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The Russian Avant-Garde in the Briansk Region (review)

Eugeny V. Sintzov

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## BOOKS

### **THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE IN THE BRIANSK REGION**

compiled by Mark Belodubrovsky.  
Izdatelstvo BGPU, Briansk, Russia,  
1998. 383 pp. ISBN: 5-88543-112-4 (in  
Russian).

*Reviewed by Eugeny V. Sintzov, Institute  
Prometei, 420111 Kazan, K. Marx Str. 10,  
KGTU, Russia. E-mail: send E-mail c/o  
<galeyev@prometey.kcn.ru>.*

Currently, more and more books devoted to Russia's unique spiritual and cultural centers are being published. Such publications present an argument against the stereotype, especially prevalent in the Russian mindset, that the most important artistic and scientific developments appear only in the major cities. *The Russian Avant-garde in the Briansk Region* provides evidence that this spirit of innovation and rebelliousness was not limited to Russia's two capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The book focuses on people in Briansk, a town on the border of Russia and Belorussia, and in the Briansk region who participated in avant-garde movements in Russian music, literature and science. One of these people was the composer N. Roslavet, who created a musical technique using a new system of sound organizing. Another was the sculptor and architect N. Gabo—one of the founders of constructivism and kineticism. We can also recall the writer N. Dobychin, the creator of writing styles that juxtaposed observations on the emptiness and platitudes of life with its simultaneously existential, absurd essence.

The compilers of this book do not consider the avant-garde merely as a trend of the 1910s–1920s; they understand it also as the very spirit of creative daring, of active searches for new systems of world vision. Such an approach gives rise to a widening list of “Briansk avant-garde” personalities, including artist A. Levit, poet and mystic D. Andreyev and scientist A. Chizhevsky. In the introduction, Mark Belodubrovsky attributes the appearance of such people in the Briansk region to a special rebellious spirit inherent to the region—one of brigands, free-thinkers, poets and scientific innovators.

This collection provides a multilat-

eral view of representatives of the “spiritual avant-garde.” One finds biographical materials, scientific articles analyzing creative concepts and first publications of musical and literary pieces. With versatility and depth, the book looks at the creativity of N. Roslavet, from a survey of his milieu and friends to an analysis of his synthechords musical technique, the predecessor of serial and modal techniques. The book examines Roslavet’s individuality through his theoretical works, such as his works on the educational role of music and its service to the proletariat, on Schönberg’s *Piero Lunaire* and on his own creativity. The reader’s attention will undoubtedly be drawn to sections devoted to constructivist sculptor Naum Gabo, painter Alfred Levit and writer L. Dobychin. Since these artists are less known at home than others in the book, information on their fate, pictures of their works, reminiscences of their contemporaries and the publication of pictures of Dobychin’s miniatures are of special significance.

Also among the materials is the brilliant literary criticism of Yuri Sheglov, who examines Dobychin’s writing style, a synthesis of avant-garde techniques with an existential view of reality. This supplements materials on two of the most prominent representatives of the spirit of daring—Daniil Andreyev and Alexandr Chizhevsky. Andreyev was a poet and spiritual visionary while the latter was a scientist and poet. Both created unique cosmological theories that dramatically challenged common perceptions. Aware of the perception of these figures’ reputation in world culture, the book does not attempt any detailed analysis of their work. The author aims instead to demonstrate a kind of nucleus of such unique personages. The commentary on Andreyev is in the form of a dialog between a philosopher, a theologian, a literary critic and an artist, among others. Chizhevsky’s creativity, on the other hand, is represented in a monological description of his basic scientific and poetic achievements.

The final part of the book is a survey of modern art festivals held in Briansk since 1986. In general, the book provokes thought about the colossal potential of Russian spiritual life in spite of the circumstances of life in Russia. On reading the biographies of the outstanding figures of the Briansk region, it might seem that creativity could

hardly be possible in such conditions; on the other hand, maybe it is *because* of such forces that people have been able to create virtual universes so unlike reality. This book again poses questions on this secret of the spirit and on issues of Russian creativity.