Among the showpieces symbolizing the Soviet regime in the 1930s, the Moscow subway plays an essential role. Its strategic importance is underscored by the short timetable of its construction, which began with the political decision to start construction in June 1931 and quickly led to the opening of the first 11.6-kilometer-long line in mid-May 1935, shortly before the official presentation of the General'nyj plan rekonstruktii (the General Reconstruction Plan of Moscow). In roughly twenty months, this first segment was built amid great difficulties and catastrophic accidents (such as that of Dzezhinskaja Square in March 1934). By way of the railhead at Komsomolskaja, it connected the heart of the city—Smolenskaja square and the Central “Gorkij” Park of Culture and Rest (CPKiO)—with the green area of Sokol’niki in the northeastern quadrant of the capital. Even though other undertakings (such as the first manufacture of ball bearings) had huge propagandistic importance, none of them gave rise to a process that was as significant and long lasting as the Moscow metro. It closely bound town-planning strategies with architectural decisions and, by its very nature, provided a framework capable of representing the regime’s priorities to the people. Exalting the results to other nations, “the most beautiful subway in the world” was used as testimony to Communist superiority in conquering the bowels of the earth. It was seen as part of a symbolic struggle with the United States and capitalism. In contrast to the towering Empire State Building, the metro became the veritable icon of the Communist regime.

Part of this ideological battle, Moscow’s “Red” underground was also part of a reconstruction and modernization strategy of the Soviet capital, which had been impoverished by the 1917 Revolution and was still quite backward in the early twentieth century. The subway was the key structuring element of the new urban order called for by the Reconstruction Plan of Moscow, approved in 1935. Its overall layout foreshadowed this plan, confirming the historic, concentric foundation of the city that had been discussed by Le Corbusier and furiously debated in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The decision to focus on the central city instead of pursuing Soviet avant-gardist dreams of metropolitan decentralization explains the significance of the neoclassical design of the stations, today still viewed as masterpieces of twentieth-century infrastructural architecture. These are doubtlessly among the best early examples of socialist realism in architecture, which was primarily a moment of artistic synthesis rather than simply a stylistic orientation.

It may appear strange that this essential chapter in Moscow’s urban development and town planning, which was one of the major laboratories of the Soviet architecture of the 1930s, was ignored by scholars for so long after Stalin’s death. Although it had been glorified by several publications and articles in the prewar years, its historiographic significance was not acknowledged until the 1990s in either Russia or the Western world. The monumental Vseobshchaja Istoriya Arhitektury (General Soviet History of Architecture) dedicates only a few pages to the metro, while the metro is mentioned only in passing by Anatole Kopp and is practically ignored in Barbara Kreis’s Moskau 1917–35. Only the new wave of research in the late and post-Soviet years (with the exception of some key brief Western contributions) has opened fuller perspectives on this important material. This scholarly lacuna is now amply addressed by this book, Le Métro de Moscou. La construction d’un mythe soviétique. Josette Bouvard is a French specialist in Slavic studies, and her study results from years of patient and thorough work in the Soviet archives in Moscow. Illustrated by cogent photographic material, it supplies a wide-ranging and detailed view of the first subway in Russia and the former Soviet Union. It consists of three parts and concludes with an indispensable glossary that helps one understand the meaning of the many acronyms used in the Soviet era. She also has provided a rich bibliography and a useful set of appendices that include a short descriptive list of all the stations and bibliographical notes on the main players and architects. Unfortunately, these are transliterated according to French phonetic rules: hence Dushkin, one of the outstanding architects of the Moscow metro, designer of the wonderful Majakovskaja station among others, becomes Douchkine.

In the five chapters making up the first part, “L’Histoire de la construction du Métro,” the book explores the complex and dense development of the metro’s planning and technical design. It was initially conceived in the late imperial period and was reconsidered in the 1920s during the New Economic Plan when some solutions were developed with the cooperation of the German AEG and Siemens-Bauunion corporations (26–33). These solutions led to a “rationalist” project that was abandoned in 1930, one whose existence was discovered by Bouvard in the archives. Finally, after a resolution of 15 June 1931 that guided all Soviet urban policy for the next decade, the construction of the underground started in the years when Lazar’ Kaganovich—arguably the true author of the work—took full control of the Communist party local organizations. Bouvard dedicates some of the most interesting pages of the book (chapters two and three) to the detailed reconstruction of this organizational stage of the project and the design and building of the first line. She shows the precarious situation that prevailed on the construction sites at that time, where chaotic conditions were almost the opposite of the “scientific” organization that resulted in the construction of the Empire State Building in New York. Chapter four briefly summarizes the development of the subsequent metro lines in the Staline...
ist era and provides short accounts of the most recent stages of construction when, from the second half of the 1930s, the monumental characteristics of the Stalinist years were almost completely lost.

The second part of the book, “A monument littéraire à édifier. L’Histoire du Métro de Moscou,” focuses on one of the fundamental chapters of the emergence of the literary “myth of the metro.” This was part of a never-completed grandiose project called the History of Manufactures and Workshops (Istorij a fabrika i zavodo, 1931–36), where the history of the metro was an essential component. Maksim Gor’kij considers this “historical-literary enterprise” to be part of the many efforts that make up a “collection of the living memory of companies and large building sites in the industrialization period” (115). Exploring this extraordinary source by combining and interweaving different levels of interpretation, Bouvard analyzes the large and complex tissue of actions, symbols, and strategies that made the Red subway—a “shock” workplace privileged in the receipt of manpower and materials—a unique technical, artistic, and ideological showcase in the history of the Soviet capital, and in many respects of the Soviet Union, in the interwar years. These key aspects were perfectly summed up in the celebratory speech given by Kaganovich, whose name the subway carried until 1955. Its architectural achievements and symbolic features make the Moscow subway not only one of the most important infrastructural works of the twentieth century, but also the most significant architectural work of socialist realism. Bouvard’s research examines the articulations of this phenomenon, one that cannot be reduced, as often believed, to the simple imposition of a classical style. It was rather an attempt to achieve an organic and timeless merging of historic and modern patterns thought to be capable of giving caractère to the various parts of the work. Its development is clearly legible in the various construction stages of the “most beautiful underground in the world.” This interpretation allows one to grasp the meaning of a work intended to represent utopia, though implemented in a society that—as we now know—was going through one of the most tragic periods of its history.4

Bouvard’s work is based on systematic and thorough research in the main archives of Moscow, in particular the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), the Institute of World Literature (IMLI), and the archive of the Communist Party. Intertwining with great intelligence various levels of inquiry, the text is addressed to a wide range of specialists. It deals with the history of architecture, town planning, and infrastructure and explores a crucial episode of Soviet literary life. Above all, Bouvard’s study offers a significant contribution to the urban history of Soviet Moscow, a topic that, until a few years ago, had only been subject to a few explorations. Among the book’s credits, it highlights over the last few years the development of a recent specialized European historiography on the Soviet era, one that has opened many new windows on one of the most fundamental chapters of twentieth-century history.

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Notes


2. Vospomineniya i sobranie sochinenii Izdanie 12 toma, T. 12, k. 1, Izdatel’stvo literary po svetovr’rku (Moscow, 1975); Anatole Kopp, L’Architecture de la période stalinienne (Grenoble, 1978); and Barbara Kreis, Moskau 1917–35. Von Wohnbau zum Staatsbau (Dusseldorf, 1985).


Christopher Whitehead

The Public Art Museum in Nineteenth Century Britain: The Development of the National Gallery


If Berlin gave birth to the purpose-built public museum with the construction of Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s Altes Museum in the 1820s, Victorian London arguably served as the building type’s most active incubator. The power of the British Empire both facilitated collecting on an unprecedented scale and celebrated the display of these collections as an appropriate expression of imperial greatness. As ad hoc facilities for the storage and exhibition of the nation’s riches began to burst at their seams, ambitious new purpose-built museums sprang up throughout the capital city: notably the National Gallery (William Wilkins, completed 1837), the British Museum