

# Zhurnalnaya Roublennaya – The Austere Typeface of the Soviet Visual Image

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The article deals with the visual archaeology of the Soviet period. In the printed matter of the time, few typefaces were used; one of them was *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya*. The aim of the article is to investigate the ideological and aesthetic prototypes of the font against the background of the modernistic typefaces of the 20th century.

In the communist period, Soviet consumer goods were limited in number and aesthetically. The same situation existed in regard to the typefaces used in books, posters, newspapers etc. There were few of them: the same recognisable characters popped up on greyish cinema tickets and in art history books, ABC books and tourist leaflets. There was only one sans serif typeface and it was everywhere: *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya*, as grey and dull as the communist everyday life. The aim of this article is to investigate the roots and ideological and aesthetic prototypes of the typeface.

Tsarist Russia had, beside its own type foundries, a few branch offices of European ones; among them, the Berthold AG from Germany opened a subsidiary in St. Petersburg in 1900. Berthold was at that time the biggest type foundry in the world and its typefaces spread throughout Russia. After the communist revolution, the Russian printing industry continued using existing fonts, but in the 1930s there was an evident need to create the Soviet empire's own printing equipment and typefaces, as the Iron Curtain started to descend and the material heritage of the previous imperial time wore out. The first 'Soviet' typeface was *Literaturnaya* (at first named *Latinskaya* = Latin), based on Berthold's *Lateinisch* from 1899. It was introduced in 1936, and the chief designer was Anatoly Schukin. In the same year, *Zhurnalnaya* came out, designed by Nikolay Kudryashov. It was a copy of Linotype's *Excelsior* (1931), designed by Chauncey H. Griffith. In 1938 *Obyknovennaya* (based on the American typeface *Century*) was released, and in 1941 *Akademicheskaya*, the clone of the popular American 19th century typeface *Cheltenham*. It was a common

practice in the Soviet state to copy Western products and rename them.

*Zhurnalnaya roublennaya* (in English, Magazine Grotesque) was released in 1947. *Roublennaya* means ‘chopped’ in Russian – and in this case it is used to mean ‘grotesque’, ‘gothic’ or ‘sans serif’. By the way, the above-mentioned *Zhurnalnaya* (meaning ‘magazine’ in Russian, Roman typeface, 1936) has no connection with our *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya*, which is a sans serif typeface, despite the bureaucrats’ voluntary application of the name. Soviet sources list A. Schukin and V. Sidelnikov as the authors of the font. They also mention the German typeface Erbar, created by Jakob Erbar for the Ludwig and Mayer foundry in 1922, as a prototype.

Anatoly Schukin (1906–1994) was born in Moscow. He studied in VHUTEIN in 1928–1930. It was an applied art school, a type of German *Kunstgewerbeschule*, and a kind of Soviet Bauhaus. Schukin graduated from the Moscow Printing University in 1931 and after that spent nearly all his life working in the state-owned institute of printing and typeface design.

The year 1947 was an exceptional time for completing the process of releasing a typeface for industry. Presumably the process of designing had started before WWII, because the two years after the war clearly seems too short a period to complete all the preparation work necessary to release a font. But the Soviet Union was on the winner’s side and removed several of Germany’s metal and machine enterprises, which started their new life in Soviet cities. For example, the Opel car factory’s production was continued in Moscow, and the Opel Kadett was renamed the *Moskvitsch*. Printing equipment and fonts were also a part of the metal and machine industry. Is it

possible that the Russians shut down the German type foundries and continued the production in Russia? Was Erbar converted to Russian characters and renamed *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya*?

### Modernist typefaces in the 1920s and 1930s

When Bauhaus members discussed the meaning and appearance of typefaces, they raised the question of form. Getting rid of ornament also meant beginning a search for essential shapes of letters. The square, circle and triangle were the geometrical figures that were accepted by modernists as possible shapes of characters. Although the essential geometry of type never reached the public, the process drove type foundries to initiate investigations. As a result, we have three ‘stars’ among typefaces, created in the 1920s.

Futura was released in 1927 by the Bauer foundry in Frankfurt. This typeface was described as *konstruktiv*, *klar*, *elegant* and *neutral* and was designed for ‘today and tomorrow’. Its author was Paul Renner, a book designer and teacher in the Munich Printing Trade School. Despite the fact that Futura seems geometrically elementary, Futura’s rounded strokes change their radius several times.

Gill Sans was an English answer to the wave of creation of modernist typefaces on the mainland. Despite some of its characters (O, M, A) being more geometrically elementary than in Futura, its author Eric Gill brought so much calligraphic sense to the typeface that it is clearly humanistic.

The third early modernistic typeface is Kabel, designed by Rudolf Koch for the Klingspor foundry in Offenbach in 1927. With its ideally rounded O-s and e-s, it belongs to the above-described

geometrically elementary fonts of the period. Angle-cut strokes of straight characters give the feeling of broad-nib pen lettering to this typeface.

Erbar has been mentioned as a prototype for *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya*. Designed by Jakob Erbar in 1922, it was very popular during the 1920s and 1930s in Europe. Its clear shapes, geometrical rounded characters and sober view fit nicely into the period's visual image. Nowadays, Erbar is rarely used. Perhaps the reason is Erbar's absence in the Letraset's library in the 1970s, or a delay in the digital fonts list in the 1990s. Although the text image of Erbar is well-suited to *Roublennaya*, the microshape of the letters is not the same. Erbar is too fancy to be the 'father' of *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya*.

There are some other typefaces that date from the same period. They are not as famous as those mentioned above, but are still used. One of them is Metro, designed by William Addison Dwiggins in 1930 for the Linotype company. Metro's appearance is comparable to Kabel, with its pointed triangular shapes, but differs in its one-storeyed *a* and *g*. From its birth, Metro was used as the corporate font of the Nivea company and still plays this role.

Nobel is a sans serif descended from the Amsterdam Type Foundry. It was designed by Sjoerd H. de Roos in 1929 and allegedly based on Berthold Grotesk, which came out in 1928. They are very similar, and it is also remarkable that Berthold Grotesk's *R*, *S* and *G* are very similar to *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya*. Berthold's typefaces, including Lateinisch, Herold, Hermes and others that were produced by the St. Petersburg branch office, were also in use after the Communist revolution. Berthold's art nouveau typeface Herold was

so widely used in Russia in the 1920s that it became a visual symbol of the 'heroic October days'. But in 1928 Berthold AG was beyond the Iron Curtain, and there were no matrices and punches of Berthold Grotesk available to be used in Moscow.

Other modernist typefaces of the period include the Stempel foundry's Neuzeit Grotesk (1928) by C. W. Pischiner (also called Stempel Sans). Stempel even published another sans serif in 1928: Elegant Grotesk by Hans Möhring. The Nebiolo foundry in Italy produced Semplicita (1931), Stephenson Blake created Granby (1930), and J. Wagner created Kristall (1930). The American answer to Futura was Tempo (1930), by Robert Hunter Middleton, a harmonic and elegant sans serif that is nearly forgotten today.

A typeface bearing the same early modernistic feeling is Super Grotesk, designed by Arno Drescher in 1932. It was manufactured by the Typoart foundry in Dresden. As it has no spectacular characters like Futura, Gill Sans or Kabel, it has received very little attention. As Dresden's Typoart was the only type foundry that survived WWII in East Germany, Super Grotesk became the 'corporate' typeface of the DDR. In some ways, it is comparable to *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya* – the same 'proletarian' aesthetics and austere image, and the same wide use everywhere, from bus tickets to scientific volumes. Shy and grey, overused and underestimated, it became the visual equivalent of communist Germany and fell into oblivion during the first decade of democracy after the reunification of Germany. But ten years later the wave of *Ostalgie* began, and young typographers started to digitise several fonts which were in use in the DDR. Super Grotesk enjoyed enormous attention – it was even digitised

twice: by Svend Smital of FontFont in 1999 (FF Super Grotesk) and by Nicolai Gogoll of Bitstream (Drescher Grotesk).

In comparing *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya* with the above-mentioned typefaces, it is evident that the most similar are Super Grotesk and Berthold Grotesk. The shapes of a, s and R are most alike, but the general appearance of the text is also similar.

### *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya* **as a poor man's Futura**

*Zhurnalnaya roublennaya* appeared in a Latin version from the Leningrad Printing Equipment Factory in 1962, and became the common sans serif in Estonian printing offices for the next 30 years. On one hand, it was a newcomer in the Soviet typeface library and, on the other hand, there was no choice: the other available sans serif for machine typesetters was *Gazetnaya*, an extra condensed typeface based on Franklin Gothic Extra Condensed, which was not suitable for longer text setting. Therefore *Roublennaya* was mostly used pragmatically, without special aesthetic intention. In the Soviet-period design magazine *Kunst ja Kodu* (*Art and Home*), the text was set in *Roublennaya*, but the headlines were in handmade lettering Futura. That was the 'real' typeface in the designer's mind when he designed the layout of the pages. *Roublennaya* was used in the absence of the desired font, as a poor man's Futura.

Jüri Kaarma was almost the only graphic designer who used *Roublennaya* intentionally. He designed the magazine *Loomingu Raamatukogu* (*Looming's Library*) and used *Roublennaya* on the covers in 1980–1983. The same magazine was also published previously with the headlines in *Roublennaya*, but then the impression was

carried by colour and the writer's portrait. Kaarma trusted the essential quality of poor Soviet typeface and gave it the main role. To produce more powerful results, Kaarma took the photoset negatives and made the characters oversized, sometimes covering the entire cover. In this process, the letter contours became poor quality (scabrous), and this gave an 'industrial' image to the characters.

Another remarkable attempt to use *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya* dates from 1978, when Jüri Kaarma designed Juhan Viiding's book of verse *Ma olin Jüri Üdi*. The modest publication was set in poor Soviet typeface without any illustrative element. *Roublennaya* became the hero of the harsh layout and described, with intense power, the silent nightmare of the poet's childhood years: the Stalinist fifties.

### *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya* **and the digital age**

At the beginning of the 1990s, when the digital age started, *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya* fell into obscurity. The Russian type foundry *ParaGraph* digitised it as early as 1991, but young Russian hackers were not acquainted with the type design details and used Futura as a base for the font, redrawing some less similar letter shapes. But the overall image was wrong and below standard. *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya* was renamed JournalSans, and the poor font is still available on the foundry's home page (the foundry's new name is *Paratype*).

The lack of a digital version of *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya* was noticeable in 2007 when the artist Marko Mäetamm exhibited his works at the Venice Biennial. Indrek Sirkel, who designed the artist's catalogue, needed some phenomenon for the visual expression of Mäetamm's

bitter, personal and childhood-reflecting art. Sirkel chose *Roublennaya*, the typeface of the generation's alphabet-book *Karu aabits* (*Teddy-bear's ABC*). As *Roublennaya's* digital form was missing, he used Erbar instead, but a year later he organised the digitalisation process through connections with his colleague Urs Lehni in the Basel Design University. Sirkel sent examples of the typeface to Switzerland, and in 2009 the Basel students Reto Moser and Tobias Rechsteiner created two fonts under the names *Eesti Text* and *Eesti Display*. *Eesti Text* has the pointed letters A, V, W, M, N and Z. The reason that two different digital versions appeared is clearly that, at the beginning of the 1980s, when the photoset version of *Roublennaya* was released, it was in pointed letters to avoid deformations in the phototechnical process of making printing plates.

The name of the font, *Eesti* (Estonia), somehow sounds wrong: the shortage of typefaces in the communist time was not Estonia's fault and there is no connection in the creation and production process of this font with Estonia at all. But naming their creation is the right of every type designer, and there are no limits on followers in creating their own digital variants of existing typefaces.

The process of digitalisation of vernacular material was not uncommon in the first decade of the 21st century. Albert-Jan Pool of Holland created the font DIN (Deutsche Industrienorme), which is based on the German engineer lettering of the 1900s. Tobias Frere-Jones of the USA created the font Interstate (1995), based on American highway signs, and the font Gotham (2000), based on New York's street lettering and shop nameplates of the 1930s. Anton Koovit of Estonia created the font U8 (2009), whose prototype

is the lettering in Berlin's U8 subway line stations of the 1920s. Considering that trend, the process of revival of *Zhurnalnaya roublennaya* is logical and *Zeitgeist* welcomed the rebirth of this visual phenomenon. It is ironic that a German-prototyped Russian-manufactured font reappeared to us in a form digitised by Swiss students and renamed *Eesti*.