

NIKOLAI SEDELNIKOV

AVANTGARDE FOR UTOPIA

GALERIE MICHAEL HASENCLEVER

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Nikolai Sedelnikov

Nikolai Sedelnikov (Moscow 1905-1994 Moscow), a student under El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko, was – like Jan Tschichold, with whom he corresponded by letter for many years – one of the pioneers of the new form of graphic art that emerged during the 1920s. He developed new typographic fonts, several fundamental forms of Constructivist printmaking and photomontage for use in book-, newspaper- and poster-design, and became one of the leading masters of Soviet propaganda art.

After the October Revolution of 1917 and the civil war that followed, lasting almost five years, the newly-founded Communist State called for an art that could be seen as the opposite to the old bourgeois one; an art that fitted with the new regime and supported it. Suprematism and Russian Futurism were at that time the most *avant-garde* art movements in Russia, renouncing all previous artistic and pictorial languages to begin completely anew again. Suprematism, introduced by the painter Kasimir Malevich, was the first art form to have been reduced down to the simplest geometrical shapes, freed from all reliance on the object. Here, colour no longer played a subordinate role: rather, it found its own voice. Combinations of geometric figures in various colours and sizes formed balanced yet asymmetrical compositions with their own intrinsic dynamics. Believing that the old language of form had been shaped by the old world order and therefore by how mankind had lived until that point, and that this new art would be able to create a new world order and to regenerate human society, the new regime supported the formative role that the *avant-garde* played in society. The political motto of “We are making a new world” also chimed with the essential aesthetic ideals of the *avant-garde’s* new artistic direction. “Only an explosion of the revolution of the human spirit will purify us from the detritus of the old forms of art,” the poet Mayakowsky wrote in 1918 in an open letter to the workers and urged them not to allow themselves to be led astray by the old forms of art, but to claim this new art as their own.¹

Suprematism as a non-objective art form without precise aims and specific functions did not fit entirely, however, with the new regime. The new State demanded an art that allowed itself to function politically and would not be incomprehensible to the broad masses. Constructivism thus developed at the beginning of the 1920s, basing itself on pre-existing *avant-garde* artistic movements. In its manifesto the Constructivist group announced as its task an examination of material values from a Communist perspective. Tectonics and facture were the mobilising material elements here.

Enthusiastic and filled with idealism, many *avant-garde* artists aligned themselves with the young Soviet Union, whose socialist conception they adopted as their own and saw the need to defend. The *avant-garde* thrust itself into all spheres of art, as well as into the theatre and architecture, music and film. Art should no longer embellish life but should rather help to shape it. From now on art should serve mankind by creating his objective reality. Artists dreamed of a mankind in harmony living in a harmonious world.

The shaping of Sedelnikov’s artistic identity took place during the 1920s, the golden age in the USSR for the mass-reproduced visual arts, which became one of the most important elements in the formation of the new art. He began working in a printer’s workshop in Moscow at the age of just sixteen, alongside his studies at the School for Technical Drawing and Lithography. In 1924 he began his studies at the Вхутемас (an acronym for the Высшие художественно-технические мастерские), the Soviet equivalent of the Bauhaus, where outstanding artists of the *avant-garde* such as Kandinsky, Rodchenko, Lissitzky and Tatlin taught. “The younger generation of our graphic designers came directly out of the printer’s workshop. This was a decisive factor in their further artistic output,”



1) V. Mayakowsky, Open Letter to the Workers in: Futurist paper, 15. March 1918
(В. Маяковский, Открытое письмо рабочим, в: Газета футуристов, 15 марта 1918)

N. Sedelnikov (on the right), Moscow, 1926

Lissitzky wrote, “such as Telingater, Elkin, Sedelnikov, and others.”² The predominance of typographic techniques gave this new generation of graphic artists freedom in their design of printed matter. In 1928 Sedelnikov became one of the founding members of the Constructivist artists’ group “October”, to which at that time leading figures such as the architect brothers Vesnin and Ginzburg, the graphic artists Klucis, Moor and Telingater, the filmmakers Eisenstein, Schub and Gan, and the painter Deineka belonged.

Constructivist mass-political publications

Above everything else, the members of the “October” group saw their mission as the development of a rabble-rousing art for the people, which would contribute through its resources to the formation of a Communist consciousness in the new citizen – joyful, optimistic, and invincible. The synthesis of diverse artistic media played a decisive role here, by achieving the greatest possible effect through the amplification of specific modes of expression. It reached a peak where art and propaganda become one. Filled with their belief in a newly-created, just State and their enthusiasm for the building of a “bright” future, the artists invested all of their creativity.

They sought out new pictorial possibilities in order to make the content intelligible and accessible; their idealistic statements chiefly concerned the collectivisation of life and their enthusiasm for technical progress and political and humanistic enlightenment. Lissitzky worked out the theory of the visual text, in which design was a cumulative and energy-converting element with text as the fundamental substance. Sedelnikov pursued this idea further intensively, together with other former students of Lissitzky. This involved above all the emotional and intellectual power of persuasion that would be achieved through a unified entity, by the bringing together of individual elements such as typography, the use of colour, the building-up of contrast and of sculptural passages through drawing, photography or photomontage. The artist was as it were the engineer of a complex spatial construction, a monumental structure that was not only intended for the individual to behold but was to produce a collective effect.

A visual text should also form a kind of “unity of optics and acoustics”, which was to be achieved through the form of the text, its typographical design and colouration. Phrases and words were emphasised and “stated loudly”, with pathos. (In cat. no. 10, the word “ВЕЛИКИХ” (“GREAT”) is highlighted as the most important piece of information through the colour red; the typeface and positioning also have a clear rhythm.) For graphic artists the typeface became an easy-to-manage, flexible medium that they deployed in their statement of content. In mass-political illustrations in which text was usually grouped into quotations, the typographical arrangement had to be particularly compelling.

Text was visually amplified by the use of photomontage and drawing (cat. no. 23: *The Creators of New Technology*; cat. no. 17, *The Murderer’s Tread*). Montage became a successful strategy in the arrangement of space, which was intended to add to the specific dynamics of what was being conveyed. Photocollage became an element that illustrated the message effectively and documentary photography was deployed as evidence, as it were, as factual data. In political motifs photocollage was often

structured as juxtaposition and contrast: the world of the rich against the world of the poor; capitalism as a synonym for the power of the few, for exploitation, discrimination and war (cat. no. 18: *The Murderer’s Path*; cat. nos. 11 & 14: *Reaction – the Path to Power*).

The asymmetrical structure that was characteristic of Constructivism and the accentuation of text allowed artists, using the text content of each individual work as a starting-point, to develop an individual logic of design and thus to present text to the viewer in a visually-comprehensible way (cat. no. 19, *Life on the Other Side of the Ocean*; cat. no. 16: *Always Ready to Protect the USSR*).

“Compared to American ones, our [Soviet] posters were not intended to be registered by the eye from a fast-moving passing car, but rather to be read and looked at from close to,”³ Lissitzky stated. Characteristic of Sedelnikov’s Constructivist works is his free use of typographical material and the multiplicity of his variations on fundamental compositional forms. Sedelnikov was awarded the gold medal for his work at the international exhibition, “Pressa”, in Cologne in 1928.

While the creation of art until then had been given over to its free artistic impulses outside the control of the Party, in 1932 all artistic organisations, whatever their multifarious points of view on art, were dissolved by Party decree and replaced by a single union of artists, writers, composers, architects, et cetera. The revolutionary State with its “idealism” had become a dictatorship.

Constructivism as a “rational” art form, which called upon technological logic and concreteness, could no longer serve the demands of this new ideology. This modern movement forging wildly ahead lost the support of its patron, the Party, after a short period of approval. Art that served a totalitarian regime had to contribute to order and unity. These questers were no longer consulted; those who believed and obeyed were instead. Traditional art transformed into Socialist Realism had to do the job. The Constructivist M. Ginzburg said quite rightly that every epoch has its corresponding style of art. In the place of Constructivism’s romantic-utopian, strict and revolutionary asceticism came grandiose examples of totalitarian culture such as Stalinist neo-classicism.

The Constructivist artists did not, however, entirely give up on their creative language from that point onwards. They still used text and photomontage as significant elements in their work.

One of the most important commissions of this period for Sedelnikov, together with Telingater and Rerberg, was the design of the “USSR Constitution” for the World Exhibition in Paris in 1937. This work was awarded the Grand Prix there and the overall Gold Medal at the World Exhibition in New York in 1939.

Although he was not a member of the Party, thanks to his ability Sedelnikov became artistic director of the State’s leading publishing houses. With an inventiveness that was characteristic of him he designed numerous book-covers and title-pages for books, brochures and journals on politics, economics, the trade unions, technology, science, literature and art. His works are still shown today in exhibitions on graphic art all over the world.

Elena Savenkova

Translation: Richard Aronowitz-Mercer

2) El Lissitzky, *The Book from the Viewpoint of Visual Perception – a Visual Book*, in: *Book-art*, Nr. 3, Moscow 1962, p. 167 (quotation from his notes) (Л. М. Лисицкий, *Книга с точки зрения зрительного восприятия – визуальная книга*, в: *Искусство книги*, вып. 3, М. 1962, с. 167)

3) *Ibid.*, p. 166



1 **Red guards** (Design for a book cover)

Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet

On right margin recto and verso annotations by the artist for the printer.

With the stamp of the printer's „Red Proletarian” Technical Department, order number 8685 registered 29.3.

24,3 x 32,9 cm



2 **Introduction**, 1931
 Photography of a photomontage heightened with white, mounted on card
 Signed lower right, dated lower left
 Verso: annotations by the artist for the printer
 32 x 23,3 cm



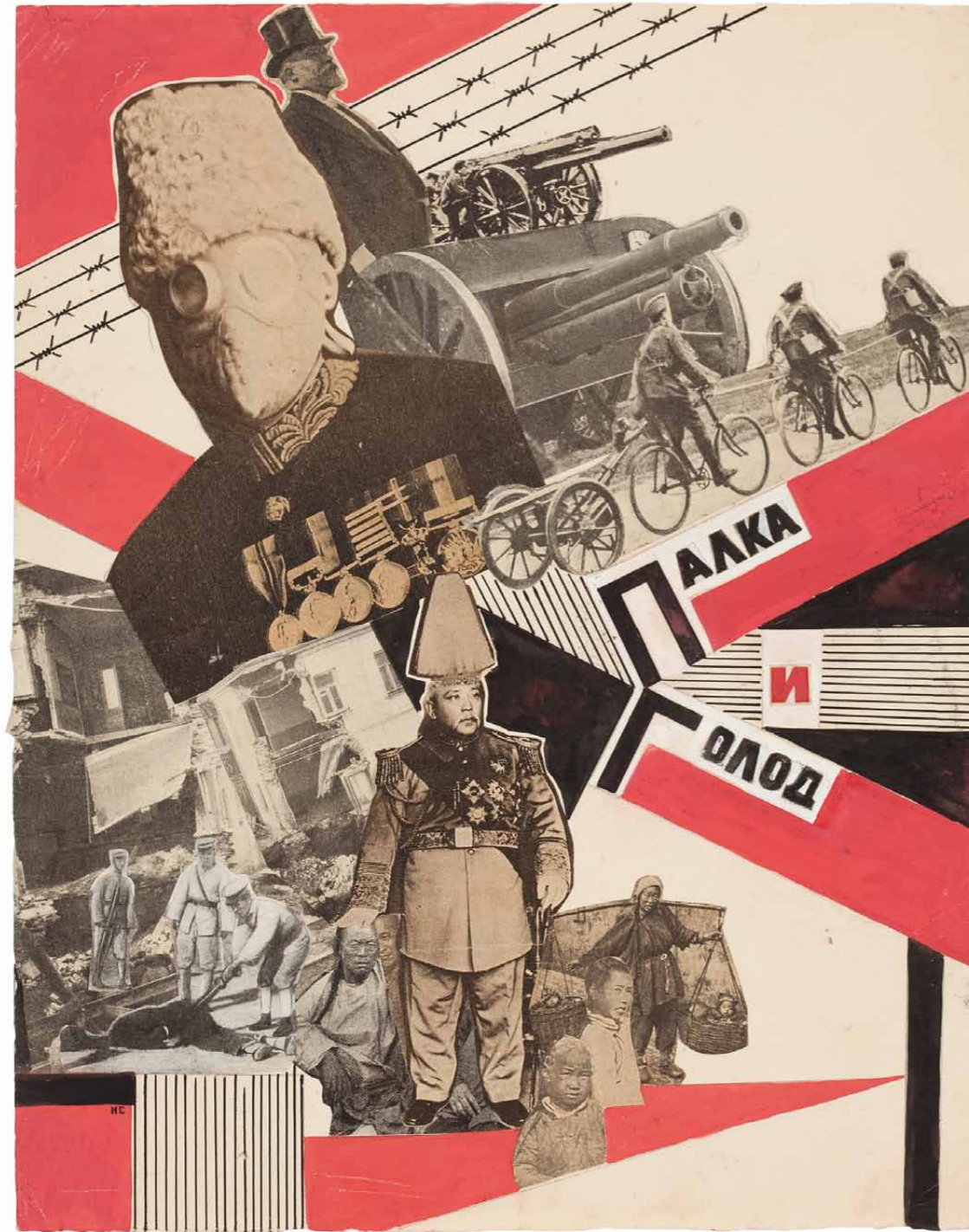
3 **Aid for the Draughtsman and Graphic Designer** (Design for a book cover), 1929
 Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
 Verso: annotations by the artist for the printer
 26 x 35 cm



4 **Untitled**, 1930
Photogram on light card, recto of a proof sheet
Signed and dated lower right
18,7 x 13 cm (32,5 x 23,9 cm)



5 (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
30,4 x 21,2 cm



6 **Stick and Starvation** (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower left
33,4 x 26,1 cm



7 **October and the defence of the country** (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower left
21,1 x 28,3 cm



8 On the other side (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower right
24,8 x 33,4 cm



9 (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
20,8 x 29,5 cm



10 Machinery for great construction projects (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
29 x 20,9 cm



11 (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
33,7 x 24 cm



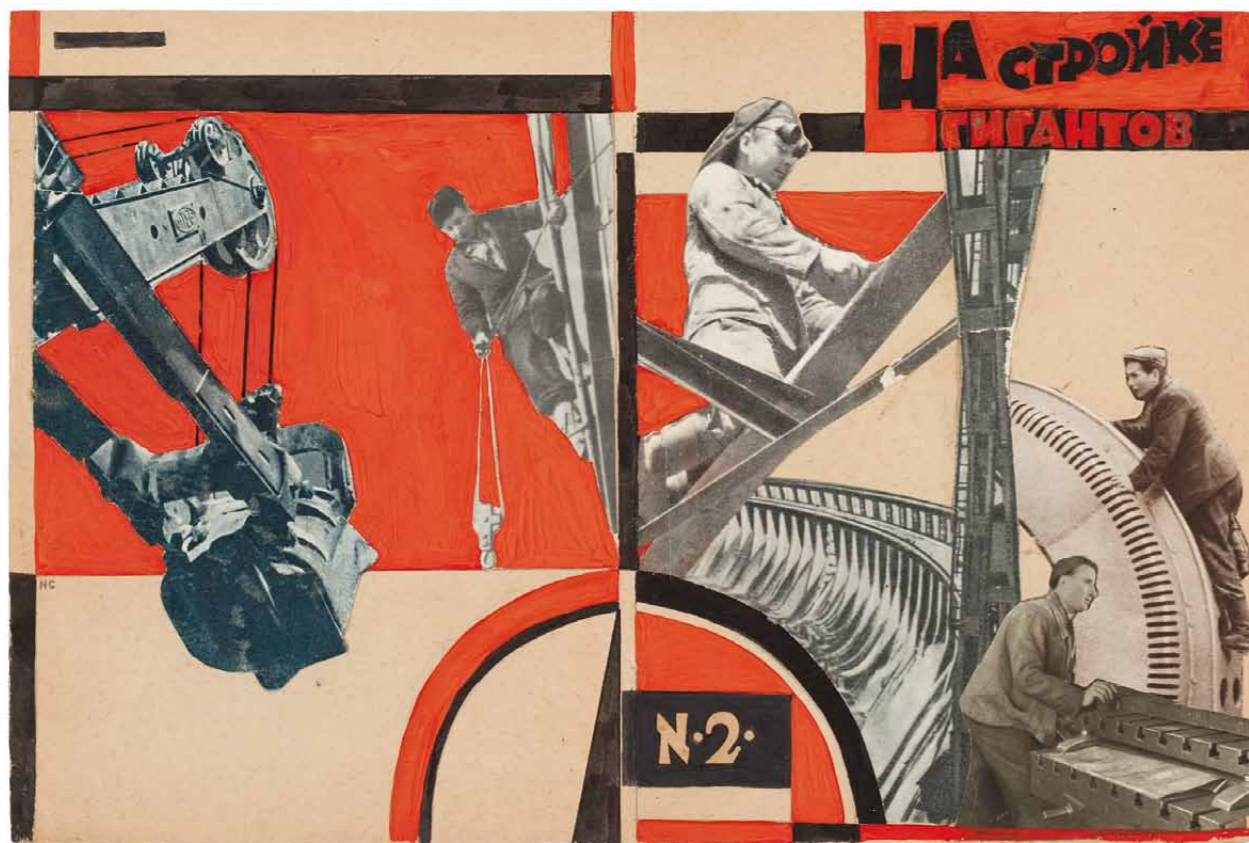
12 Festival of Soviet Body Culture (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
25,3 x 55,4 cm



13 **Football. Rules and Techniques** (Design for a book cover)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower center
27,5 x 21,5 cm



14 Reaction - the Path to Power (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower right
33,5 x 24 cm



15 **At the building site of giants** (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower left
24 x 36 cm



16 **Always ready to protect the USSR / Prepare the country for defence!** (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
24 x 18,2 cm



17 **The Murderer's Tread** (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower center
35,6 x 24 cm



21 **Victory of a Champion** (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower left
33,3 x 25,2 cm



22 **Moto / Auto (-mobile)** (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower center
29,5 x 47,2 cm



23 **The Creators of New Technology** (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower left
33,1 x 41,2 cm



24 **Man is created for happiness!** (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower left
33 x 24,2 cm



25 **Soldiers of the army for labour** (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower left
38,2 x 28,5 cm



26 (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower left
22 x 31,1 cm



27 (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower left
23,4 x 15,4 cm



28 (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower left
30 x 42 cm



29 Event of a decade (Design)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower center
26,9 x 38,3 cm



30 **Quality Test of the shoe production** (Design for a book cover)
Collage and gouache on recto of a proof sheet
Monogram lower center
23,4 x 32,5 cm

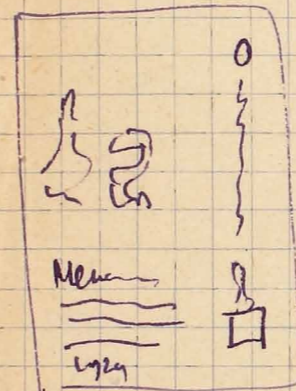
Nikolai Aleksandrovich Sedelnikov 1905-1994

- 1905 Born in Moscow.
- 1921-1924 Studies at the Sytin School for Technical Drawing and Lithography, Moscow. Works at the same time in a printer's workshop.
- 1924-1926 Studies at the Bxyrema, the Soviet version of the Bauhaus. A pupil of Rodchenko, Lissitzky and Tatlin.
- From 1925 Works at leading State publishers, such as *Science* and *Art*, and from 1930 as artistic director.
- From 1927 As well as taking part in exhibitions in the Soviet Union, he participates in numerous exhibitions in the USA, England, France, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Italy, et cetera. Several awards from Soviet competitions for book design in the USSR.
- 1928 Wins the Gold Medal at the international exhibition, "Pressa", in Cologne. A founding member of the Constructivist artists' group "October" in Moscow, together with the architect brothers Vesnin and Ginzburg, the graphic artists Klucis, Moor and Telingater, the filmmakers Eisenstein, Schub and Gan and the painter Deineka.
- 1930 Included in the first exhibition of the "October" artists' group.
- 1930-1933 Collaboration with Maxim Gorki on the journal "Our Achievements".
- 1930s Corresponds with Jan Tschichold over many years.
- 1937 Wins the Grand Prix at the World Exhibition in Paris for the design of the "USSR Constitution", together with Telingater and Rerberg.
- 1939 Wins the overall Gold Medal at the World Exhibition in New York for the same work.
- 1950-1951 Included in the exhibition of book designers in Moscow.
- 1952-1980 Teaches at the Moscow Polygraphic Institute.
- 1964 Solo exhibition at the Central House for Artists in Moscow.
- 1977-1978 Solo exhibition at the City Committee of Artists, Moscow.
- 1982 A retrospective "N. Sedelnikov: Book-Design/Graphic Works/Books/ Journals/ Photo-Montages" at the Book Museum in the Vladimir Ilyich Lenin State Library, Moscow.
- 1992 Included in the exhibition "The Great Utopia. The Russian *Avant-Garde* 1915-1932" at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt am Main.
- 2001 Included in the exhibition "With Full Power. The Russian *Avant-Garde* 1910-1934" at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg.
- 2005 Included in the exhibition "For the Voice! The Russian *Avant-Garde* Book 1910-1934" at the Anna Achmatova Museum in St. Petersburg.
- 2012 Included in the exhibition "The Merrill C. Berman Collection" at the Fundación Juan March in Madrid.



N. Sedelnikov (second from right)

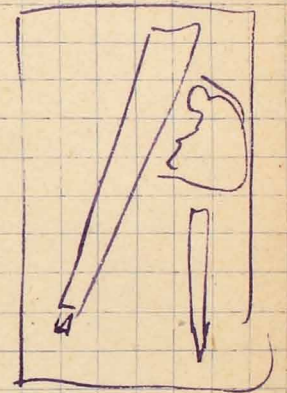
Начертаны здесь 4 примера судяны эгофотомией
 А. П. Лекаревой.



1. Обложка. ~~от~~ Николай Семенович.



2. Контуры. Николай Семенович



3. Контур и рука А. П. Лекаревой.



Н. Тарасов Николай Семенович

4 примера.

Москва
 1929. 17-19/X.

Николай Семенович

