

ARTICLE



The Neptun film company and the Antik-Kwartiroff family

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the biographies of Pavel Antik, Anna Antik and Aleksandr Kvartirov (Alexander Kwartiroff), and the history of their film company Neptun founded soon after the February revolution in 1917. Operating in the very last years of the imperial film industry, Neptun engaged many of the prominent creative figures of the time and produced three films starring the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. After emigrating to Berlin, the Antik-Kwartiroff family briefly revived Neptun and produced Paul Leni’s celebrated expressionist film *Waxworks* (1924). The article reconstructs the company’s history through previously unknown biographical facts and unpublished photos from the archive of the family’s descendants.

KEYWORDS

Neptun film company; Antik-Kwartiroff family; cinema of the Russian Empire; Vladimir Mayakovsky; film studios; emigration

Introduction

The history of cinema of the Russian Empire represents an uneven landscape, with some filmmakers and film companies studied in meticulous detail and others almost completely forgotten. Among the latter are the early film producers Pavel Antik (1869–1954), Anna Antik, born Kvartirova (1882–1957), and Aleksandr Kvartirov (1882–1923) – the people behind the Neptun film company. These three personalities can be used as illustrations for different modes of erasure: Pavel Antik is mistaken for another person and bears the wrong name in most sources; Anna Antik is mentioned exclusively as ‘Antik’s wife’ and never by name; and Aleksandr Kvartirov simply remains one of the thousands of nameless early cinema workers, not even once caught in the spotlight of history. Their company Neptun was created right after the February revolution in 1917, in the imperial film industry’s most turbulent and least documented period that ended with an imminent collapse. A short-lived yet prominent enterprise, Neptun engaged key artistic forces of its time – including several actors of Moscow Art Theatre, eminent set designer Vladimir Egorov and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who wrote and starred in three of the company’s films. This latter fact has attracted the attention of Soviet historians and can be credited for the preservation of some of the valuable first-person accounts that mention the company. Despite its relative prominence, the history of Neptun has never been studied. This article attempts to sketch out its principal timeline, to trace the biographies of its creators, and to correct some of the most common errors and omissions surrounding their

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identities. The article also follows its three protagonists in exile in Germany, where the Neptun company was briefly revived, and gives a cursory overview of the remarkable biographies of their children, little-known yet noteworthy émigré personalities.

The article provides new sources and previously unpublished materials acquired from the direct descendants of the Kwartiroff (Kvartirov) family, as well as numerous archival findings. It also draws heavily on the press of the 1910s and compiles various memoirs and correspondences that refer to the Antiks or the Kvartiroy (and sometimes mistake their identities).

The research on Neptun and its founders can contribute to the ongoing expansion of pre-revolutionary film history scholarship and the revision of its rather reductive canon that prioritises few producers like, for example, Aleksandr Khanzhonkov and Paul Thiemann, while leaving out the decisive role of their wives – Antonina Khanzhonkova and Elizaveta Thiemann respectively. The recent studies dedicated to Khanzhonkova (Kovalova 2025) and Thiemann (Bagrov and Kovalova 2021) demonstrate that they were heavily involved in both artistic and administrative sides of the respective film businesses they operated together with their spouses. The case of Neptun reveals a similar gendered dynamic, with Anna Antik being heavily involved in the company's affairs but rarely credited for her contribution.

Studies on other under-recognised contributors and film companies, like a recent detailed profile of Grigori Libken's Yaroslavl studio (Zubatenko 2024), Anna Kovalova's book on film production in Saint Petersburg (Kovalova 2012) or studies of female film professionals Olga Blazhevich (Artemeva and Nesterenko 2023), Anna Mar (Andreeva 2020), Maria Kallash-Garris (Ryabchikova 2021), demonstrate how much there is still to uncover about the early film industry's major players, let alone smaller-scale producers and creatives or those that have operated outside of the two imperial capitals. Meanwhile, the research of the seemingly less-distinguished film professionals could provide a valuable insight into the inner workings of the industry, the current understanding of which may still be biased and informed by hierarchies introduced later. This article attempts to offer yet another contribution to the project of expanding, decentring and nuancing early film history's canon by re-introducing previously overlooked personalities.

Mayakovsky on the screen

The story of how futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky got into cinema is attested to by several of the poet's contemporaries. His friend Lev Grinkrug, whom Mayakovsky invited to act in one of the films, recalled the events 40 years later:

In Moscow we had acquaintances named Antik, a husband and a wife. They owned a publishing house that issued popular works in the Universal Library series. The same Antik spouses were the heads of the Neptun joint-stock company, which produced films. The Antik couple was fond of Mayakovsky and valued his poetic talent. Having learned of his desire to work in cinema, they offered the poet to write a script, promising to make a film based on it. (Polianovskii 1958, 34)

This account is confirmed by another person from Mayakovsky's circle at that time, Soviet writer, translator and literary critic Sergei Spasskii. According to him, Mayakovsky declared his desire to act in films from the stage of the underground Poets' Café in early 1918: 'Mayakovsky's exclamation was heard by the owners of the Neptun film company. It was

the Antik family, the publisher of the once famous Universal Library. The family frequented the café – father, mother and son’ (Spasskii 1963, 175).

At Neptun, Mayakovsky starred in three films based on his own scripts. On one of the films – extant *The Lady and the Hooligan* (*Baryshnia i khuligan*, 1918) – he is also billed as a co-director with director Evgenii Slavinskii. The direction of the other two films he heavily influenced – to the displeasure of the official director Nikandr Turkin appointed by the company.

Poet, writer and translator Lev Ostroumov, whose scripts were adapted by Neptun, recalled learning of the studio’s founding in 1917:

The publisher of the popular Universal Library (yellow pocketbooks), Antik opened his own film company Neptun, setting himself the task of releasing only literary significant films. [...] Antik’s wife, a very educated and cultured woman, took an active part in the work. (Ostroumov 2007, 255)

Multiple accounts attest to ‘Antik’s wife’s’ high involvement in the company’s affairs, and some directly state that the couple ran Neptun together. According to cameraman and director Evgenii Slavinskii, it was owing to her that Mayakovsky got to work in cinema: ‘The chairman of the joint-stock company Neptun was entrepreneur Voldemar Antik. [...] Antik’s wife held progressive views and had influence on the affairs of the film factory. On her initiative, the film factory invited V. V. Mayakovsky’ (Slavinskaia 1979, 139).

Actor Oleg Frelikh recollected that ‘co-owner of the film atelier, or, as the people who worked there called her, “the mistress” arrived on set and suggested that Frelikh, as an experienced lead actor, instructs Mayakovsky on how to perform a love scene (Polianovskii 1958, 44). And while Frelikh presents this as an example of a rather annoying interference in a creative process, it demonstrates madame Antik’s involvement in the production in the role that may be defined today as that of a producer.

All the above statements reiterate that the founders of Neptun film company were also the owners of the publishing house responsible for the highly successful ‘Universal Library’ series of affordable pocketbooks. However, this common assumption is false.

The Pol’za publishing house was founded in 1906 by Vladimir (Woldemar) Moritzovich (Moiseevich) Antik (1882–1972). In 1915 its name was changed to a joint stock company Universal Library. After the October Revolution of 1917, the publishing house was municipalised and eventually taken over by Gosizdat, the State Publishing House of the RSFSR, where Vladimir Antik continued to work for some years. He lived in Moscow with his second wife Aleksandra (Slava Iankelevna) Antik, born Sokolina (TsGA Moskv 2372/1/27: 21) and daughter Lydia, a chemist who in her later years managed to create a comprehensive publication catalogue of her father’s highly influential publishing house.

Meanwhile, the charter of the joint stock company Neptun signed on 27 June 1917 lists two founders: attorney-at-law Pavel Samoilovich Antik and Moscow merchant Gerasim Fomich Lezin (Neptun 1917). Their enterprise was established for the acquisition, construction and operation of cinemas and theatres of miniatures, as well as the production and sale of films and cinema screens. Thus, ‘Father, mother and son’ that frequented Poets’ Café and admired Mayakovsky in 1917, were Pavel, Anna Vasil’evna Antik, born Kvartirova, and their son Vasilii Pavlovich Antik.

Film producer Pavel Antik was, in fact, a first cousin once removed of publisher Vladimir Antik. Pavel’s father Samuil Antik was a brother of Efroim Antik – the father of Moisei

(Moritz) Antik, who was in turn the father of Vladimir Antik (KRVA 61/1/1505: 4). They likely knew each other personally, even though it is difficult to verify it definitively: they were registered as one extended family in Kovno (now Kaunas, Lithuania) in 1884, but the entry in the revision book mentions that Pavel's father's real address at the time was in Saint Petersburg. There is no clear evidence of Pavel being involved in Vladimir's publishing business and vice versa; however, the association with the undeniably successful and reputable Universal Library series (even if illusory) could prove useful and lend weight to the new film company in artistic circles.

The founders' early years

Pavel Samoilovich (Samuilovich) Antik ([Figure 1](#)) was born on 6 January 1869 in Vilna (now Vilnius, Lithuania). He graduated from the 6th St Petersburg Gymnasium, and in 1891, from the Demidov Lyceum with a candidate of law degree. From 1894, he worked as assistant to an attorney in Astrakhan. In 1908, he transferred to the class of Moscow attorneys, and from that time on held the position of sworn solicitor (Pobedonostsev and Godzevich [1909](#), 74).



Figure 1. Pavel Antik (Source: Pobedonostsev and Godzevich [1909](#), 74).



Figure 2. Anna 'Niusha' Antik. Courtesy of Natalia Deruguine.

Not much is known about the background of Anna Vasil'evna Kvartirova (Figure 2). According to different sources, she may have been born 26 February 1882 in Taganrog (misspelled as 'Tangarog') or in 1885 in Kharkiv (AN 19,940,433/4, Dossier 337) – the latter does not match the year indicated on her gravestone. The name of Vasilii Akimovich Kvartirov can be found in the 1895 Commercial and Industrial Address Book in the section listing Tobacco Businesses in Kharkiv (Arkhangel'skii 1895, 281). From the same year, there is a registry entry about a Jewish household of Vulf, son of Akim Kvartirov, 43 years of age, living in Kharkiv with his wife Klara, daughter of Mikhel, 35 years of age (DAKhO 52/2/130: 288). Crimean register books contain information about the marriage of Vasilii Iakimov Kvartirov to Klara Mikhailovna in 1879.¹ Her name, if made more Orthodox-sounding, matches that of Klavdia Mikhailovna Kvartirova, a godmother (and presumably a grandmother) of Anna Antik's nephew born in Moscow in 1911. At that point, the family is described as 'of Orthodox faith' (TsGA Moskv 2126/2/211: 101).

Anna's grandniece Natalia Deruguine recalls that Anna, or Niusha as she was known to her close ones, was an *artistka* – a performer, who, to the best of her knowledge, danced.² However, no one in the family remembers whether Anna performed professionally. In Moscow, the Antiks became owners or co-owners of several cinemas. According to the press, Pavel Antik was the owner of Modern cinema (Anon 1917a, 74). Film historian Semen Ginzburg calls him the owner of Kino-Ars, one of the biggest and most luxurious cinemas (Ginzburg 1963, 324). However, it was Anna Vasil'evna, 'wife of a candidate of



Figure 3. Aleksandr Kvartirov (Alexander Kwartiroff). Courtesy of Natalia Deruguine.

law', who was listed as one of the founders of the trading house, established for managing co-owned cinema-theatres Union, Stella and Velikan (Anon 1914, 3). Already in 1912, Pavel Antik participated in the creation of the union of cinema-theatre-owners (Anon 1912) and served as its chairman for several years. One of the signatures under the protocol of the union's establishing meeting belongs to engineer Aleksandr Vasil'evich Kvartirov, Anna's brother (Figure 3).

Aleksandr Kvartirov was an engineer who graduated from St Petersburg Institute of Railway Engineers of Emperor Alexander I in 1904 (TsGIA 381/1/593). After moving to Moscow, he took part in building cinemas Kino-Ars and Velikan (L-r 1924). At Neptun, he at some point held a position of the head of the production department (L-r 1924). The Antiks and the Kvartiroyvs lived and worked closely together. In 1912, both families resided at Sretenskii Boulevard 6 in the Rossiia Insurance Society building (*Vsia Moskva* 1912, 386; 1041). They were registered together again in 1916 and 1917, at Mamonovskii pereulok 12, right next to the Kino-Ars cinema engineered by Kvartirov and at one point co-owned by the Antiks (*Vsia Moskva* 1916, 327; 756; *Vsia Moskva* 1917, 392; 1062).

Foundation of Neptun

Right after the February revolution, people employed in the film industry, as in many other industries, set out to unionise. The initiative to unite all film professionals, from company-owners to set workers, was taken in early March 1917 by the All-Russian Society of Electric Theatre Owners (Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo vladel'tsev elektricheskikh teatrov), headed by Pavel Antik. These initial attempts to find a common ground were marked by confrontations between the representatives of labour and of capital – and Antik was one of the most prominent voices of the latter group. After the failure to find common ground and the disbandment of the newly formed union, he was active in other professional associations, like the Council of Film Organisations (Sovet kinematograficheskikh organizatsii) or the Association of Film Releasing Societies (Ob'edinenie kinoizdatel'skikh obshchestv). Antik consistently protested the cuts in electricity to cinemas, the requisition of enterprises by the government, and lobbied other policies that would later be deemed by Soviet film historians as a counter-revolutionary sabotage (Ginzburg 1963, 324–332; Vishnevskii 1958, 47).

Neptun emerged at the very same time, in March–April 1917, absorbing already existing companies: Aleksandr Bishov's (Bishof's) and G.I. Shirman's Pobeda and Vekshtein's project A. i V. (Standart) (Anon 1917b, 19–20). Khanzhonkov (1937, 107) provides a different account, naming three young studios Obnovlenie, Svoboda and Khimera; however, their merger with Neptun is not confirmed by the press. The company was registered in Moscow's Glinischevskii pereulok 4 (the former address of Pobeda) and owned (in some sources, rented) a filming pavilion in Samarskii pereulok 22 (Anon 1917c). Pobeda was taken over together with all its projects that were already in development, which provided an initial influx of creatives like Vladimir Gardin, whose contract with Pobeda obliged him to direct films for Neptun (Gardin 1949, 149). It is possible that Antik had previously been involved in one of the companies he acquired: some scholars suggest that 'A. i V.' may stand for 'Antik and Vekshtein' (Deriabin and Fomin 2004, 214). However, Neptun, was an enterprise of a different scale: soon transformed into a joint-stock company with a fixed capital of two million roubles, it quickly established itself as a major industry player.

Aleksandr Khanzhonkov recollected that the best employees of many film companies were approached by representatives of Neptun and offered incredibly high salaries. Khanzhonkov's top director Evgenii Bauer agreed to leave the firm for Neptun, taking some of the most valuable employees with him. Luckily for Khanzhonkov, after several days Bauer returned together with most of the people who had followed him and shared that the new company gave the impression of running their business carelessly (Khanzhonkov 1937, 108). Neptun managed to attract directors Vladimir Gardin, Mikhail Doronin, Nikandr Turkin, Olga Preobrazhenskaia and Nikolai Malikov, while renowned Vladimir Egorov acted as an artistic director and set designer. The company's troupe (Figure 4) included several actors of the Moscow Art Theatre: Leonid Leonidov (first time on screen), Gregori Chmara, Vasilii Vasil'ev, Aleksandra Rebikova. Besides engaging already experienced screen actors like Oleg Frelikh, Lidiia Terek, Konstantin Dzhemarov and Mikhail Narokov, Neptun attempted to jumpstart the careers of its own stars, inviting the singer of the famous cabaret *The Bat* Lidiia Kolumbova, young talent Margarita Kibal'chich and aspiring actress Avgusta Merkurova (born Sapir). Promoted by Neptun



Figure 4. 'A group of Neptune atelier's actors at the script reading. In the background is the set for the film-play *Thais*.' Source: *Kino-teatr* 4 (1918): 15.

under the stage name Asta Grai, Merkurova was the wife of famous sculptor-monumentalist Sergei Merkurov, who wrote some of Neptune's scripts.

Neptune's filmography lists only a couple of comedies focusing predominantly on dramas and adaptations of reputable literature. Besides scripts by Mayakovsky, Neptune advertised adaptations of works by the authors like Knut Hamsun, Anatole France, Henry Bataille, Stanisław Przybyszewski, Guy de Maupassant and Oscar Wilde; the adaptation of the latter's *Salome*, however, was apparently never released. Many of the original scripts were composed by the company's directors Turkin and Gardin, while others were outsourced to prolific female scriptwriters Olga Blazhevich and Zoia Barantsevich. With particular pride, Neptune advertised an adaptation of the first-ever film script by Alexei Tolstoi – Vladimir Gardin's *Current of Love* (*Tok Liubvi*, 1918). The company attempted to win a broader audience with a high-budget adaptation of Maurice Leblanc's detective novel – Mikhail Doronin's partially extant *The Last Adventures of Arsene Lupin* (*Poslednie prikliucheniia Arsena Liupena*, 1918) – that, however, received rather mixed reviews: 'The performers spin so fast, roll around the floor in fights and in every other part die at the hands of some strange character' (Brender 1918, 7). Another large-scale production was the adaptation of Anatole France's novel about a Christian saint from Roman Egypt – Nikandr Turkin's epic *Thais* (*Tais*, 1918), also released to moderate reviews (Vishnevskii 1961, 296). However, the company's more modest dramas were often praised: 'The latest films have demonstrated both the company's taste in literature and its ability to respond to contemporary life without violating artistic objectives' (Brender 1918, 7). Films referenced as examples of contemporary relevance were Turkin's drama *Ania Kraeva* (1918) about the pressing 'woman question' and the same director's *That Which Is More Valuable*

None of the promises made at the beginning of the season about an interesting repertoire led by outstanding artistic forces have been fulfilled so far. [. . .] It is sad to note such results for one of the largest film companies, from which so much was expected at the beginning of the season and nothing was received. (Anon 1918c)

Neptun had its primary production base in Moscow, but also produced at least three films in Kyiv in 1917 and at least one in Odesa in 1918 (Mislavskii 2005, 173–174). According to film scholar Volodymyr Myslavskyi, in the summer of 1917 ‘the major film producer Pavel Antik moved his production to Kyiv’ (ibid.). However, it is more likely that in the summer 1917 the newly formed Neptun was not transferring to Kyiv indefinitely but instead exploring various possibilities and making a name for itself through the wide geography of filming. The company’s promotional materials of the time advertise ‘six big pictures’ being shot ‘in the Caucasus and the Black Sea coast’ (Anon 1917c). After the production of the three films in Kyiv, the company’s collective returned to Moscow and produced around 20 films there. The time of the mass exodus of Moscow film companies to Ukraine would come some months later, after the Bolsheviks took over.

After the October Revolution

In March 1918, in celebration of the five-year anniversary of the Society of Cinema-theatre Owners, a special delegation visited Antik and presented him with a certificate styled as a 15th-century scroll declaring him the first Honorary Member of the Society and ordering ‘to place his portrait within the walls of the Union for all time’ (Anon 1918a). Within about a month, Antik had to resign from the position of the chairman due to an internal conflict in the organisation. Yesterday’s major industry players were losing control over rapidly developing events which just recently had seemed to promise great opportunities.

From the beginning of 1918, due to the increasing number of seizures of private film companies and rumours of imminent nationalisation, many film entrepreneurs, under the pretext of filming on southern locations, hastened to take their crews, equipment, and film supplies to the south, where the Bolsheviks had not yet consolidated their power. Considering this as sabotage and theft, in March 1918, the revolutionary authorities in Moscow introduced the so-called workers’ control over the film industry and obliged the owners of film companies to report on all their equipment and property (Aksel’rod 1958, 26–27). An inventory of Neptun’s laboratory is dated March – April 1918.⁴ In parallel with attempts to keep its Moscow enterprise, the company was apparently exploring alternative operating options, looking west. In June 1918, Neptun signed a lease agreement with the Ministry of Public Education of Ukraine for a pavilion formerly belonging to Kyiv Svetoten’ studio that had stood idle since the end of 1917 (Mislavskii 2005, 132). Besides monthly rent, the company undertook to produce Ukrainian films for the Ministry; however, nothing came out of this agreement. In the same June 1918, in Moscow, the directorate of Neptun refused to submit to the new working conditions after the introduction of the workers’ control, which led to a conflict with the company’s factory committee (Vishnevskii 1958, 57). The protocol of the meeting between the two sides of the conflict mentions ‘the two persons belonging to the Antik family who are not employed by the enterprise’ – likely Anna and

Aleksandr – not participating in the voting amid protesting shouts from Neptun's employees (Anon 1918b, 17). The protocol was published in the only issue of *Nemoe Iskusstvo* (*Mute Art*) film magazine – the periodical founded by Neptun but discontinued after the very first issue. Soon, Neptun was reformed:

The sovereign owner of Neptun, P. Antik was one of the most dexterous, intelligent businessmen, hostile towards the Soviet power [...]. Soon Neptun turned into the labour association Kinokultura at the Moscow Central Workers' Cooperative. Its board members were K. Stanislavsky, V. Nemirovich-Danchenko, L. Leonidov, A. Sumbatov-Yuzhin, P. Sadovsky and many others. But the names and the big title were just a screen hiding the same Antik. (Sobolev 1962)

This takeover likely happened in August 1918: around that time the Moscow Central Workers' Cooperative (MTsRK) became a shareholder in the Moscow Art Theatre (now also a cooperative society), to which all the famous board members belonged. The condition for subsidising the theatre was its obligation to give regular performances for workers and participate in MTsRK's cinematographic studio (Radishcheva 1999, 32) – this likely was Neptun. The memoirs of filmmaker and producer Moisei Aleinikov confirm it: '[t]he film production of the MTsRK was created on the basis of Neptun film factory, acquired from the trading house Antiki and Co [sic]' (Aleinikov 1996). In the end of September 1918, Neptun's building was sealed (Deriabin and Fomin 2004, 264).

It is hard to deduce whether Pavel Antik was still highly involved in the film studio's affairs after officially stepping down, but documents from the personal archive of director Vladimir Kasyanov analysed by historian Romil Sobolev suggest that Aleksandr Kvartirov was still a member of Neptun's Artistic and Literary Commission at the end of 1919 (Sobolev 1962). In any case, the company no longer had much creative freedom. According to a film catalogue (Macheret 1961), all the films produced by Neptun in 1919, except for one, were agitfilms (agitation films) commissioned either by the Moscow Film Committee or by All-Russian Photo-Cinema-Department of the People's Commissariat of Education (VFKO). The sole exception was Mikhail Narokov's *Doctor Pascal* (*Doktor Paskal'*, 1919), an adaptation of a novel by Émile Zola. The acts on the requisition of Neptun's equipment are dated February – March 1919.⁵ Around the same time, the Emergency Commission for Electricity Supply of Moscow decided to temporarily stop the operation of all cinemas.

In August 1919, all private film enterprises were nationalised by the Soviet authorities. Vishnevskii's (1961) and other (Macheret 1961) catalogues lists all four films developed by MTsRK (three of them never to be released) as productions of Burevestnik. The highly turbulent post-revolutionary circumstances do not allow us to trace many landmarks indefinitely, but it is likely that this short-lived film studio Burevestnik was the one Neptun was transformed into at some point in 1919. In 1920, the crisis in the film industry reached its peak: almost complete absence of raw stock, acute shortage of electricity, economic devastation, and decline of production facilities. Hopes for the imminent collapse of the Bolshevik regime were fading. The Antiks (Figure 6) and the Kvartiroy fled the country (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Pavel and Anna Antik. Courtesy of Natalia Deruguine.



Figure 7. Travelling documents of the Kwartiroff family. Courtesy of Natalia Deruguine.

Exile in Germany

In 1921, Pavel, now Paul, and Anna Antik settled down in Berlin, at Kurfürstenstraße 126 (*Berliner Adreßbuch* 1924, 45). Aleksandr Kvartirov, now Alexander Kwartiroff, together with his wife Natalia, nine-year-old son Alexei (Alexis) and four-year-old daughter Marina took up a residence at Königgrätzer Straße, 78 (*Berliner Adreßbuch* 1924, 1678). The two families might have had reasons to choose Berlin over other destinations popular among

exiled natives of the Russian Empire. The Berlin Commercial Register lists a 1919-founded private bank Antik & Co., one of the partners of which is Dr Jefim Antik, whose name matches that of Pavel's brother (*BHR* 1921, 11).

Vasilii, or Wassili, Antik left the former Russian Empire in May 1921 together with Maxim Gorky's son Maxim Peshkov, his future wife Nadezhda 'Timosha' Vvedenskaia, artist Ivan Rakitskii and the daughter of legendary opera singer Fedor Chaliapin, Lydia (Gor'kii 2009, 400). In July 1921, Vasilii and Lydia married in Latvia and later that month arrived in Germany (NARA Philadelphia 4,713,410/21). Officially, Lydia Chaliapine divorced Vasilii Antik in France in 1924 (NARA Philadelphia 4,713,410/21). However, the couple separated much earlier, after less than a year. In her memoirs, Lydia devoted exactly one sentence to her marriage to Vasilii, not even mentioning his name: 'My personal life, or rather my marriage, turned out badly – I divorced my husband' (Shaliapina 1997, 158). Some insight into their separation can be found in a letter that Maxim Gorky wrote to Fedor Chaliapin on 15 May 1922:

Probably, the Antiks wrote to you that Lydia left them, and I am sure that they slandered her. I advise you: do not trust these swindlers. They were counting on 'doing business' by speculating on the name of Chaliapin, exploiting your daughter, and Lydia acted quite sensibly by not allowing them to do so. To slander your name in enterprises of dubious nature is a nasty business. Recently, the attitude of young Antik towards Lydia has taken on the character of the most vulgar mistreatment. (Gor'kii 2009, 54)

After signing the letter and indicating a date and a place, Gorky added a post scriptum: 'Don't trust the Antiks. Swindlers'. Gorky's son Maxim Peshkov also referred to the separation between Lydia and Vasilii in a letter from May 1922:

Lida Chaliapina divorced her husband, who did not receive any material benefit from the marriage, and since Lida refused to align herself with the dodgy Antik family, he began to disappear from home, forbade her to return after 9PM, etc. (Gor'kii 2009, 400)

These records – no matter how critical they may be – are especially valuable in the absence of other sources. The fact that they refer not to Paul Antik alone but to 'the Antiks' in the plural is the only account that indirectly suggests that Anna might have been involved in the family's endeavours in Germany as she had been in the Russian Empire. Unfortunately, this period is poorly documented even compared to the turbulent revolutionary years. There seem to be no memoirs that could shed light on the inner workings of the family's businesses, and the scarce press reports tend to fail to mention the contribution of women.

Based on the ever-present false premise that Vasilii was a son of the Universal Library publisher Vladimir Antik, the editor of Gorky's letters speculates in the endnotes that the Antiks were trying to pressure Lydia into participating in a dubious 'publishing project' (Gor'kii 2009, 400). As Lydia had previously, back in the Russian Empire, tried her hand at film acting, the above-mentioned project more likely had something to do with cinema. In fact, Gorky's disdainful attitude towards the family's endeavours rather points towards cinema. According to film scholar Natalia Nusinova, '[t]he social status of a filmmaker in the émigré community was dramatically lowered. [...] In literary and theatrical circles it was considered good manners to despise filmmakers' (Nusinova 2003, 42–43).

Dubious in nature or not, the industrious Antik family were indeed full of plans. Already in 1921, Pavel Antik tried to gain a foothold in the German film industry. In April, the Berlin émigré newspaper *Rul'* reported that Antik became the head of the newly formed film company *Passant-Film-Gesellschaft* (Anon 1921, 4). Its first production was set to be a film *Suicide's Skeleton* (*Skelet samoubitsy*), starring German actors Sascha Gura and Robert Scholz; however, the film was never released, and the company did not leave many traces.

Already a year later, in spring 1922, Antik became the head of a new film company, *Wiking Film AG*, registered at Leipziger Strasse 114 (*BHR* 1923, 1126). The émigré press announced that the company bought from producer Iosif Ermoliev (Joseph Jermolieff) the rights to distribute his films shot in the Russian Empire and France (Anon 1922, 14). In the same spring of 1922, Antik co-founded the Union of Russian Cinematography Professionals in Germany, together with director Yakov Protazanov, Ermoliev and other well-known expatriate film producers (Iangirov 2007, 86). Alexander Kwartiroff is listed among the members of the Union. The meetings took place in café Landgraf (Kurfürstenstraße 75), the centre of émigré literary life of the time.

Besides distributing other companies' films, *Wiking Film* launched its own production. In 1922, it released its first film – Artur Retzbach-Erasiny's *Escape in the Marriage: The Big Flirt* (*Die Flucht in die Ehe: Der grosse Flirt*, 1922). Alexander Kwartiroff acted as both producer and cinematographer for this project. In 1923, the company produced two more films with predominantly German cast and crew: Rudolf Oppelt's *Judgment of God* (*Gottesgericht*, 1923) and Fritz Hofbauer's *Thou shalt not kill* (*Du sollst nicht töten*, 1923). While many émigré filmmakers from the Russian Empire produced mostly adaptations of classical Russian literature and engaged familiar expatriate actors, *Wiking Film* seemed oriented towards integrating into the German film industry.

They were involved in other industries as well: in 1922, Antik co-founded *Walpa Im- und Export GmbH* and Kwartiroff co-founded *Trikota* joint-stock company for knitwear and warp-knitted goods (*BHR* 1923, 1115; 1087). In 1923, Antik acquired *Silesia Financing LLC* (*BHR* 1924, 1180). Not listed as the founder or partner, Kwartiroff, together with another immigrant from the Russian Empire, Wolf (Volf) Ajolo, was reported to financially back the Berlin cabaret theatre *Die Gondel* (The Gondola), co-created by German artist and director Paul Leni and composer Hans May in 1923 (Bock 1986, 25). Collaboration between Leni and Kwartiroff extended to cinema. Since 1920, Paul Leni had been developing a film project for which he had created around 500 design sketches. Unable to finance the production through his own film company that failed in 1922, he turned to Kwartiroff (Tortolani and Norden 2021, 16).

In 1923, specifically for Leni's film a new company was set up – the resurrected *Neptun*. *Neptun-Film Aktiengesellschaft* was co-founded by Alexander Kwartiroff, Wolf Ajolo and Aron Kassel and registered at Königgrätzer Strasse 78 – the official domestic address of the Kwartiroff family (*BHR* 1924, 1072). Paul Antik was on the company's board (Bock 1986, 27). At *Neptun*, Alexander Kwartiroff produced the now-canonical German Expressionist film *Waxworks* (*Das Wachsfigurenkabinett*, 1924). Paul Leni's aesthetic vision defined the film's atmosphere, while Leo Birinski, in some sources credited as co-director, worked with the actors. The film was written by Henrik Galeen, scriptwriter of other notable Expressionist films like Paul Wegener's *Der Golem* (1920) and F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922). The cast featured some of the most popular

German actors of the time: Conrad Veidt, Werner Krauss, William Dieterle and Emil Jannings. The leading female role was played by Olga Belajeff – the émigrée actress who had worked in the Russian Empire under the screen name Olga Org. *Waxworks* consists of three fantasy segments, one of which presents a dark expressionistic interpretation of the Tsardom of Russia under the rule of Ivan the Terrible. Eventually screened in the new Soviet state, *Waxworks* is widely considered as an inspiration for Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (*Ivan Grozny*, 1945).

Kwartiroff is credited as the film's 'Produktionsleiter' – head of production or production manager. The frequent mention of his name in sources on *Waxworks* suggests that, besides handling the finances, he was directly involved in the production process. The film's executive architect Fritz Maurischat recalled: 'I can't remember ever being held back by Dr. Kwartiroff, the head of production. As before in *Gondel*, he gave me free rein [...], so that I could turn every one of Leni's designs [...] into reality' (Bock 1986, 166).

Waxworks was a hit and an international breakthrough for Paul Leni, who was soon after invited to Hollywood by Universal. The film's distribution in Germany was handled by UFA, the country's largest film company, while Wiking Film oversaw world rights sales. Sadly, Alexander Kwartiroff did not witness the success of his biggest film work. On 31 December 1923, not long after the film's principal production was completed, he died of severe pneumonia (L-r 1924).

Pavel Antik took over Neptun which, however, never produced another film. Already in 1926, it is reported to be in a process of liquidation (BHR 1926, 1124). Antik started to disband his other Berlin businesses too: *Passant-Film* and *Walpa* are marked as 'in liquidation' in 1925, *Sileasia* changed its owner in 1927–1928 (BHR 1925, 1140; 1297; BHR 1928, 1140). Around that time, he likely withdrew from another company he was involved in – *Spektator-Film GmbH*, which managed two Berlin cinemas, *Schillerkino* and *Kammerspiele*. This company, founded in November 1924, was a joint project of Paul Antik, film producer Antonina Khanzhonkova, Abram Gekhtman and A. Springfield. Apparently, the business was not going well (langirov 2007, 39). In August 1925, the partners had to gather at the same Orthodox cemetery in Tegel, where Alexander was buried (Figure 8), this time to bid farewell to Antonina Khanzhonkova. The last Antik company standing was *Wiking Film*: it is marked as put into liquidation only in the 1929 registry (BHR 1929, 1112). Paul Antik was winding up his affairs both in Germany and in cinema.

The two families parted ways for a while: Paul, Anna and Vasilii Antik moved to France, where Paul returned to the practice of law (Mnukhin, Avril', and Losskaia 2000, 64), while Kwartiroff's widow Natalia with children Alexei and Marina stayed in Berlin.

Second generation: Alexei and Marina Kwartiroff

After the death of Alexander and the Antiks' relocation to France, the Kwartiroff widow was not doing well financially in the inter-war Berlin. In 1932, the Kwartiroffs applied for urgent financial help to cover Marina's school admission fee, as the family had already been visited by a bailiff (UNAG C1257/153/178: 42).

In 1940, conservative Christian nationalist philosopher Ivan Ilyin wrote a letter to his regular correspondent, émigré writer Ivan Shmelyov:



Figure 8. Alexander Kwartiroff's grave in the Russian Orthodox cemetery in Tegel, Berlin. Photo by the author, 2025.

My friend! You have shown much kindness to my little Kwartirlings. Thank you for that! They wrote to me and literally thank God for the happiness of seeing and hearing you. They are both my students – they sat in my seminar for five years and developed and grew before my eyes. (Ilyin 2000, 289)

The loving nickname 'Kwartirlings' (*kvertiriata*) refers to Alexei/Alexis (1911–1992) and Marina (1916–2003) Kwartiroff. As a fierce anti-communist and right-wing conservative, Ilyin initially championed the National-Socialists' rise to power; however, already by the mid-1930s he himself was having troubles with the Gestapo. He managed to leave Germany for Switzerland with the help of Alexei Kwartiroff, who personally organised the secret transportation of Ilyin's belongings and obtained a visa for him despite the official travel ban (Kvartirov 1983, 137–139).

According to Alexei Kwartiroff, he and his sister met Ilyin in 1935, when he organised a youth club in Berlin with a regular seminar on spiritual topics. Kwartiroff described Ilyin's teachings as being 'in the Russian-national spirit', as opposed to the liberal views held by most of the émigré intellectuals (Kvartirov 1983, 134). In the following years, Marina and Alexei remained in Ilyin's closest circle, and after his death made decisive efforts to preserve his archive and library, which were eventually transferred to Russia in the 2000s.



Figure 9. Paul Antik, Natalia Kwartiroff, Alexei Kwartiroff, Anna Antik. Courtesy of Natalia Deruguine.

The Kwartiroff siblings are frequently mentioned in the correspondence of the above-mentioned Christian conservative writer Ivan Shmelyov. A prominent émigré author nominated for the Nobel prize in literature in 1931 and 1932 (the first time – by Thomas Mann), Shmelyov supported Nazi Germany's attack on the USSR, hoping for the fall of the Bolshevik regime. As he was based in Paris, it is possible to deduce from his letters that the Kwartiroffs (Figure 9) were sometimes visiting the city and staying in touch with the Antiks, their aunt and uncle. Shmelyov's letters reference Alexei coming to Paris to be in his aunt's care during an illness, a visit of the unnamed 'Marina's aunt' marked in the edition's endnote as an unidentified person, or the Kwartiroffs bringing their relatives to his public reading (Shmelev and Bredius-Subbotina 2005, 64; 63; 32).

As Germany's defeat and the advancement of the Soviet army towards Berlin became apparent, the Kwartiroffs fled the country and joined Anna and Paul Antik in Paris.

Second generation: Vassili Antik

At some point in the 1920s, Paul and Anna's son Vasilii Antik, sometimes spelled Vassili Antig, acquired a Persian passport that was very handy for travelling (Figure 10). After the collapse of the Russian Empire, White émigrés became officially stateless and, in most cases, got stuck in their first port of entry, unable to get visas for travelling further. Persian passports were relatively easily to obtain for people of means and connections.

CC. 2240259

NOM ANTIK

Prénoms VASSILI

Né le 23 AOUT 1902

à ASTRAKAN

de PAUL

et de ANNA KWARTIROFF

Nationalité IRANIENNE

Situation de famille : célibataire, marié, veuf, divorcé (1)

Date d'entrée en France 22 4 47

Durée de séjour ininterrompu en France _____

Profession _____

Adresse 28 RUE H G FONTAINE
ASNIERES (SEIN)

Délivré le 10 AVRIL 1962

par M. Le Préfet de Police

Police Le Préfet de Police

Signature Blouquet

(1) Rayer les mentions inutiles

Figure 10. Vassili Antik's documents from the 1960s. Courtesy of Natalia Deruguine.

In letters to his then-fiancée Lydia dated December 1920, Vasili mentioned acting in a theatre in Riga (RGALI 912/4/1318: 3 v). From 1923, he mainly resided in France, which issued an expulsion order against him in 1934, subsequently revoking it in 1935 (here and throughout the whole paragraph: AN 19,940,433/4, Dossier 337). The documents accumulated by the Prefecture of Police during the proceedings chronicle Vassili's rather adventurous lifestyle. In 1925, he was officially banned from gambling and allowed to frequent casinos again 'on a trial basis' only five years later. The subject of numerous complaints for issuing bad cheques, Vassili reportedly managed to avoid trials by always compensating the complainants. In 1928, he was arrested for fraud but released just a month later. A short newspaper report on the case read 'Two foreign swindlers operating on the Stock Exchange arrested: they defrauded one million'.⁶ In 1931, he was reported by the American police as possessing jewellery from a major burglary in Paris, but the investigation revealed nothing suspicious. Similar suspicions regarding a jewellery affair were recorded again in 1939. But most importantly, the reports on Vassili's escapades reveal his involvement in the film industry. While vouching for him, writer and scriptwriter Henri Duvernois referenced Vassili's participation in the production of Georges Marret's film *Jeanne* (1934). According to the dossier, in 1933–1934, Antik was working as an assistant director for the French film companies Euréka and Gaby-Morlay. The latter bore the name of the famous French actress, Max Linder's co-star, who successfully transitioned to sound cinema. Described as her 'l'amant de cœur', Vassili was 'reportedly maintained by a star named Gaby, who rented him an apartment in the Trianon of Versailles' (AN 19,940,433/4, Dossier 337).⁷

From 1939 to 1942, his traces can be found in Portugal. Within these years, he indicated different occupations: first as merchant/businessman based in either France or Switzerland, at one point as a doctor (*medico*), and later as a head of cinema production based in Lisbon.⁸ In 1941, he was arrested and detained in Aljube and Caxias Prisons for five months, released and detained again for another month (ANTT PT/TT/PIDE/E/010/69/13683). The reasons behind his arrest remain unclear, especially since Aljube was mainly used for political prisoners. However, since Vassili was soon released, the charges could not have been grave. The most banal explanation would be Vassili remaining in Portugal beyond the permitted maximum of 30 days, which was a common ground for arrest of many foreigners coming to Lisbon in hope of leaving war-torn Europe by sea.

The next country where he can be traced is England. In autumn 1945, Vasilii married Frieda Potel in London (GRO 1945). Frieda's, or Freda's, maiden name was Wadiaeff/Vad'iaeva and married name Poteliakhoff/Poteliakhova (later abbreviated into Potel). These two famous Bukharan Jewish families were the wealthiest cotton industrialists in Kokand (modern Uzbekistan). Having fled the Russian Empire after the Revolution, Frieda eventually settled down in England, divorced her husband and opened a bridge and poker club in North London (Potel, *n.d.*). Frieda's descendants have vague memories of Vassili, who apparently remained her partner for a relatively short time. Frieda's granddaughter Helen Green,⁹ who was around four years old when Frieda and Vassili married, recalls believing that 'he was very rich as he had a big American car' and that he possibly left Frieda a house in the South of France as a part of the divorce settlement. Contrariwise, Helen's brother Stephen has the impression that Vassili 'took lots of her money and buggered off'.¹⁰

In 1947, Vassili filed for bankruptcy as a film producer in London.¹¹ It is difficult to trace his work as a producer, or to even confirm whether it amounted to any completed projects. Vassili's first cousin once removed and goddaughter Natalia Deruguine has never heard of his career in cinema.¹² According to her, Vassili was a high-profile painting dealer – at least in the period when he joined the rest of the family in France again. After marrying a Turkish dancer named Zuhra (or possibly Zuhre), Vassili, an avid gambler, got into debt and lost everything he owned. Fleeing from creditors, he moved to Vienna where his cousin Marina was living at the time. Vassili's goddaughter recollects that he was barely leaving the house in fear of creditors. That is where he died in 1969.

Paul Antik died in Asnières-sur-Seine in the north-western suburbs of Paris in 1954. Anna died three years later, in 1957. They were outlived by Natalia Kwartiroff, who died in 1981. The ashes of most of the Antik-Kwartiroff family members are buried in Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois Orthodox Cemetery near Paris (Figure 11).

Conclusion

As a company that entered the early film industry shortly before its ultimate decline, Neptun was nevertheless prolific, aiming for the niche of film adaptations of contemporary literature. With only five out of more than forty films currently considered extant or partially extant, it is hard to evaluate the quality and impact of most of Neptun's productions, but the involvement of many prominent artists makes the loss of the company's films truly regrettable. Meanwhile, the Berlin reincarnation of Neptun left an undeniable legacy in the form of the Expressionist classic *Waxworks*.



Figure 11. The tomb of the Antiks and Kwartiroffs. Les Amis de l'histoire de Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois. <https://www.cimetiere-russe.org/ru/tombe/4316>. Courtesy of the committee for the maintenance of Russian Orthodox Graves, the cemetery of Sainte Geneviève des Bois.

The case of Neptun provides yet another example of the producer's wife taking an active part and effectively co-running a film company with her spouse – the practice seems to be the rule rather than the exception in the imperial film industry. And while Anna's involvement in the Berlin film enterprises cannot be assessed, the crucial role of her brother, Berlin Neptun's co-founder Alexander Kwartiroff, is evident. Unfortunately, his up-and-coming career as a producer and a cameraman was tragically cut short. The biographies of their children also represent fascinating trajectories. The Antiks' son Vassili led an adventurous life all over Europe and at least for a while worked in the film industry as an assistant director and possibly a producer. Meanwhile, his cousins were not connected to cinema in any tangible way: the Kwartiroffs' children became the closest students of Ivan Ilyin and the keepers of his archive.

Notes

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2. Personal Communication (videocall), 4 March 2025.
3. *Daydreams* database: 'Simfoniia goria (1918)', <https://daydreams.museum/film/f061318ffd67b11bef3b208951663f55/?tab=libretto>.
4. See online catalogue: RGALI 989/1/78 'Oprosnyi list i opisi imushchestva laboratorii aktsionernogo obshchestva "Neptun"', 1918. <https://rgali.ru/storage-unit/3053562>.
5. See online catalogue: RGALI 989/1/149. 'Oprosnye listy i opisi imushchestva kino-atel'e aktsionernogo obshchestva "Neptun", udostovereniia i akty po rekvizitsii kinematograficheskikh apparatov', 1919. <https://rgali.ru/storage-unit/3053658>.
6. 'On arrête deux escrocs étrangers qui opéraient à la Bourse: Ils ont escroqué un million'.
7. ... 'serait entretenu par une star, prénommée Gaby, qui lui aurait loué un appartement au Trianon de Versailles'.
8. *Cascais Cultura*: Arquivo Histórico Digital. 2011. 'Antik, Vassili Paul.' <https://arquivodigital.cascais.pt/xarqweb/Result.aspx?id=15957&type=Autoridade>.
9. Personal message , 2 March 2025.
10. As per Stephen's nephew Daniel Green, personal message , 2 March 2025.
11. See online catalogue: National Archives' Website: Discovery. BT 226/5375. 'Antik V P: film producer, less than 50K', 1947. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C423226>.
12. Personal Communication (videocall), 4 March 2025.

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