

BARRY SCHERR

Notes on Literary Life in Petrograd, 1918–1922: A Tale of Three Houses

The Bolshevik Revolution had little immediate effect on the periodicals, newspapers, and publishing houses that were already in existence in 1917. During the first few months after the takeover, Communist Party papers appeared along with satirical journals, such as *The Scourge* (*Bich*) and *The New Satyricon* (*Novyi satirikon*), that remained steadfastly opposed to the new regime. Then, in the middle of 1918, the government ordered the closing of all opposition newspapers and magazines, and authors suddenly discovered that the places where they could publish were limited. The civil war brought further hardships; shortages of food and firewood plagued everyone in the cities, but writers also suffered from the paper shortage that made publishing virtually impossible.

Despite the harsh material conditions of the next several years, a vigorous cultural life endured in Petrograd, thanks in no small part to a number of organizations that aided artists, musicians, writers, and scholars. Among the establishments mentioned most often in this regard are the House of the Arts (*Dom iskusstv*), the Writers' House (*Dom literatorov*), and the Scholars' House (*Dom uchenykh*). Perhaps as a result of their similar names, or perhaps as a result of the relative scarcity, until recently, of factual information concerning their origins, critics have often failed to distinguish among them. Typical is the following passage from Dan Levin's book on Gorky:

[Gorky] organized cooperative lodgings and eating places—where interminable Russian conversations could also take place—for scientists, writers, artists, regardless of their sympathies. There was a Home of Scholars, a Home of Writers, a Home of Artists, and the definitions were flexible enough, being Gorky's, so that almost anyone who managed to get to him had a chance for a bed and food, if there was any. And he saw to it that there was.¹

In fact, Gorky had relatively little to do with the Writers' House, although he was a member, and the definitions were not quite so loose as Levin implies. Furthermore, the bare list of houses or homes leaves a number of questions unanswered. What part did Gorky actually play in creating the houses? Why were there three houses instead of just one or two? Did they all have more or less the same purpose, or were there specific differences among them? The answers can best be found by examining the conditions under which each was established as well as the role each assumed in Petrograd's cultural life.

1. Dan Levin, *Stormy Petrel: The Life and Work of Maxim Gorky* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1965), p. 204.

Many months before any of the houses came into being, writers in Petrograd had felt the need for an organization that would not only help them obtain basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter, but also would provide them with places where they could meet to discuss their work and with warm rooms where they could write and read. As early as the spring of 1918, the leaders of the local journalists' union put forth a proposal for a literary "club" which would bring together the various elements of Petrograd's cultural life. Their suggestion eventually led to the creation of the Writers' House in December 1918.² In March of that year, however, a group of writers had already united to form the Union of Belletrists (*Soiuz deiatelei khudozhestvennoi literatury*). Even though this organization remained active for only a little over a year and failed to achieve most of its extensive goals, the Union's significance outweighs its accomplishments. Not only was it the first of the literary organizations that arose after the revolution, but at its height it contained the great majority of Petrograd's best writers, including Blok, Gorky, Sologub, Kuprin, Gumilev, and Zamiatin.

The Union grew quickly. By May 1918, when it held its first general meeting and elected a governing board, it already had about 40 members; in April of the following year it had 170.³ The chairman of the original board was Fedor Sologub who, along with his wife, Anastasiia Chebotarevskaiia, had founded the group.⁴ Financial support at the start came not so much from the government but from a wealthy individual named M. S. Ginzburg, whose house on the eleventh line of Vasil'evskii Island was turned over to the society after he fled abroad. The Union opened a dining room in the Ginzburg house and also turned part of it into a dormitory. Vladimir Piast, Alexander Grin, and Victor Muizhel', among others, made their temporary home here. While the efforts to help writers materially were at least partly successful, plans to turn the building into a center for literary activity produced few notable results. Continual attempts to found a publishing house led to a list of over twenty works in two series that the editors planned to put out, yet nothing was actually printed. Similarly, ambitious plans were made to begin a literary journal. But even though manuscripts were solicited, chosen, and edited, neither the journal nor a proposed almanac ever appeared. The Union of Belletrists did manage to arrange a series of lectures and literary evenings in the spring of 1919; the participants at one such event, held on March 24, included Gorky, Blok, and Zamiatin.⁵

2. I. F. Martynov and T. P. Klein, "K istorii literaturnykh ob'edinenii pervykh let Sovetskoi vlasti (Petrogradskii dom literatorov, 1918–1922)," *Russkaia literatura*, 14, no. 1 (1971): 125–26.

3. P. P. Shirmakov, "K istorii literaturno-khudozhestvennykh ob'edinenii pervykh let Sovetskoi vlasti: Soiuz deiatelei khudozhestvennoi literatury (1918–1919 gody)," in *Voprosy sovetskoi literatury*, vol. 7, ed. V. A. Kovalev and A. I. Pavlovskii (Moscow and Leningrad, 1958), p. 456.

4. Shirmakov also names Gumilev as one of the Union's organizers, but Alex Shane points out that Gumilev was out of the country until April 1918, while the Union was formed in March (see Alex M. Shane, *The Life and Works of Evgenij Zamiatin* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968], p. 213; on pp. 26–34 Shane offers a concise and well-informed account of Zamiatin's role in this group as well as in the publishing house World Literature, the House of the Arts, and the Writers' House).

5. Shirmakov, "Soiuz deiatelei," pp. 462–72, provides a thorough account of all these

There are several explanations for the Union's inability to accomplish more than it did. P. P. Shirmakov, the author of the single major study devoted to the organization, is probably only partially correct when he cites the group's ideological diversity as the basic reason for its quick dissolution.⁶ If ideological differences alone were a determining factor, then neither the Writers' House nor the House of the Arts could have survived long either. More to the point, other groups had been established by government decree and continued to look to the government for support, even if not all the members fully endorsed the Bolsheviks. The Union of Belletrists, on the other hand, had arisen independently and had subsisted at the start largely on the funds provided by a private benefactor. A significant part of the governing board remained cool to the political authorities even after Muizhel' had replaced Sologub as chairman. By the spring of 1919, the Writers' House was already active and, indeed, could provide more material support than the Union, which faced official disfavor along with its internal conflicts. Thus, the Union's activities gradually came to a standstill, and within a few months it had faded out of existence.

Gorky, who had been an inactive member of the Union's governing board during 1918, did take a sudden interest in the Union at the beginning of 1919. Indeed, virtually all the serious publishing ventures stemmed from his suggestions and direct efforts. Gorky's efforts to revive this virtually inert organization were related to his desire to help writers through the publishing house World Literature (*Vsemirnaia literatura*). Before the revolution, Gorky, along with A. N. Tikhonov and I. P. Ladyzhnikov, established a publishing house called The Sail (*Parus*), which was in business from 1915 through early 1918.⁷ In August 1918, these three men and Z. I. Grzhebin, who had joined The Sail at the end of 1916, signed an agreement among themselves to organize World Literature. The new firm began operations the following month under the auspices of Narkompros, the National Commissariat of Education. Its goal was to publish the classics of foreign literature from the second half of the eighteenth century up to the present. The editorial staff dealing with Western literatures included Gorky, Blok, Gumilev, Chukovskii, A. L. Volynskii, F. D. Batiushkov, and M. L. Lozinskii, among others. Those in charge of Eastern literatures included linguists such as N. Ia. Marr and S. F. Ol'denburg, a well-known Orientalist and the permanent secretary of the Academy of Sciences for some twenty-five years both before and after the revolution.⁸ Gorky's plans were ambitious; he intended to create a "Basic Library" of 1,500 books and a "Popular Library" of between 3,000 and 5,000 titles. However, the paper shortages of the civil war period, disputes with the State Publishing House, and Gorky's own departure from the Soviet Union in 1921 put these goals far out of reach. In 1919 World

activities. In a memoir devoted to Blok, Zamiatin also refers to the journal that the Union planned to publish (see his *Litsa* [New York: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1967], pp. 17-18).

6. Shirmakov, "Soiuz deiatelei," p. 473.

7. For a history of The Sail see O. D. Golubeva, *Gor'kii—izdatel'* (Moscow, 1968), pp. 62-96.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Literature published no books at all. By the time Gorky left Russia it had issued just 59 volumes, and when it went out of existence at the end of 1924 its catalog contained just over 200 titles.⁹

Despite his difficulties at World Literature, Gorky was not satisfied with trying to publish only foreign authors. He wanted to see Russian works, particularly those by contemporary authors, appear as well, and toward that end he made strenuous efforts to establish a Russian Literature publishing house. Gorky saw the Union of Belletrists as a natural vehicle for such an endeavor. He presented a report on the possibility of setting up a publishing house at a meeting of the Union's governing board on January 13, 1919. After arranging for preliminary financial support from Narkompros, he proposed an editorial staff that would include himself (as chief editor), Blok, Gumilev, Chukovskii, Zamiatin, Kuprin, and several others, with Muizhel' in charge of the administrative section.¹⁰ The overlap between the proposed staff and that of World Literature was obviously substantial. Furthermore, in April 1919, Gorky, Zamiatin, and Chukovskii—all from World Literature—replaced V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko and A. F. Koni as editors of the Union's proposed literary journal.¹¹ Clearly Gorky saw the Union as an adjunct to World Literature. The staff of both publishing houses would be largely the same, but the Union's purpose would be to publish Russian authors and perhaps also to serve as a center and meeting place for Petrograd's writers. However, the editorial staff that Gorky helped set up at the Union of Belletrists quickly found itself in conflict with the governing board. Shortly after Gorky abandoned his efforts to work with the Union, it ceased to exist.¹²

Even during the attempts to establish a publishing house at the Union of Belletrists, the editors of World Literature, who had taken on the task of translating or retranslating most of the world's classics of the past century and a half, had become convinced that it would be desirable to organize a literary studio where theories regarding translation could be examined, applied, and, if necessary, reformulated in the course of actual work. Chukovskii and Gumilev put out a pamphlet entitled *Principles of Literary Translation (Printsiipy khudozhestvennogo perevoda)*, and in February 1919 a workshop was opened in the former Muruzi home on Liteinyi Prospekt.¹³ The studio's modest beginnings featured seminars by Gumilev and Lozinskii on poetic translation as well as lectures by Chukovskii and Zamiatin. The seminars and lectures proved so successful that an entire program of studies was planned for the summer. The new courses were not just on translation, but also on the history and theory of prose, poetry, and literary criticism.¹⁴ Among the students at the studio were a half-dozen

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 104 and 108.

10. Shirmakov, "Soiuz deiatelei," p. 462.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 469.

12. World Literature, with the approval of Narkompros, assumed the rights to the two series of works that the now defunct Union had planned to publish, but material shortages as well as opposition from the State Publishing House, which had received exclusive rights for publishing all Russian classics, prevented World Literature from printing the works of contemporary Russian authors (see Golubeva, *Gorkii*, pp. 115–16).

13. A. D. Zaidman, "Literaturnye studii 'Vsemirnoi literatury' i 'Doma iskusstv' (1919–1921 gody)," *Russkaia literatura*, 16, no. 1 (1973): 142–43.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 143–45.

future members of the Serapion Brothers: Zoshchenko, Slonimskii, Lunts, Polonskaia, Gruzdev, and Pozner.¹⁵

Although the seminars attracted famous teachers and outstanding students, interest soon declined. Chukovskii recalls that by fall some of the students had gone to the front and others had simply grown tired of working. While a hard core of strong students remained, their interests had gone beyond the original program of the studio. The basic task of World Literature was to translate and publish foreign classics; consequently, it had intended to set up a workshop for translators, not an institute of general literary studies. In addition, many of the teachers and students faced shortages of food, shelter, firewood, and other items required for survival. World Literature by itself could do little to satisfy these wants. What was needed was an institution that would combine the facilities of the Union of Belletrists with the literary activity that had grown up around World Literature.

Chukovskii began to petition the authorities in July 1919 to create such an establishment by giving the writers a large empty building on the corner of the Moika and Nevsky Prospekt, but nothing happened until Gorky became head of the proposed organization.¹⁶ Then events moved quickly, and the House of the Arts (or *Disk*, the acronym by which it was known to its inhabitants) opened on December 19, 1919 in the huge building that actually bordered on three streets: the Moika, Nevsky Prospekt, and Morskaiia (now Herzen) Street. The House's headquarters were in the three-story apartment that had belonged to the former owners of the building, the Eliseev family; the main entrance was from the Moika.¹⁷ Most of the teachers and students from World Literature's studio now continued their work in the studio that was established at the House of the Arts.¹⁸ In retrospect, then, the House of the Arts grew out of Gorky's efforts to improve the living conditions and the creative opportunities both for his colleagues at World Literature and for the fledgling writers who had been attracted to its literary studio. World Literature itself provided many authors with work, but because its main concern was foreign literature Gorky felt the necessity of establishing a complementary organization to aid both young and old authors who were creating original works in Russian. When his endeavors to start such an institution within the framework of the already existing Union of Belletrists produced no results, he then lent his support to the campaign that led to the creation of *Disk*.

Virtually everyone who lived in the House of the Arts or who even just knew somebody there has written about the place at one time or another.¹⁹ There is, therefore, no need to recount in great detail daily life at the House on the

15. Kornei Chukovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 2: *Sovremenniki* (Moscow, 1965), p. 486.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 503.

17. Two good descriptions of the facilities at the House of the Arts are by Vs. A. Rozhdestvenskii in his *Stranitsy zhizni: Iz literaturnykh vospominanii*, 2nd enl. ed. (Moscow, 1974), pp. 263–66; and by V. F. Khodasevich in his *Literaturnye stat'i i vospominaniia* (New York: Chekhov Publishing House, 1954), pp. 401–5.

18. Zaidman, "Literaturnye studii," p. 146; and Chukovskii, *Sovremenniki*, p. 151.

19. The most valuable of these memoirs include those by Chukovskii, Rozhdestvenskii, and Khodasevich (see footnotes 15 and 17 above) as well as the early sections of Fedin's *Gorkii sredi nas* (see footnote 20). Interesting comments can also be found in M. L. Slo-

Moika, but a few particulars regarding its organization and activities are worth noting. The House was open to people involved with all the arts, and so it included artists and musicians as well as writers. Literary figures were in the majority, however, and those living in the House not long after it opened included Gumilev, Mandelstam, Shklovsky, Khodasevich, Akim Volynskii, Ol'ga Forsh, Marietta Shaginian, Alexander Grin, Vladimir Piast, and three of the future Serapions: Zoshchenko, Lunts, and Slonimskii (whose room was to serve as the Serapions' gathering place). Some of the members most active in House affairs, such as Gorky, Zamiatin, and Chukovskii, did not actually live there. Membership was carefully controlled; according to Fedin, the organizing principle was not universality, as at the Writers' House, but selectivity: only the best writers, the best artists, and the best musicians were to be allowed to join.²⁰ The method of admitting new members was designed to ensure high quality. A prospective member needed five recommendations just to be considered, while final selection came by closed balloting at a general meeting of the particular section—art, music, literature—to which the new member would belong. A new and less formidable process for admitting applicants on the basis of data submitted directly to the governing board came into effect only at the beginning of 1922. In reporting the change, the *Writers' House Chronicle* noted loftily that *Disk's* new method had been the policy at the Writers' House from the very beginning.²¹

Whatever Gorky's hopes might have been, the House of the Arts never became very active in the publishing field. It did put out a literary almanac that bore the same name as the house, but that lasted for only two issues during 1921. In any case, the House's main function was not to serve as a publisher, but as a studio, meeting place, dormitory, and work area for writers—a kind of literary hotbed. And in this endeavor it was eminently successful. As Chukovskii points

nimskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, vol. 4: *Rovesniki veka; Sem' let spustia; Vospominaniia* (Leningrad, 1970), pp. 407–18. Articles devoted specifically to life in the House of the Arts include Anna El'kan, "Dom Iskusstv," *Mosty*, 1960, no. 5, pp. 289–98; and Vladimir Milashevskii, "V dome na Moike: Iz zapisok khudozhnika," *Zvezda*, 47, no. 12 (December 1970): 187–201. Occasional references to the House of the Arts (and often also to the Writers' House) appear in many of the autobiographies and collections of memoirs by those who lived through the period. See, for example, Iurii Annenkov, *Dnevnik moikh vstrech: Tsikl tragedii*, vol. 1 (New York: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1966); Nina Berberova, *The Italics Are Mine* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969); Irina Odoevtseva, *Na beregakh Nevy* (Washington, D.C.: Victor Kamkin Inc., 1967); Nikolai Otsup, *Sovremenniki* (Paris: Imprimerie Coopérative Étoile, 1961); and Victor Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs 1917–1922*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970). The House also inspired works of fiction. The abandoned bank that was located in the same building as the House served as the setting for Alexander Grin's novella, "The Ratcatcher" ("Krysolov"). Perhaps the most unusual work devoted to the House is Ol'ga Forsh's *Sumasshedshii korabl'* (Leningrad, 1931), a *roman à clef* in which many of the House's inhabitants appear under fictitious names. The novel has been republished in the West (Washington, D.C.: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1964) with a fine introduction by Boris Filippov (pp. 7–55), who draws on various memoirs to create a vivid portrayal of life in the House of the Arts.

20. K. A. Fedin, *Gorkii sredi nas: Kartiny literaturnoi zhizni* (Moscow, 1967), p. 28.

21. *Letopis' Doma literatorov*, no. 1/2 (5/6) (January 15, 1922), p. 6.

out, the House served as a magnet for the majority of young writers in Petrograd, and by 1921 the most talented of these already stood out: Fedin, Ivanov, Kaverin, Nikitin, and Tikhonov.²² They, along with the group of excellent students from World Literature's studio, began to meet regularly and soon formed the Serapion Brothers. In addition to gatherings at the House and discussions by writers of each other's work, the activities at *Disk* included lectures and public readings. During the first half of 1920, one evening was dedicated to the memory of Andreev, others to readings by several poets, for example Blok and Gumilev, and still others to lectures by such people as Eikhenbaum, Zhirmunskii, Chukovskii, and Gorky.²³ Chukovskii cites fifteen events between March 1 and March 24, 1921, including lectures by Zamiatin on Wells and by Eikhenbaum on Tolstoy, as well as a poetry reading in which Gumilev, Mandelstam, and Khodasevich were among the participants.²⁴ On October 15 of that year a series of courses began: Volynskii taught the bases of philosophical thought, Zamiatin taught prose techniques, Lozinskii the technique of verse translation, and Dobuzhinskii form, material, and composition in the plastic arts. Other teachers were Tynianov, Chukovskii, and Shklovsky. During the second half of the same month two readings by the Serapions were held, while Tomashevskii, Tynianov, Chukovskii, and Vasili Kamenskii presented lectures.²⁵ At first members and invited guests met among themselves on Fridays, while Mondays were given over to public gatherings. Soon the Serapions were meeting on Saturdays, and if Chukovskii's records for March 1921 are accurate, functions took place on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays as well. Thus *Disk* succeeded on two fronts: it provided a place where writers could develop their talents by getting together and discussing the literary process among themselves, and at the same time it offered the citizens of Petrograd an opportunity to see and hear some of Russia's most talented poets, prose writers, artists, literary scholars, and art historians.

Why did Gorky and his comrades at World Literature feel it necessary to establish the House of the Arts in the first place? After all, the Writers' House had been in operation for a year, since December 1, 1918, and was solidly established at No. 11 Basseinaia (now Nekrasov) Street. It offered a dining room where an average of five hundred persons a day were given meals at reduced prices, provided warm work rooms in which its members could read and write, opened a library that eventually had more than 70,000 volumes, operated three bookstores, and had begun collecting materials for a proposed literary museum.²⁶ A cultural program did not begin there on a large scale until January 1920, or a little after *Disk* had opened, but there could never have been any doubt that the Writers' House would begin to sponsor readings and lectures of its own

22. Chukovskii, *Sovremenniki*, p. 505.

23. Zaidman, "Literaturnye studii," p. 146.

24. Chukovskii, *Sovremenniki*, pp. 504-5.

25. *Letopis' Doma literatorov*, no. 2 (November 15, 1921), p. 8; and no. 1 (November 1, 1921), p. 7.

26. Martynov and Klein, "Dom literatorov," pp. 128-29. Odoevtseva provides a more personal description of the facilities at the Writers' House; several times she refers to the comforts provided there, emphasizing the warmth, the brightness, and the food (see Odoevtseva, *Na beregakh Nevy*, pp. 157, 183, 320).

once it had seen to the most pressing material needs of its members. Yet Gorky had been hostile to the Writers' House from the start. Why? His opposition was apparently based on a conviction that it was largely a refuge for writers of the previous generation who essentially wanted a return to the old order. Gorky had some disagreements of his own with the Bolsheviks at the time, but his views were still clearly to the left of many of the people most closely involved with the Writers' House. In advising Fedin to associate with the House of the Arts instead, Gorky referred to the members of the Writers' House as remnants of the past.²⁷ Many of the Serapions apparently agreed. Fedin himself linked the *Literary Herald* (*Vestnik literatury*), a magazine published at the Writers' House, with the old journalism,²⁸ while Slonimskii felt that the Writers' House was mostly a center for old, prerevolutionary writers and journalists.²⁹

In fact, the Writers' House, as its name in Russian (*Dom literatorov*) makes clear, directed its appeal toward a broad audience; not just writers, but also journalists, critics, and all "men of letters" in general, whatever their political convictions. Consequently, it was by far the larger of the two houses, boasting over 600 members by the beginning of 1922. This very openness was one of the features that distinguished it from *Disk*, which was to be only for the "best." As might be expected, a rivalry grew between the two. Fedin, hardly a disinterested observer, claims that the Writers' House boasted of its independence from Gorky and Narkompros but was envious of *Disk*'s superior facilities and greater concentration of talent.³⁰

The Serapions and other writers who belonged to the House of the Arts did not disdain their rival institution entirely. Like all others connected with literature or journalism in Petrograd, they too were members of the Writers' House. Several people, including Khodasevich, Akhmatova, and Zamiatin, served simultaneously on the governing boards of both.³¹ When the Writers' House conducted a contest for the best short story by a beginning author, the top two prizes and five of the top six went to members of the Serapion Brothers.³² Similarly, the members of *Disk* were more than willing to submit their work to various publications put out by the Writers' House. The short-lived journal *Literary Notes* (*Literaturnye zapiski*), for example, contained an article on the Serapions by Zamiatin and a set of brief autobiographies by the Serapions themselves.³³ Five of the Serapions also appeared in a 1922 literary almanac, *A Petersburg Miscellany* (*Peterburgskii sbornik*), put out by the Writers' House.

The cultural activities at the Writers' House may have been slow in getting started, but once under way they hardly yielded to those at the House of the Arts in variety or intensity. Throughout 1920 and 1921, the Writers' House sponsored

27. Fedin, *Gor'kii sredi nas*, p. 26.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

29. Slonimskii, *Sobranie*, vol. 4, p. 450.

30. Fedin, *Gor'kii sredi nas*, pp. 28–29, 89.

31. *Letopis' Doma literatorov*, no. 1/2 (5/6) (January 15, 1922), p. 6.

32. V. A. Shoshin, "Konkurs Doma literatorov," *Russkaia literatura*, 10, no. 3 (1967): 214–19.

33. E. I. Zamiatin, "Serapionovy brat'ia," *Literaturnye zapiski*, no. 1 (May 25, 1922), pp. 7–8; "Serapionovy brat'ia o sebe," *Literaturnye zapiski*, no. 3 (August 1, 1922), pp. 25–31.

a series of "living almanacs" at which more than forty authors read their works; among these were Blok, Belyi, Sologub, Chukovskii, Fedin, Remizov, Zamiatin, and Kuzmin. In 1922, a series of literary "Wednesdays" were begun, with the participants ranging from Serapions to the proletarian Cosmist group. Arkadii Gornfel'd, a critic who had been active many years before the revolution, Boris Eikhenbaum, still a relatively young scholar, and a wide range of their colleagues gave both popular and scholarly lectures devoted to the classics of Russian and world literature. Several evenings were given over to concerts. The House was also more active than *Disk* in publishing. In addition to its *Petersburg Miscellany*, the House put out a volume dedicated to Pushkin and Dostoevsky.³⁴ The *Literary Herald* was the organ of the Writers' and Scholars' Mutual Aid Society (*Obshchestvo vzaimopomoshchi literatorov i uchenykh*), one of the two organizations (the other being the Petrograd journalists' union) that operated the Writers' House. The *Writers' House Chronicle* began as a section of the *Literary Herald* and then appeared as a separate publication from November 1921 through February 1922. This miniature journal, containing brief articles as well as news of the literary world, was succeeded by *Literary Notes*, which survived for just three issues.³⁵

Still, the atmospheres of the two houses were quite different. The membership of the governing board at the Writers' House indicates that the older generation did in fact dominate. The chairman was an academician, N. A. Kotliarevskii, who had been the head of Pushkinskii Dom since 1910. Its members included Sologub, Koni, and Nemirovich-Danchenko, all familiar from their connection with the Union of Belletrists. Sologub, the founder and first chairman of the Union, was not known as a supporter of the Bolsheviks, while the latter two, it will be recalled, had been replaced as editors of the Union's proposed literary journal by Gorky and two of his colleagues from World Literature. Among the journalists, who accounted for a goodly portion of the House's membership, were many from the numerous magazines and newspapers that had been closed by the government. Though not all the members of *Disk* were ardent Bolsheviks themselves (Gumilev was shot for involvement in a counterrevolutionary plot, and already by the early 1920s Zamiatin had been in trouble with the authorities), it nonetheless contained a higher proportion of younger writers not tainted by past associations. And with Gorky as its chairman the House of the Arts had a direct line to Narkompros.

Both the House of the Arts and the Writers' House were closed abruptly at the end of 1922. The precise factor or combination of factors that determined their demise may never be known, but it is not difficult to identify some of the most likely causes. The official reason given for abolishing the House of the Arts was the discovery of economic irregularities in its administration. An audit conducted for the Petrograd Workers' and Peasants' Inspection Commission (*Petrorabkrin*) concluded that art objects were being auctioned at *Disk* and that special meals had been arranged for its members at inflated prices.³⁶ There

34. Martynov and Klein, "Dom literatorov," pp. 129–33, discuss these activities in detail.

35. Information regarding dates, editors, and affiliations of these journals can be found in K. D. Muratova, comp. and S. D. Balukhatyi, ed., *Periodika po literature i iskusstvu za gody revoliutsii: 1917–1932* (Leningrad, 1933), pp. 52, 142, 149.

36. Martynov and Klein, "Dom literatorov," pp. 133–34.

may have been some truth to the charges, but at least a few members of the House felt that Grigorii Zinoviev, head of the party organization in Leningrad and no admirer of Gorky, was the person ultimately responsible for the actions taken against the House.³⁷ With Gorky abroad, Zinoviev had a free hand to destroy one of the writer's pet projects. In any case, Zinoviev could not have been happy with the way a few of *Disk's* prominent members had been acting. During 1922 alone, Shklovsky fled abroad to avoid arrest, Khodasevich decided to emigrate, and Zamiatin was jailed, only to be released a short while later. To the authorities, matters were doubtlessly no better at the Writers' House, which was still a refuge for many people unsympathetic to the revolution. Of course, the move against the houses, which certainly would have come sooner or later, may have occurred precisely when it did because it was in keeping with other actions being taken at the time, such as the arrest and subsequent exile of 160 intellectuals.³⁸ Finally, the economic situation in Petrograd had improved. Now that it was easier to obtain food, shelter, and firewood, one of the original reasons for bringing both houses into existence had lost its urgency.³⁹ Goods were available, new places to publish had opened, and writers were in a better position to fend for themselves.

What about the Scholars' House? What connection did it have with the writers of Petrograd during this period? The Scholars' House was the creation of *Kubu*, an acronym for the Commission to Improve Scholars' Living Conditions (*Komissiiia po uluchsheniuiu byta uchenykh*), which came into existence late in December 1919—at about the same time that the House of the Arts opened. The tireless Gorky was on the commission and also became head of its Petrograd division, which was established on January 12, 1920.⁴⁰ In addition to Gorky, the Petrograd *Kubu* included a number of academicians and professors. Its first order of business was to establish an “academic ration,” which was to provide scholars with a diet sufficient for normal work. A special medical committee agreed upon daily norms for twelve specific items, such as one-half pound of meat, one and one-half pounds of bread, one pound of potatoes, one and one-third ounces of sugar, and so forth.⁴¹ *Kubu's* next problem was to create a center for distributing the ration as well as for providing scholars with clothing, firewood, and medical aid. On January 31, 1920, *Kubu* opened the Scholars' House at No. 26 Dvortsovaia Embankment in the palace which formerly belonged to Grand Duke Vladimir, uncle of Nicholas II.⁴²

37. Khodasevich, for example, puts full blame for *Disk's* closing on Zinoviev (*Literaturnye stat'i*, p. 412).

38. For details of this incident see Gleb Struve, *Russkaia literatura v izgnanii: Opyt istoricheskogo obzora zarubezhnoi literatury* (New York: Chekhov Publishing House, 1956), p. 18.

39. Martynov and Klein, “Dom literatorov,” p. 134, cite this last reason along with the aesthetic and ideological views of certain members as the main causes for the decision to close the House.

40. A. A. Borisov, “A. M. Gor'kii—organizator pervogo Doma uchenykh,” in *Gor'kovskie chteniia*, vol. 10: *K 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia pisatel'ia*, ed. B. A. Bialik (Moscow, 1968), pp. 322–23. Borisov refers to the Petrograd division as *Petrokubu*, while the main organization was often called *Tsekubu* (for “Central Commission . . .”) as well as *Kubu*. To avoid a surfeit of acronyms I simply use *Kubu* throughout.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 327.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 324–25.

Kubu also had to determine who was to receive the special allotment. There were originally 5,700 applicants for 500 rations. Gorky managed to get the number raised to 1,800 rations by the time the distribution began, and the figure reached 3,700 by 1921. But even when there were more than three people seeking every available academic ration, Gorky managed to include a number of writers and artists on the list of those privileged to receive it. In 1921 and 1922, 350 people involved with the arts were eligible, but *Kubu* turned down a request by the Writers' House to allot it 60 rations. In its decision, *Kubu* noted that a cooperative organized by the Writers' House was already distributing food to its members. Actually, some people at the Writers' House were receiving the academic ration, but they did so through some other organization to which they also belonged, not because of their affiliation with the House. The efforts by various groups and individuals to obtain the ration resulted in bitterness and demands to revise the procedure for selection. In the end, a committee at *Kubu* established the precise number of recipients in each of the arts and decided to make material need as well as artistic achievement a major criterion in determining eligibility.⁴³

On the other hand, if the memoirs of those connected with the House of the Arts are any indication, it would seem that most, if not all, the members of *Disk* received the ration. Slonimskii, for example, writes about the new inhabitants of *Disk* running over to the Scholars' House for their allotments. According to Rozhdestvenskii, people in the House of the Arts would arrange feasts on their ration day. Khodasevich recalls that the recipients of the weekly allotments were divided into six groups, one for each of the days on which the distribution center at the Scholars' House was open. And Fedin praises Gorky's ability to supply young writers through *Kubu*, noting, as well, that even after Gorky left Russia he managed to send a suit to each of the Serapians from abroad.⁴⁴ Thus, having helped establish *Disk* as a place for writers to meet, work, and live, Gorky almost immediately turned to taking care of their other needs through his connections with *Kubu*.

Unlike the other houses, the Scholars' House survived beyond 1922 and exists in the same location to the present day. From the very beginning this institution did more than simply improve the living conditions of scholars. It too had its workrooms and library, the latter, thanks to Gorky's personal efforts, containing a fine collection of current scientific books and journals published abroad—perhaps the best collection then available in Petrograd. Scholarly papers from the natural and social sciences as well as from the humanities were presented weekly, and a series of lectures intended for the nonspecialist began in September 1920.⁴⁵ These activities assured its continued existence. The Scholars'

43. *Literaturnye zapiski*, no. 1 (May 25, 1922), p. 21; no. 2 (June 23, 1922), p. 21; and no. 3 (August 1, 1922), p. 23. On p. 22 of issue no. 2, a statement by the governing board of the Writers' House shows that the House was receiving and distributing to its members aid packages sent directly from abroad. Since at least one of the foreign organizations mentioned (and presumably others as well) sent goods both to the Writers' House and to the Scholars' House, *Kubu* may have had good reason for insisting that the Writers' House supply its members out of its own resources.

44. Slonimskii, *Sobranie*, vol. 4, p. 401; Rozhdestvenskii, *Stranitsy zhizni*, p. 327; Khodasevich, *Literaturnye stat'i*, pp. 393–94; and Fedin, *Gor'kii sredi nas*, p. 114.

45. Borisov, "Gor'kii—organizator," pp. 329–32.

House came to provide a place where scientists could gather and exchange the latest information, an organization to popularize scientific knowledge, and a center for arranging lectures and meetings. To some extent, the House of the Arts and the Writers' House fulfilled a similar role, but, of course, there were other literary organizations, such as a fledgling Writers' Union, that could take the place of these two houses. The Scholars' House was unique within its field. Thus it not only lasted but spawned a series of other Scholars' houses, which are now scattered among scientific centers throughout the Soviet Union.

It would be erroneous to conclude that these three houses were the only centers for literary activity in Petrograd after the revolution. A branch of the All-Russian Writers' Union (*Vserossiiskii soiuz pisatelei*) was organized in Petrograd during the spring of 1920 and for the rest of the decade played a major role in the professional lives of the city's writers. That same year a Petrograd unit of the All-Russian Poets' Union also came into existence.⁴⁶ Throughout the 1920s Zhirmunskii, Tomashevskii, Eikhenbaum, Tynianov, Vinogradov, and other outstanding literary scholars were conducting courses at the Institute of Art History.⁴⁷ Yet, each of the three houses served a distinct purpose of its own that was not quite duplicated by any other institution, and had any one of the houses not existed, Petrograd's cultural life would have been all the poorer. The Writers' House attempted to bring together virtually everyone in Petrograd who made a living by writing. Critics, journalists, prose writers, and poets—of all ages, degrees of talent, and ideological persuasions—found a warm place to meet and work. The other two houses both owed their existence to Gorky's influence and to his unceasing efforts to aid the Russian intelligentsia after the October Revolution. The House of the Arts served not only writers, but also artists and musicians. It made no attempt to gather in all the people from each field but instead offered living and work facilities for a select few. The Scholars' House was essentially not set up for writers at all, yet through its facilities many people involved with the arts were able to receive the much coveted "academic ration." Thus, it was by no means unusual for authors like Zoshchenko, Slonimskii, Forsh, and Grin to live in the House of the Arts, read their works at meetings sponsored by the Writers' House, and on a specific day of the week go to the Scholars' House for their rations. In the midst of the economic, social, and political upheavals of the civil war era, the houses provided numerous writers with not just the means required for physical survival, but also with the opportunities for study, work, and discussion that were necessary to ensure creative survival.

46. Brief information on the activities of both organizations is provided in *Pechat' i revoliutsiia*, 1, no. 1 (May/June 1921): 181. The original leadership of the Writers' Union was drawn largely from the members of the House of the Arts; the same was true of the Poets' Union, which included Blok, Belyi, Gumilev, Rozhdestvenskii, and Kuzmin. Readings organized by the Poets' Union were frequently held at the House of the Arts. For more information on the Poets' Union see the notes in Aleksandr Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, vol. 6: *Proza, 1918–1921* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1962), pp. 542–43.

47. The Institute of Art History is the focus of Veniamin Kaverin's memoir "V starom dome," published in his *Sobesednik* (Moscow, 1973), pp. 6–170. See pp. 9–14 for a brief account of the Institute's early history.