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Title: Challenged Utopia: Velemir Khlebnikov and the Volga Famine of 1921-1922

Abstract:

This paper presents a close reading of the poem "Hunger" by Velemir Khlebnikov, written in 1921. This work challenges the usual view of Khlebnikov as a poet who was apolitical and interested solely in avant-garde experimentation with language. In this poem, we find no reference to "zaum" or any other of the radical linguistic experiments he is famous for. The poem, written amidst the Volga famine of 1921-1922, uses very simple language to describe how peasants were forced to collect and eat different inedible materials, such as bark or clay. Khkebnikov does not discuss what caused the famine, and neither does he point to any solution. There is no vision of the utopian future that Khlebnikov previously professed in numerous essays. In "Hunger', the vision of a "bright world" is a rabbit that they are chasing– something that can be eaten without fear of dying from it.
I analyze this poem within the broader context of two other avant-garde Russian poets of the 1920s who also referred to the famine in their poetry, namely Vladimir Mayakovsky and Aleksei Kruchenykh. The utopias created by different Russian avant-garde poets, I argue, were challenged by the historical events that they witnessed, and in particular by several major famines that have not received much attention in scholarship.