writer Franz Jung, who in 1922 was to become responsible for the coordination of Workers' Relief in Moscow. Arthur Holitscher had been one of the founders of the League of Proletarian Culture in 1919 and enjoyed a vast network within political and cultural circles.³³ According to Piscator, the aim of Artists' Relief had from the very beginning been "propagandistic" in the sense that it strove to mobilize the bourgeoisie to help with famine relief. Their task was to use art to establish a link with the German middle class as well as with other German artists, scholars, and writers.³⁴ This function became of central relevance when the First Russian Art Exhibition became a part of the broader cultural mission of Workers' Relief.

Imagining the Land of Revolution

The organization's illustrated magazine, *Sowjet-Rußland im Bild*, played a crucial part in popularizing the relief campaign and then subsequently in the turn toward more universal support of the socialist cause in the form of so-called "productive assistance." As Münzenberg repeatedly emphasized to Moscow, while the communist press in Germany was mostly read by party members, the Workers' Relief illustrated magazine was reaching a much broader segment of the German working class. By September 1922, Münzenberg reported to the Comintern that *Sowjet-Rußland im Bild* had achieved a print run of 70,000 copies and rising.³⁵

The subsequent covers of *Sowjet-Russland im Bild* signaled the radically changing wind: The December 20, 1921, issue showed ill-fated famine refugees in Samara, but the next issue, one month later, boldly depicted an electric plough intended to become a valuable aid in future

³² Erweiterte Exekutiv-Sitzung: III Internationale, 14. Sitzung, 1. März 1922 (Abendsitzung), Münzenberg: Bericht über die Hungerhilfe [Extended Executive Meeting. Third International, 14th Session, March 1, 1922 (evening session), Münzenberg: Report on famine relief], Moscow, RGASPI 495/159/35, 10. See also Braskén, *International Workers' Relief*, 74–75.

³³ Arthur Holitscher, *Mein Leben in dieser Zeit: Der "Lebensgeschichte eines Rebellen" zweiter Band (1907–1925)* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1928), 183–189; John Willett, *The Theatre of Erwin Piscator: Half a Century of Politics in the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1986), 42–46.

³⁴ Erwin Piscator, "Bericht der deutschen 'Künstlerhilfe für die Hungernden in Russland'" [Artists' aid for the starving in Russia], *Der Rote Aufbau* 2, October 15, 1922, 28–31.

³⁵ Letter from Münzenberg to Zinoviev, September 28, 1922, Moscow, RGASPI 538/2/9, 68.

Soviet agriculture.³⁶ (fig. 1+2) The magazine continued to include images of the famine in subsequent issues, but its sights were increasingly set on ways to secure the forthcoming harvest. In this spirit, a “fundraising for tools” (*Werkzeugsammelwoche*) effort was organized in the first week of May 1922, with a plea that: “Every hammer you give will help to forge the structure of the socialist economy.”³⁷

As a part of the productive assistance effort, Workers’ Relief organized a major conference in Berlin, from July 5 to 11, 1922, that gathered over 100 guests from 15 countries, including Soviet Russia’s ambassador to Germany, Nikolay Krestinsky.³⁸ A further cultural and political event was coupled to the conference with the opening, on July 7, on the old premises of the Russian consulate at Unter den Linden 11, of a Workers’ Relief exhibition titled *Hungersnot und Hungerhilfe in Sowjet-Russland* [Famine and famine relief in Soviet Russia]. It included statistical charts about the famine, posters, photos, samples of “hunger bread” from the famine region, craftwork, magazines, brochures, and photo albums.³⁹ Although the exhibition was much more modest than Münzenberg had originally planned, he was very pleased with the outcome and especially with the location. He estimated that about 60 percent of the visitors had been from working class circles, but the rest had been tourists and passersby on the prominent Berlin boulevard. This had been a very successful way to reach the bourgeois public sphere, Münzenberg realized,⁴⁰ as the majority of communist cultural activities took place in the working-class districts outside the city center and hence were easily ignored by the bourgeoisie.⁴¹

Although the organization’s efforts initially focused solely on ways to overcome the economic blockade of Soviet Russia, Holitscher argued in October 1922 for the relevance of the “cultural propaganda” that accompanied the productive assistance. In Holitscher’s words, the preceding years had not only represented an economic blockade of Russia, but likewise an intellectual blockade. It was therefore the mission of Workers’ Relief to facilitate the cultural exchange between Russia and the West. One such crucial opportunity was the display in Berlin of the most recent developments in Russian art, created during years of hardship, including

³⁶ See cover images of *Sowjet-Russland im Bild* 3 (December 20, 1921) and 4 (January 20, 1922).

³⁷ “Jeder Hammer, den du gibst, schmiedet am Baue der sozialistischen Wirtschaft.” “Internationale Werkzeugsammelwoche” [International Tool Collection Week], *Sowjet-Russland im Bild* 6, March 1922.

³⁸ Braskén, *International Workers’ Relief*, 64.

³⁹ Bericht über die Ausstellung “Hungersnot, Hungerhilfe in Sowjet-Russland” [Report on the Exhibition Famine, Famine Relief in Soviet Russia], Moscow, GARF 1065/3/44, 85–87.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ A short report and picture from the exhibition was also published with the title: “Die Ausstellung der produktiven Wirtschaftshilfe” [The exhibition of the productive economic aid], *Sowjet-Russland im Bild* 11, August 1922.

revolution and civil war, works achieved despite difficult times and the effects of the blockade.⁴²

INSERT FIG. 3 HERE

Fig. 3: “Erste Russische Kunstausstellung in Berlin,” *Sichel und Hammer*, October 1922

There were many delays and setbacks in the planning of the The First Russian Art Exhibition. Münzenberg insisted in his communications with both Lenin and Krestinsky that failure was not an option. After all the resources and time invested in its planning, cancellation would have been a devastating misfortune for Workers’ Relief and for Soviet Russia itself.⁴³ When the exhibition finally opened, it was proudly introduced to readers of *Sichel und Hammer* by Holtischer and David Shterenberg (see Post). Holtischer framed the exhibition as a program of “revolutionary art and the art of revolution” and lauded the promises of new art created by and for the revolution.⁴⁴ Shterenberg explained that the exhibition had two goals. First, it needed to contradict the foreign and Russian émigré press that claimed that the revolution had eradicated Russian culture, that art did not exist anymore. Shterenberg begged to differ, exclaiming that nowhere in the West were artists treated as well as in Soviet Russia, where they were provided with the opportunity to work and where the artistic youth had grown close with the revolution and were “being nurtured by its juices.” The second goal of the exhibition was simply to “bring the Western comrades closer.”⁴⁵ Many exiled Russian artists and intellectuals would certainly have disagreed with Shterenberg’s optimistic portrayal of the artists’ situation in Soviet Russia, but he was correct in his belief that in both the west and the east, comrades were debating revolutionary art and how to maintain art’s relevance. The exhibition thus offered a way to further facilitate this exchange of ideas between artists in Germany and Russia. The articles in *Sichel und Hammer* were accompanied by illustrations showing art works by Shterenberg, Gabo, Altman, and Ioukowski (fig. 3).

⁴² Arthur Holitscher, “Von der Kultur-Propaganda der Internationalen Arbeiterhilfe” [On the Cultural Propaganda of the International Workers’ Relief], *Inprekorr* 200 (October 16, 1922): 1349–50.

⁴³ See e.g. Münzenberg to Lenin, March 9, 1922, published in Ruth Stoljarowa and Peter Schmalfuß, eds., “Aus den Briefwechsel deutscher Genossen mit W. I. Lenin” [From the correspondence of German comrades with V. I. Lenin], *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 29 (1987): 51–57.

⁴⁴ Arthur Holitscher, “Revolutionäre Kunst und Kunst der Revolution” [Revolutionary Art and Art of the Revolution], *Sichel und Hammer* 1, October 1922.

⁴⁵ “die künstlerische Jugend ist eng mit der Revolution verwachsen und nährt sich von ihren Säften. [...] Das zweite Ziel dieser Ausstellung ist, uns den westlichen Kameraden näherzubringen.” D. Sternberg [sic], “Erste Russische Kunstausstellung in Berlin” [First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin], *Sichel und Hammer* 1, October 1922.

Despite enthusiastic reports, it had not been possible to realize the First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin as grandly as originally conceived. Münzenberg himself regretted in a letter to Lenin that it had been limited to “a pure arts exhibition,” leaving unstated what the alternative vision had been. On a positive note, according to Münzenberg, the exhibition had found a “warm and friendly” reception in the Berlin press, which by extension implied that it indeed had provided Workers’ Relief and the Comintern with the moral victory they had aimed to achieve.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ “Die Ausstellung ist auf eine reine Kunstausstellung beschränkt [...] Die Ausstellung hat aber eine sehr warme und freundliche Aufnahme in der Berliner Presse gefunden.” Letter from Münzenberg to “Lieber Genosse” [Dear Comrade; presumably Lenin], October 25, 1922, Moscow, GARF 130/5/1096, 193.