



The Russian Garden Gazette

The digital journal of the Russian Cultural Garden, Cleveland

Human Time

Vladimir Zworykin · Günther Anders · Ivan Bunin · In the Next Issue

The Most Important Part of a Television Set

*Vladimir Zworykin: from Murom to America —
by way of Siberia, the Arctic and two oceans.*

How did it happen that Vladimir Zworykin, one of the creators of electronic television, came to say late in life that the most important part of a television set was the off switch?

Had the inventor fallen out of love with his own creation?

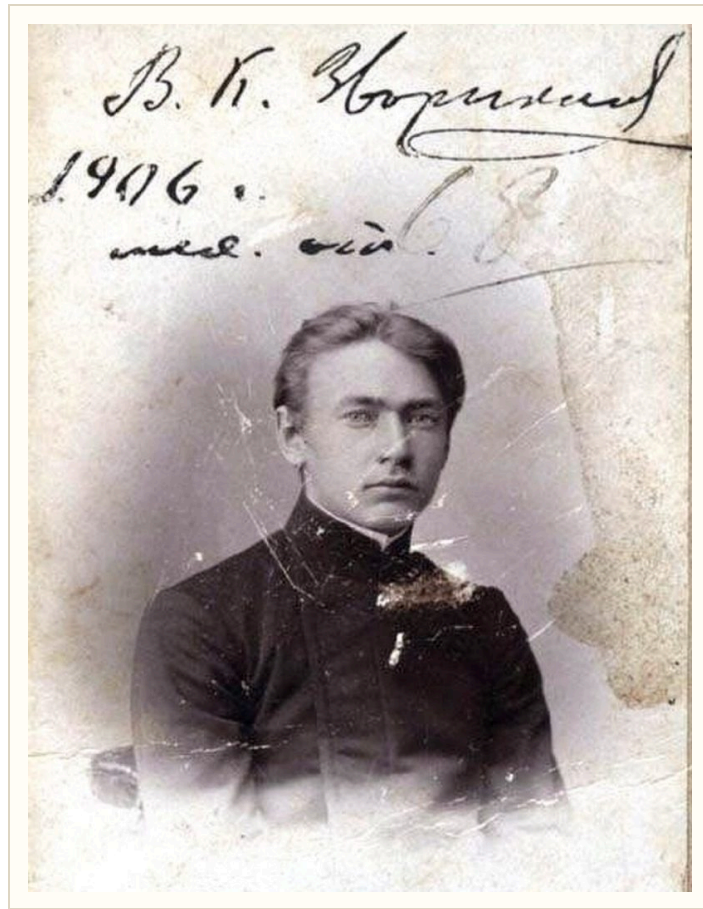
To untangle this paradox we have to take a journey. From the old Russian town of Murom to St. Petersburg; from there into revolutionary Siberia, and across the Arctic Ocean to America. Then back to Siberia, this time across the Pacific. And then to America once more.

But let us begin with the boy from Murom.

A Boy with Something to Lose

Vladimir Zworykin was born in 1888 into a prosperous merchant family. His father, Kozma Alekseevich, was a well-known Murom businessman. A family firm, money, standing in town — the son's road seemed laid out for him.

But young Volodya cared far more about machines.



Vladimir Zworykin. Murom, 1906. Photograph by Nikolai Sazhin. Public domain.

In 1906 he entered the St. Petersburg Institute of Technology and found his way into the laboratory of Professor Boris Rosing.

Rosing was working on a problem then called “far-seeing” — sending a picture over a distance.

The telephone already let you hear a person’s voice hundreds of miles away. But to see them? To see what was happening in another city, another country, on another continent?

Rosing experimented with cathode-ray tubes, and young Zworykin assisted him. This is where the interest that would shape his whole life began.

After graduating in 1912, Zworykin continued his studies in Paris under the physicist Paul Langevin.

A brilliant scientific career seemed to lie ahead.

Then the First World War began.

Revolution Instead of the Laboratory

Zworykin returned to Russia and served in the signal corps, working on radio and military equipment.

And then came 1917.

The revolution swept every plan aside. A former officer from a wealthy merchant family had good reason to fear for his future.

In 1918 Zworykin set out for Siberia.

On the way he was detained in Yekaterinburg. He was freed only when anti-Bolshevik forces, among them units of the Czechoslovak Legion, took the city.

So he made his way to Omsk, seat of the Provisional Siberian Government.

There his knowledge of radio suddenly proved useful. The Omsk authorities needed communications and equipment, and Zworykin was given a mission to buy radio apparatus abroad.

But how do you get from Siberia to America in the middle of a civil war?

The answer belongs in an adventure novel.

Across the Arctic for a Radio Station

In August 1918 Zworykin joined a northern expedition led by the geologist Innokenty Tolmachev.

From Omsk the travelers went north down the Irtysh and the Ob toward the Kara Sea, through harsh Arctic waters to Vaygach Island, from where Zworykin was able to reach Arkhangelsk.

All this in a country torn by war, with power changing hands, transport in ruins and the future wholly uncertain.

From Arkhangelsk he traveled through Scandinavia and England to the United States.

By the end of 1918 Zworykin was in America.

Picture him: a thirty-year-old engineer from Murom, a graduate of the St. Petersburg Institute of Technology, a student of Rosing and Langevin, who had just crossed Siberia and the Arctic Ocean.

He had arrived in a country where electrical engineering was racing ahead, a place where he might at last realize his scientific ideas.

What more could he want?

Yet Zworykin decided to go back to Russia.

Two Trips to America

The first American journey did not become emigration.

Zworykin felt bound by his obligations to the government that had sent him for equipment. Once his errands were done, he set off back to Omsk.

This time across the Pacific.

America, Japan, Vladivostok, Harbin, the Trans-Siberian Railway...

By the spring of 1919 he was in Siberia again.

In a few months the young engineer had in effect traveled around the world. Not for the sake of travel, but because he was trying to go on with his work in a world where the familiar roads no longer existed.

And here the name of Admiral Kolchak enters our story again.

In [our previous issue](#) we told the story of Kolchak and Anna Timiryova. Now another unexpected connection appears.

While Zworykin was on his first journey, in November 1918, Kolchak seized power in Omsk and took over the anti-Bolshevik government. Back in Siberia, Zworykin carried on with his technical assignments, now under Kolchak's rule.

Once again he was sent to the United States.

Once again he crossed the ocean.

But this time history had other plans.

In the autumn of 1919, while Zworykin was in America, Kolchak's government was collapsing. In November it abandoned Omsk.

Going back to Siberia had become not only dangerous but pointless.

The second trip turned into emigration.

The Man Who Taught a Tube to See

In 1920 Zworykin went to work for Westinghouse in Pittsburgh.

He returned to the task that had captured him in Boris Rosing's laboratory: electronic television.

Of course, Zworykin was not the only inventor of television. Researchers in many countries were working on transmitting moving pictures, and the history of the invention is full of independent discoveries, technical rivalry and patent battles.

But Zworykin's contribution to practical electronic television systems was exceptionally important.

In 1929 he moved to RCA, where he had far greater resources for research. His work on camera tubes, above all the iconoscope, became one of the main lines in the development of electronic television.



Vladimir Zworykin with the iconoscope, the television camera tube developed at RCA's laboratories. 1950. Public domain.

Little by little, what had seemed like fantasy in Zworykin's youth became part of everyday life.

Television brought news, music, theater, sport, scientific discovery and faraway events into people's homes.

It crossed distances that Zworykin himself had once crossed by steamer, icebreaker and train.

Could there be a more convincing triumph of technical progress?

The Most Important Part

And yet Zworykin was far from delighted with the way his invention was used.

His biographer Albert Abramson wrote that the inventor was irritated by empty entertainment, by the amount of violence on the screen and by the lack of educational and cultural programs.

Hence the famous remark about the off switch being the best part of a television set. At least, that is the form in which the line has come down to us in countless stories about Zworykin.

The problem, of course, was never the ability to transmit pictures.

The technology had done its job.

The question was what people did with it.

And here the story unexpectedly brings us back to Cleveland.

In the Russian Cultural Garden, on a sign honoring distinguished Americans of Russian origin, Vladimir Zworykin stands beside Sergei Rachmaninoff and Vladimir Nabokov. That sign is on the cover of this issue.

Three very different lives. Three people who left Russia and left their mark on world culture.

One made music. Another, literature. The third made the technology that let music, theater, literature and history itself come into millions of homes.

And still the inventor felt he had to remind us: this technology has an off switch.

Prometheus Before the Screen

Günther Anders on the human being who fell behind his own machines.

Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to humankind. Since then we have learned to make astonishing things — from the steam engine to the atomic bomb, from television to artificial intelligence.

But what if one day our creations become more perfect and more powerful than their maker? What if we learn to produce things whose consequences we can no longer even imagine?

The German-Austrian philosopher Günther Anders devoted much of his life to this paradox.

A Philosopher of the Generation of Catastrophes

Günther Anders was born Günther Stern in Breslau in 1902. He grew up in a family of psychologists — his father, William Stern, introduced the concept of the intelligence quotient, the IQ. Günther himself studied philosophy with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.

At Heidegger's seminars he met Hannah Arendt, later one of the great political philosophers. They married in 1929. When the Nazis came to power, both fled to France. Their marriage ended in divorce in 1937, but the intellectual and human bond between them endured.



Günther Stern (Anders) and Hannah Arendt, c. 1929. Photographer unknown. Library of Congress. Public domain.

In 1936 Anders left for the United States, where he worked in a factory and in Hollywood. His encounter with America's society of mass production and mass consumption deeply shaped his philosophy.

After the war he returned to Europe and settled in Vienna.

In 1956 the first volume of his major work appeared: *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*.

The Moral Wear of Man

The title is usually rendered in English as *The Obsolescence of Man* or *The Outdatedness of Human Beings*.

But Anders is talking about more than obsolescence. Humans build ever more perfect machines, while our ability to grasp the consequences of our own actions cannot keep up with what the machines can do.

At our "Philosophical Evenings," while discussing a not-yet-published Russian translation of the book by Svetlana Stolyarova and Liliya Tsibizova, we proposed

another version of the title: *Moralny iznos cheloveka*, literally “the moral wear of man.”

In Russian this phrase is an economic term. It describes a machine that still works perfectly well but has become outdated because better ones have appeared. That, according to Anders, is exactly what is happening to us. Which is why, we think, this version captures the philosopher’s alarm more precisely.

The Promethean Gap

Anders calls the “Promethean gap” the distance between what we are able to produce and what we are able to imagine, understand and morally comprehend.

We can build a weapon capable of destroying whole cities, yet we cannot truly picture the scale of the human suffering it will cause.

Next to it stands another idea, “Promethean shame”: the feeling of being inferior to the perfection of the machines we have made.

A machine does not tire, does not doubt, does not age the way a person does. It performs its task with a precision no human can match.

And gradually people begin to measure themselves by the standards of their own technical creations.

But Anders was not only interested in grand technological threats. He found an equally striking paradox in the most ordinary living room.

The Mass Hermit

Once, to become part of a mass audience, people had to gather together — in a theater, a square, a concert hall.

Television changed that.

Now millions sat each in their own room, yet watched the same programs, heard the same voices and saw the world through the same images.

Anders called such a person a “mass hermit.”

Physically alone, yet with a mind plugged into mass consumption.

And here the philosopher finds yet another reversal.

The Producer Who Pays for His Own Labor

In the world we know, a producer is paid for what he makes, and a consumer pays to acquire it.

In front of the television, the scheme turns upside down.

People become volunteer producers of themselves as mass consumers.

They do it in their free time, with pleasure, and usually without realizing they are producing anything at all.

Most surprising of all: they are not paid for this work. They pay for the privilege of doing it.

Producers used to be paid for the goods they made. Now people pay to turn themselves into consumers ready to pay for new goods.

It is an almost perfect economic model: the producer pays for his own production, and the finished product — himself — creates demand for new goods and entertainments.

That was the paradox Anders noticed in the early days of mass television.

The Internet: A Network of Mass Hermits

The internet linked the mass hermits into a single network.

Now they can talk to each other, exchange opinions, create their own texts, photographs and videos.

It would seem the age of the hermit is over.

But something even more interesting has happened.

People have become not only consumers but suppliers of content for other consumers — often for free, voluntarily and with great enthusiasm.

And digital platforms have learned to turn their attention, habits and even friendships into economic value.

So Anders's paradox has found an unexpected sequel: people not only produce themselves as consumers, they help build the environment that will go on shaping them.

Anders died in 1992, before the age of social media. So this is not his own observation but our attempt to carry his thought into our time.

Zworykin was saddened that television gave knowledge and art so much less room than empty entertainment. The internet has given us even wider opportunities to connect, create and learn. But have we used them as well as we might?

Anders's question sounds with new force today: how independently do we form our own desires, interests and picture of the world?

*Prometheus gave us fire.
Now we sit before a screen lit by that fire —
still trying to work out who is controlling
whom.*

Bunin: Human Time

For the 156th birthday of Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin



Ivan Bunin in 1933, the year of his Nobel Prize. Nobel Foundation. Public domain.

October 22 marks 156 years since the birth of Ivan Bunin, the first Russian writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Rereading his *Cursed Days* today is not easy. These diary entries from the revolutionary years hold so much anger, bitterness and merciless observation — and, alas, so much that resembles our own time — that at moments you want to close the book.

But Bunin had a remarkable gift for seeing the terrible and the beautiful at once. Human lying filled him with almost physical revulsion, while a golden moon over evening Odessa moved him to tears.

All of it on the pages of a single diary.

The Lie That Becomes Second Nature

Bunin returns again and again to the human capacity to believe what we desperately want to believe. He watches rumors being born, growing invented details, and perfectly sensible people repeating obvious untruths.

“And all of this comes from an unbearable thirst for things to be the way one so unbearably wants them to be.”

IVAN BUNIN, *CURSED DAYS*

Even more interesting is his observation about a special kind of lie — one the liar gradually stops noticing.

“All of that was there. And there was also the habitual profit of lying, which was rewarded one way or another. ‘I believe in the Russian people!’ — and for that, people applauded.” Bunin goes on to describe people so used to playing the friends of the people, of youth and of all things bright that they came to believe in the sincerity of their own feelings.

“But this is a special kind of falseness, almost unconscious to the person himself: a habitual life of invented feelings that long ago, of course, became second nature — and yet remain invented.”

“An extraordinary subject for a novel — and a terrible novel,” he concludes.

And indeed, what could be more frightening than a person who can no longer tell his own convictions from the ones he is used to performing?

More than a century has passed. Human nature, it seems, has not changed very much.

From One Tree, Both Cudgel and Icon

But Bunin would not be Bunin if there were not something larger behind his anger.

Reflecting on the contradictions of the Russian character, he recalls a folk saying:

“Out of us, as out of wood, come both the cudgel and the icon.”

IVAN BUNIN, *CURSED DAYS*

Everything, he goes on, depends on circumstances — on who is working the wood: St. Sergius of Radonezh or the rebel Yemelyan Pugachev.

And then he asks a question that explains much of his own despair:

“If I had not loved this ‘icon’, this Rus’, had not seen it, why would I have gone so mad all these years, why would I have suffered so ceaselessly, so fiercely?”

These words hold more than the despair of a witness to historical catastrophe. They hold a love without which there might not have been such pain.

And suddenly, amid reflections on Russia’s fate, on lies, on violence and on human nature, an entirely different theme appears.

What time is it?

“By Their Reckoning, It’s Already the Eighteenth”

On February 5, 1918, in Moscow, Bunin writes:

“From the first of February they ordered the new style to be. So by their reckoning today is already the eighteenth.”

He means Russia’s switch from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian. By decree of the Council of People’s Commissars, January 31, 1918 was followed directly by February 14.

Thirteen days vanished from the calendar. Not one of them, of course, vanished from anyone’s life.

Bunin went on dating his entries by the old style. The Odessa part of *Cursed Days* opens with the note “April 12 (Old Style).”

His small “by their reckoning” says a great deal. The state could change the calendar; getting a person to accept the new count inwardly was harder.

And the calendar was only the beginning.

Eight in the Evening. Or Half Past Ten?

In April 1919 the Reds entered Odessa, which the French had just abandoned.



Cavalry of Ataman Grigoriev, then fighting on the Red side, enters Odessa after the French evacuation. April 1919. The postcard reads, in Ukrainian: "Odessa 1919. Entry of the Red Army after the evacuation of the French." Public domain.

On April 21, 1919 by the old style — May 4 by the new — Bunin comes home from a walk through the city. He closes the shutters and notes:

Just now (8 in the evening, but by "Soviet" time already half past ten), back from a walk, I was closing the shutters: a slice of moon, quite golden, shines clean through the young green of the tree beneath the window, in the clearing western sky, thin and still light.

IVAN BUNIN, *CURSED DAYS*, APRIL 21, 1919

Eight in the evening — and by the official clocks it is already half past ten!

Where did the extra two and a half hours come from?

We decided to find out.

The Pulkovo Meridian and the Puzzling Clocks

Before time zones, cities lived by local solar time. Noon was set by the sun, so clocks in different cities showed slightly different times.

The Earth turns 15 degrees an hour, so each degree of longitude equals four minutes of time.

Moscow lies almost seven degrees east of Odessa — a difference of just under half an hour. When the sun said noon in Odessa, it was already about half past twelve in Moscow.

Now one more almost forgotten detail.

The Russian Empire had Pulkovo time, the time of the meridian of the famous Pulkovo Observatory near St. Petersburg. It was used above all on the railways, where a single standard was essential for timetables. Curiously, St. Petersburg and Odessa lie almost on the same meridian, so Pulkovo time and Odessa's solar time differed by only a couple of minutes.

The revolution piled new rules on top of this old confusion.

On May 30, 1918, the Council of People's Commissars ordered clocks moved two hours ahead to save on lighting. In the autumn they were set back by only one hour.

So in the spring of 1919 Moscow's clocks ran an hour ahead of Moscow's sun. Add the half hour between the meridians and you get about an hour and a half. Not two and a half!

So where is the missing hour?

Most likely it was hiding in Odessa itself. In 1918–1919 power in the city changed hands again and again — the Reds, the Austrians under the Hetman, the Whites and the French, the Reds once more — and the clocks changed along with it. The Central Rada had introduced Central European time; the Hetman’s Ukraine, East European time; Soviet Ukraine in early 1919 made shifts of its own.

The likeliest explanation: Bunin’s clock kept the time Odessa had lived by before the Bolsheviks arrived, while the “Soviet” clocks showed the new decreed time. But exactly which time was in force in Odessa in the spring of 1919 is something we have not yet been able to establish from documents.

Help Us Find the Missing Hour

If you have come across orders of the Odessa authorities about time in the spring of 1919, or memoirs and letters that mention the clocks in Odessa or Kyiv in those years, please write to us. We will publish the most interesting finds.

WRITE TO THE GAZETTE

board@russiangarden.org

“By Our Soviet Time, It’s Five!”

On May 29, 1919, the Council of People’s Commissars ordered clocks moved one more hour ahead. In Odessa this seems to have happened a little later: Bunin notes the change on May 31 by the old style — June 13 by the new.

“The clocks have been moved another hour ahead — by mine it is now ten in the morning, but ‘by Soviet time’ half past one in the afternoon.”

Now three and a half hours separate his clock from the Soviet one.

And on June 11 Bunin records a story told by Foma, the yard keeper, about a Red Army soldier who stops a passerby in the street:

“Comrade citizen, what time is it?” And the fool takes out his watch and blurts: “Half past two.” — “What do you mean, half past two, when by our Soviet time it’s five? So you’re for the old regime, are you?”

IVAN BUNIN, *CURSED DAYS*, JUNE 11, 1919

Then the watch goes flying onto the cobblestones.

The numbers in this street story don’t match Bunin’s own — it is hearsay, not timekeeping. But the scene says more than any numbers could: time had become a test of loyalty. What your watch showed could reveal whether you were “for the old regime.”

It is an almost fantastical picture: people in one city living by different clocks, arguing about the time, while the state issues decree after decree trying to impose a single order.

And still the sun rises and sets regardless of decrees.

The Hour We Get Back

Then again, we shouldn’t be too surprised at the Odessans of 1919.

We still change our clocks twice a year.

Very soon, on the night of November 1, 2026, at two in the morning Cleveland's clocks will fall back to one. We will be given an entire extra hour.

We can sleep a little longer. We can spend it with a book, in conversation, or simply fail to notice the gift.

But will time really come back?

The sun will not change its course. The autumn day will not get longer. We will simply agree to give different names to the hours when it begins and ends.

There is something both sensible and comic in this: humanity has learned to measure time with incredible precision, yet still argues over how to show it on a clock face.

And Bunin, nearly a hundred and eight years ago, looked at the golden moon over Odessa and saw something that needed no official confirmation.

What Remains

In 1918, amid the upheavals of history, Bunin wrote a poem of just eight lines.

There is no revolution in it, no quarrel over calendars, no accusations of human falseness.

There are flowers, bumblebees, field roads, summer heat — and the memory of happiness.

И цветы, и шмели, и трава, и колосья,
И лазурь, и полуденный зной...
Срок настанет — Господь сына блудного
спросит:

«Был ли счастлив ты в жизни земной?»

И забуду я всё — вспомню только вот эти
Полевые пути меж колосьев и трав —
И от сладостных слёз не успею ответить,
К милосердным коленям припав.

*And flowers, and bumblebees, and grass, and ears of wheat,
and the azure, and the midday heat...
The hour will come — the Lord will ask the prodigal son:
“Were you happy in your life on earth?”*

*And I will forget it all — remembering only
these field paths among the wheat and grass —
and for sweet tears I will not manage to answer,
falling to the merciful knees.*



Rezanov, Vishnevskaya and the Garden's New Plaza

Juno and Avos is a love story known to several generations of audiences. But what really happened 220 years ago, when Count Nikolai Rezanov sailed for the shores of California? For Nikolai Karachentsov's birthday, we'll go behind the scenes of a famous theatrical legend.

We will also mark the centenary of the great soprano Galina Vishnevskaya.

And long-awaited news from the Russian Cultural Garden: the new entrance plaza is complete.

We'll show how the Garden has been transformed and tell you about the people who made this project a reality.

Support the Russian Cultural Garden

The Garden lives thanks to its friends. Your donation helps us care for the Garden, continue the Walk of Fame, build the Rachmaninoff Music Corner and publish the Gazette. Any amount matters: \$10, \$25 or \$100 — every gift helps the Garden grow.

To add a name to the Walk of Fame, the suggested donation is **\$250**. Sponsors' names are published at RussianGarden.org. A donation can also be dedicated in honor or in memory of someone dear to you.



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Russian Cultural Gardens



*A television can be switched off.
A clock can be turned back.
The moon keeps its own time.*



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This Issue

THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF A
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PROMETHEUS BEFORE THE SCREEN

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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