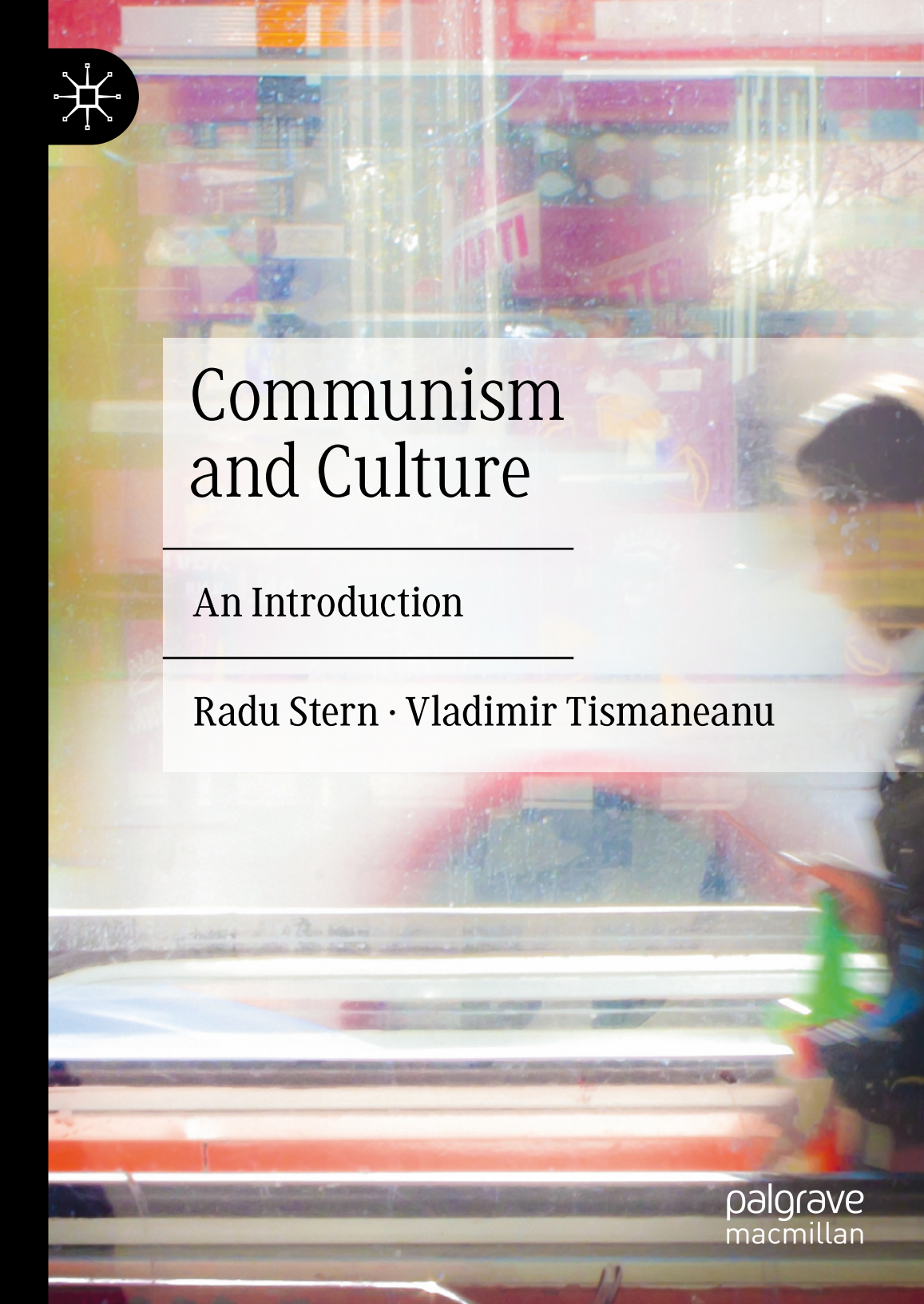

# Communism and Culture

## An Introduction

Radu Stern · Vladimir Tismaneanu

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*For our wives, Vanda and Mary, in love and gratitude.*

*—Radu Stern*
*—Vladimir Tismaneanu*

# Preface

Communism, in all its historical incarnations, was an attempt to make reality out of several political myths. First and foremost, it was a redemptive creed. In his book *The Captive Mind* (1953), Czesław Miłosz called the New Faith. It invoked rationality and even scientific status but was in fact what Feuerbach had called, referring to Hegel, a form of rationalized mysticism. Following this line of thought, associated with Alain Besançon, Robert Conquest, Evgeny Dobrenko, Leszek Kolakowski, Stephen Kotkin, Martin Malia, Andrei Siniavski, Yuri Slezkine, and Robert C. Tucker, we have elaborated our own perspective. We see communism as a logocratic order in which ideology relies on what Weberian sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner called the paleo-symbolic emotional infrastructure made up of longings, passions, expectations, and illusions. Without grasping the meanings of these mythological constellations, one cannot make sense of the lyrical illusion, as Andre Malraux called this fascination with utopian radicalism.

As literary critic George Steiner emphasized years ago, communism, compared to fascism, exerted a significantly and dramatically more powerful influence on arts and artists. It was, or rather claimed to be, the legitimate heir to the humanist project of the Enlightenment. Communism is a universalistic worldview, fascism is a particularistic one. This is at least part of the explanation of communism's appeals.

Another factor that surely contributed to its appeal was that communism provided simple "explanations" to the most complex phenomena.

Suddenly, the complicated world and even the universe became clear and easy to understand. History of philosophy? The struggle between materialism and idealism! History? It is the history of class struggle! The sense of history? It's simple, it's bringing us to communism! The communist utopia promised eternal and universal happiness. How could one refuse paradise?

However, chiliastic utopias beget millenarian omelets. Polish poet Aleksander Wat (1900–1967) drew some illuminating lessons from his experiences under totalitarian regimes. One of them was linked to the Devil's ability to posture as the carrier of a noble cause. We can call this behavioral pathology romantic masquerading, a mannerism of hypocrisy. Listen to Wat: "In 1934 I was a sympathizer yet still fairly active; I talked with the Warsaw correspondent of Pravda about the slanders by the bourgeois press, i.e., the extermination of five million Ukrainian peasants during collectivization. He was intelligent, sensitive, and deeply kind-hearted, and he answered, 'What do you want? You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs.' I lost my appetite for millenarian omelets, and a few years later my friend found himself among the broken eggs."

Sixty years later, Isaiah Berlin used the omelet metaphor again. In his speech "A Message to the 21st Century," given at the University of Toronto in 1994, the British historian of ideas denounced the evils of totalitarian thinking: "… One cannot have everything one wants—not only in practice but even in theory. The denial of this, the search for a single, overarching ideal because it is the one and only true one for humanity, invariably leads to coercion. And then to destruction, blood—eggs are broken, but the omelet is not in sight, there is only an infinite number of eggs, human lives, ready for the breaking. And in the end, the passionate idealists forget the omelet, and just go on breaking eggs."

The first communist leaders were convinced they were acting in the sense of history. One may wonder how much Lenin considered his own voluntarism a truly historical law. Stalin did not have moments of doubt, he was certain. Berlin rightly pointed out the link between this pretense of infallibility and violence. Ossified into dogma under Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot communism had been—and in China and North Korea still is—the contrary of freethinking. The abandonment of pluralism of thought, Berlin warned, generates an exorbitant price to pay.

Yet there was one certitude that caused more broken eggs than the others: the Bolsheviks' excessive ambition. They were convinced that it is possible to change human nature. If God did not create man, they

would succeed to create the New Man, an ideal superior being that had the qualities that enabled him to live in the communist ideal society.

Communism was a political, social, economic, cultural, and anthropological project. It was/is based on the conviction that culture reflects power relations and therefore a new social order is unthinkable without a new culture. To build it, the communist attempts appealed to deep-seated human yearnings for dignity and equality.

Communism was (and arguably still is, at least in China and North Korea) a civilizational perspective, strategy, yearning, and aspiration. To achieve its main goals, which definitely went beyond economic performances, cultural hegemony was needed. Russian Marxist Vladimir Lenin, Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Chinese Marxist Mao Zedong, and Argentine-Cuban Marxist Ernesto "Che" Guevara understood this imperative and acted accordingly.

The book is a comprehensive exploration of the relation captured in its title. It is called an introduction because we are entirely aware of the many ramifications of our main theme. It aims to provide the reader with the analytical compass needed for grasping the relationships between utopian dreams, cultural fervor, dogmatic zeal, millenarian ecstasy, and revolutionary anthropological project meant to bring about the New Man. It is both a historical guide and a conceptual map. We tried to make it accessible for the Communism 101-course students without conceding to reductive simplifications.

St. Legier, Switzerland — Radu Stern
College Park, USA — Vladimir Tismaneanu

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# Contents


CHAPTER 1

# Communism and Culture

Generally, the building of communism has been described as a gigantic social experiment. Some authors asserted even that it was the most radical social experiment ever attempted. However, *stricto sensu*, the building of communism was not a genuine experiment at all. The Bolsheviks were not exploring the future as true researchers would do, without knowing beforehand what they would discover. If the other two totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, Italian fascism and German Nazism, had expressed quite a vague idea about the time to come, a kind of grotesque re-enactment of the Roman empire for the first, and a rhetoric and nebulous one-thousand years Reich (for the second) the communist *vulgata* offered a by far more comprehensive view. They had an ideological crystal ball that gave them a precise forecast of the future. From a teleological perspective, militants were instructed that the starting point was a revolution, an inevitable and imminent process, which will necessarily make capitalism collapse. According to Marx, the global revolution would bring about an egalitarian society. After a transition period called socialism, the perfect communist society will inevitably follow, which will not last only a millennium but for eternity. It was an infinite eternal project.

Communism implied necessarily the end of history: if the historical change was determined by the class struggle, as Marx stated in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), then it was no longer possible in a classless society. So, the road to this paradise on earth was a marked path with a



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definite end, only the methods to reach there were experimental, and, in this field, culture was given an essential role.

Communism's main goal was not merely to replace the capitalist economy (mode of production) with a superior, better organized, more efficient one. In Marx's view, the economic transformation was the precondition for an apocalyptic change in the very nature of the human being, what is often described as the human nature or essence. Like Friedrich Nietzsche, Marx claimed humanity was entering a new stage, defined by the advent of the New Man, the Super Man. It was thus a cosmic mutation, an anthropological revolution, the "leap into the kingdom of freedom."

Marx was a dialectical materialist or a materialist dialectician. In several classic statements, he highlighted the primacy of the economic structure underlying an existing society over the world of ideas, symbols, social relations, and cultural institutions. The economic matrix of society was the base on which an entire universe of ideas and institutions functioned as the superstructure. A Hegelian dialectician, Marx rejected a mechanistic connection between the two: The base determined the superstructure, Being determined Consciousness, the material conditions determined the spiritual ones, but not rigidly, automatically. The relationship, according to the founder of historical materialism was one of mediated determination. These mediations (in German *Vermittlungen*) are always the guarantee of what Marx regarded as the relative autonomy of the superstructures. His writings on art are telltale in this respect. The ancient Greek tragedies were for him the expressions of the social environment but also immortal archetypes of the human condition in general. His favorite ancient hero was Prometheus whom he identified with in his rebellion against the abhorred existing (and unjust) order.

The imminent global proletarian revolution would bring about a new social structure, new economic relations, and, crucially important a new culture. Material changes are extremely critical, but a cultural breakthrough is needed for the communist revolution to succeed. The new material civilization would remain a simple skeleton without the new culture. For Marx and his faithful followers, the embryo of this new culture was what they called the proletariat's class consciousness. The role of the vanguard Party, argued Lenin in *What is To Be Done?* (1902) was to instill revolutionary consciousness into the oppressed proletariat, to transform the workers from a class in itself into a class for itself. Culture becomes therefore a continuous confrontation between bourgeois and

proletarian ideologies. There is no "objective truth." It is true whatever corresponds to the interests of the revolutionary class.

As a Marxist—and he definitely was one—Lenin saw himself as fulfilling the Prophet Marx's behest (the famous Thesis 11 on Feuerbach). Thus, his purpose was not to interpret the world but to change it.

Lenin's political voluntarism was rooted in the Russian revolutionary tradition with its utopian beliefs and the exaltation of revolutionary will. He held in high esteem the heritage of *Narodnaia Volia* (People's Will), one of the major revolutionary groups that preceded Russian Marxism's birth. Yet, he espoused historical materialism and spelled out the role of objective conditions in the development of revolutionary practice. This orthodox Marxism would not in any way justify a Russian communist revolution before such a scenario would occur in the industrially developed West. Lenin and his followers (the Bolsheviks) were still members of the supra-national family of parties and movements known as the Second International.

Grasping the meanings of what can be called Lenin's century implies a work of comprehension, and understanding of the passions, pathologies, cleavages, and fractures unleashed by World War I and the Russian revolutions of February and October 1917. The cult of History merged with the mystique of the future and the exaltation of the creative power of destruction: "In fact, all early-twentieth-century revolutionaries, wherever they found themselves on the class-as-nation to nation-as-class continuum, shared a loathing for the world of old age, decay, effeminacy, corruption, selfishness, irony, artificiality, and cowardly compromise (including liberalism, parliamentarism, and democracy). Opposing them were the ideals of vengeance, violence, masculinity, simplicity, sincerity, certainty, self-sacrifice, brotherhood, and faith in the coming renewal and necessity-as freedom."[1]

Lenin's main contribution that transformed Marxism into Marxism–Leninism was a "profoundly un-Marxist idea that a revolutionary Party could seize power and then create the necessary preconditions for the construction of socialism."[2] World War I and the breakdown of Czarism in February 1917 convinced Lenin that the revolution was not only

[1] Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 182.

[2] Vladimir Browkin, *Russia After Lenin: Politics, Culture, and Society,* London: Routledge. 1998, p. 5.

possible in Russia but also imminent and necessary. In an article published in *Pravda* on June 9, 1917, he maintained that: "If an iron chain is needed to hold a weight say, of 100 *poods,* what would happen if we replaced one of its links by a wooden one? The chain would break. No matter how strong and intact all the other links are, if the wooden link breaks the whole chain will burst. The same it's true in politics."[3] Contrary to Marx, Lenin advocated that the very backwardness of the Czarist Empire made it ripe for revolution. By doing this he abruptly changed the geography of the communist world. In this light, peripheral Russia replaced the developed West and became the new leading center that would determine the world's radiant future. His instrument to bring about the upheaval was the vanguard communist Party, the self-appointed phalanx of custodians of humanity's liberation. What was at stake was not just a replacement of a political regime with another one but mankind's collective salvation. Culture was one of the most influential means to accomplish this supreme objective, even before the new social and economic structures would mature. Creating the New Man was, in Lenin's political anthropology, the ultimate goal. A new material civilization could not exist without a new spiritual culture. Whoever controls the symbolic universe controls the material one as well.

One of the first Western authors who mentioned the subject, the Austrian historian René Fülop-Miller wrote about "the terrible hara-kiri the old man has to undergo in Russia."[4] He had to disappear and be replaced with the New Man, "a creature of the future which is called upon to take place of the individual" and transform him into the "collective man."

At the end of his *Literature and Revolution* ((1923), Leon Trotsky had expressed his vision about the re-shaping of man into the New Man. According to him, the New Man will harmonize itself and will achieve complete control of his biological functions such as "breathing, the circulation of the blood, digestion, or reproduction." Displacing "barbarian routine by scientific technique and religion by science", he will ameliorate his behavior and his psychic life, and diminish his fear of death. Even more, "Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise

[3] V.I. Lenin, "The Chain Is No Stronger Than Its Weakest Link", *Pravda*, June 9 (May 27) 1917. https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/may/27.htm.

[4] René Fülop-Miller, *The Mind and Spirit of Bolshevism*, London: Putnam and Sons, 1926, p. 12.

his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or if you please, a superman."[5]

At the same time, in Lenin's view, the New Man was selfless, completely dedicated to the sacrosanct Cause, and ready to resort to any means to achieve the ultimate political objectives. This was Lenin's revolutionary Machiavellianism. For him, the presumably pure, humanistic, generous end, justified the most ruthless, even barbaric means.

Communism's ultimate purpose was to transcend the anachronistic human condition and allow for the unfettered expression of long-repressed human instincts, desires, and needs. Joy, happiness, melancholy, and sadness were seen as socially driven. Evil thoughts had to be completely erased. In a classless paradise, there would be no reason for such nefarious musings. The mass-scale pedagogical endeavor inaugurated in Lenin's Russia aimed at the emergence of selflessly dedicated soldiers of the world proletarian revolution. Historian Igor Halfin accurately highlights[6] how Anatolii Lunacharsky, the Bolshevik people's commissar for education, connected the calls for equality and justice to the millenarian project of a sinless, perfectly pristine society. For him as well as for the other Leninist luminaries, before introducing the humanist program, the Soviet power had to annihilate its enemies.

In 1913, when he intervened in the philosophical discussions within the Bolshevik circles, Lenin had not read either Hegel or young Karl Marx. He had no idea about modern epistemology and his understanding of Kant was, at the best, rudimentary. But he knew one thing: Bourgeois ideas must not be allowed to contaminate the proletarian minds. Lenin developed a binary view of the world, which he divided into "we" and "them." The relation between the two groups was expressed by the celebrated formula: "those who are not with us are against us!" Later, Georg Lukacs would refine this abrupt scheme in that he would insist on the category of mediation (*Vermittlung*) that links the economic base to the ideational superstructure. But the foundational incompatibility had been spelled out. Either bourgeois or proletarian philosophy.

[5] Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch04.htm.

[6] Igor Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 2.

*Tertium non datur*. And, subsequently, there will be bourgeois culture, justice, literature, painting, architecture, etc., and its opposite, proletarian consciousness with its outgrowths in all fields of the spirit. In this cosmology, philosophical materialism served the interests of the proletariat, and idealism was a bourgeois fallacy.

Therefore, to fulfill his political goals, Lenin distanced himself pragmatically from the canonical Marxist theoretical base, as the founding fathers had defined culture as superstructure. It was the economic base that determined the superstructure, including art and culture in general. Consequently, a true communist culture could be developed only by a communist society to come. Despite this, Lenin conceived culture not only as a superstructure built upon the economic and social foundations of the new order. In Lenin's eyes, culture was not considered the expression of the creative potential of society but mainly as a practical and very efficient tool which was crucial in speeding up the building of what he saw as a new civilization. The absolute dream coming true, the civilization which would radically change the very nature of man. To achieve this, Lenin realized that if someone wanted to change man's nature, one must begin by changing his culture. That was the reason why, from the moment that Bolsheviks seized power, Lenin gave cultural matters such an important role in the new state's politics. The Bolshevik revolution means a complete repudiation of bourgeois moderation, the abandoning of conventional morality, and a new sense of complete freedom. No wonder so many artists identified themselves with the promises of renewal, revival, and regeneration proclaimed by the entranced ideologues.

## The Commissars and the Creators

One of his first moves was to establish NARKOMPROS,[7] The People's Commissariat for Enlightenment; it was founded in November 1917 under the leadership of Anatoly Lunacharsky, a veteran Bolshevik intellectual with a deep interest in art and literature and a member of Lenin's intimate circle. Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaia, was the head of the adult education department. As such, NARKOMPROS was an original

[7] For NARKOMPROS see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat for Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts Under Lunacharsky October 1917–1921*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

hybrid institution, responsible at the same time for high culture, low culture, and education.

A philosopher, art theorist, literary critic, playwright, and journalist, Lunacharsky was considered at the time the Bolshevik expert in cultural affairs. He faced the difficult task of staffing NARKOMPROS at the time when the larger part of the *intelligentsia* was hostile to Bolsheviks, horrified by the violence and bloodshed of their takeover. They contested the legitimacy of the new authorities and were reluctant to collaborate, convinced that Bolshevik power would not last long and that those who had compromised themselves with the new government would be repressed. The recently appointed *Narkom* (People's Commissar) complained that only: "functionaries without ideas are rather likely to come to our side while the officials with ideas stubbornly defend their opinion that our regime is a usurpation."[8]

In an unprecedented move, Lunacharsky opened the gates of the NARKOMPROS to the avant-garde artists and musicians, who had key positions in the new cultural administration. For instance, David Shterenberg headed the IZO (Visual Arts) department; Vladimir Tatlin was in charge of the IZO section in Moscow. The avant-garde art critic Nikolai Punin was the head of the IZO in Petrograd. Natan Altman worked at Petrograd IZO; the "comrade painter" Marc Chagall was appointed Commissar for the Arts in Vitebsk. Responsible for museums, Vasily Kandinsky, together with Aleksandr Rodchenko, created a new type of institution, the Museum of the Culture of Painting, which could be considered the first contemporary art museum of the world. The modernist composer Arthur Lourié was the chief of MUZO, the music department. Vsevolod Meyerhold worked at TEO, the theater section. The old fine arts academies were abolished and avant-garde artists were teaching in the newly created SVOMAS (The Free Art Studios).

Lunacharsky's choice was not motivated just by the shortage of loyal qualified personnel but as well by his genuine interest in the modernist currents he had discovered in his Parisian exile years. In 1912, he opposed Georgii Plekhanov's critique of Albert Gleizes' and Jean Metzinger's *Du Cubisme* and rejected the idea that cubism, together with all modern art, was decadent. Also, Lunacharsky favored the modernist subjectivity of the

[8] Quoted in David Joravshky, "Cultural Revolution and the Fortress Mentality" in Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, Richard Stites eds., *Bolshevik Culture. Experiment and Order in Russian Revolution,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, p. 94.

artist and contested Plekhanov's idea that beauty has objective laws which must be respected.

Artists' reasons to collaborate were various. For those with leftist sympathies, the choice was obvious. Vladimir Mayakovsky declared: "To join or not to join? It was my Revolution!"[9] Using almost the same words, Tatlin wrote: "To accept or not accept the October Revolution? There was no such question for me. I organically merged into active, creative, pedagogical, and social life."[10]

For some others, the reasons were less clear. At first, Kandinsky welcomed the Revolution but naively believed it was the embodiment of the spiritual upheaval predicted by Mrs. Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy. The misunderstanding could not end in a compromise and finally, the artist resigned from the position of the founding director of the INKhUK, the Institute of Artistic Culture, and decided to stay in Berlin in 1922. The same year, Chagall, marginalized, emigrated first to Berlin, then to Paris. Disillusioned, Lourié chose to ask for political asylum during an official visit to Germany.

## The PROLETKULT

Apart from NARKOMPROS, the other major organization that dealt with culture in the first years after the revolution was PROLETKULT[11], an acronym of "proletarian culture." Its official name was The Proletarian Cultural Educational Association. PROLETKULT originated in the workers' cultural circles and trade union clubs that had emerged after the aborted revolution of 1905 and also in the prerevolutionary workers' schools opened by the Russian left in exile in Capri and Bologna to raise the cultural level of the proletariat. Two weeks before the Bolshevik coup, at the Pan-Russian Conference on Proletarian Culture, the movement unified into a central structure. Immediately after the revolution, PROLETKULT enjoyed considerable success, with more than 400,000 participants at its activities and a strong network of regional branches that

[9] Quoted in Lev Kassil, *Sobranyie Sochinenyie,* Moskva: Izdateltsvo Detskaia Literatura, 1967, p. 327.

[10] Quoted in Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983, pp. 47–48.

[11] For PROLETKULT, see Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

covered all the Russian territory. It provided workshops in music, creative writing, theater, visual arts, or even, sometimes, circus techniques. The training method used was "learning by doing." This was essential because a true proletarian culture was not to be imposed on workers from above but produced by the workers themselves. Often the instructors were volunteers and workers were encouraged to self-manage the workshops. Participation, that is the workers' direct implication into the creative process, was considered more important than the quality of the final result, which was expected to improve in a further stage. The immediate objective was to unleash the talent they believed every proletarian inherently possessed. As Platon Kerzhentsev, the head of the PROLETKULT's theatrical section explained: "the task of the proletarian theater is not to produce good professional actors who will successfully perform the plays of a socialist repertory but to give an outlet to the artistic instinct of the broad masses."[12] PROLETKULT's different studios were conceived as "laboratories" in which the new proletarian culture would emerge.

The British socialist Eden Paul, one of the first Western authors who wrote on the PROLETKULT, defined it as an "ergatocratic culture:" "… a fighting culture aiming at the overthrow of capitalism and the replacement of democratic culture and bourgeois ideology by ergatocratic culture and proletarian ideology." In its first phase, PROLETKULT developed as a class culture, but in a post-revolutionary stage, it will necessarily lose its class character and "… for the first time in the history of civilization culture will become a universal culture."[13] In communism, the distinction between high culture and low culture, so typical for the bourgeois culture, would disappear, and all different national cultures will merge into a single one, the culture of the victorious international proletariat.

There was no such thing as a PROLETKULT style. The proletarian artists' and writers' creations could be presented in a variety of styles. Nonetheless, one can put into light some common characteristics. Unlike bourgeois culture, which was based on the individual artist's or writer's performance, proletarian culture favored collective creation. The artistic and literary genres were used according to their social relevance and

[12] Quoted in James van Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals: 1917–1920*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 28.

[13] Eden & Cedar Paul, *Proletcult* (Proletarian Culture), New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1921, p. 22.

their potential to influence the emergence of the New Man. The literary workshops recommended collective recitation of poetry. In theater, the monologue was set aside, suspicious of maintaining individualism, and collective acting was preferred instead. In music, they appreciated bands, orchestras, or choirs, rather than soloists. In visual arts, they counseled experimenting with teamwork. Cultural reception was also promoted mainly as a collective experience. The poetry readings, for example, were often followed by a debate in which the audience was expected to take an active part. The goal was to "liberate" the proletarian creative power. The principle of collective creation and the use of amateurs aimed at a deprofessionalization of art.[14] Without knowing, because the manuscript (1846) was published only in 1932, the proletkutist goal to professionalize art was in deep agreement with Marx's prophecy from *The German Ideology*. The prophecy claimed that because of the new division of labor in communism the professional artist will disappear: "In a communist society there will be no painters but only persons who engage in painting among other activities."[15]

More than just a pedagogical method of creation, collectivism was the general principle of organization of PROLETKULT's structures. Influenced by Taylorism and in search of American efficiency, Kerzhentsev and his group did empirical research that made them discover that "the products of collective labor qualitatively changed depending on the size of the ensemble."[16] Consequently, the size of the ideal group was "from twenty to twenty-two persons." Obviously, the size of the ideal group was essential information for the necessary size of the art studios.

All these creations were infused with content that had to be mainly "proletarian." Rather than praise the heroism of the Red Army, for instance, the typical PROLETKULT poetry exalted the factory environment, which was the workers' universe. They developed almost a mystical worship of iron, perceived as the workers' typical material, and the metal developed into a symbol of the proletariat. Every important proletkultist poet created at least several poems on the subject. Probably one of

[14] Evgeny Dobrenko, *Aesthetics of Alienation. Reassessment of Early Soviet Cultural Theories,* Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2005, p. 14.

[15] Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology,* 1846, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm.

[16] Devin Fore, "Social Engineering: Soviet Organizational Science", *Artforum,* Vol. 56, No. 2, October 2017, p. 222.

the most known is Mikhail Gerasimov's *Poem on Iron* (1918). The title of another of Gerasimov's works was *Iron Flowers* (1918)). One verse in Aleksei Gastev's *We Grow Out of Iron* (1918) read: "fresh iron blood pours in our veins."[17] Vladimir Kirrillov's proletarian new *Iron Messiah* (1918) was naturally "all of steel" and did not come from heavens but "… clad in gray smoke/From the suburbs, foundries, factories/Bringing peoples eternal fraternity."[18]

The main PROLETKULT's thesis was that, because, in a Marxist perspective, and culture was *linked to a certain class, the proletariat must develop its own proletarian culture, separated* from the previous bourgeois culture. The idea was Aleksandr Bogdanov's, the leading PROLETKULT theorist.[19] An adept of Ernst Mach, Bogdanov had extensive philosophical polemics with Lenin in 1908–1909, who refuted his ideas in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (1909).[20] The dispute was not only a philosophical one, as Bogdanov, a member of the LEFT Bolsheviks, opposed him for the control of the Party. Having not taken part actively in the October coup, Bogdanov, who was no longer a Party member, was very critical of the War Communism harsh policies and stated that "this is a soldiers' revolution, not a workers' revolution." When his brother-in-law Lunacharsky offered him a position in NARKOMPROS, inspired probably by Talleyrand's celebrated remark "You can do anything you like with bayonets except sit on them," he replied caustically: "the bayonet is not a creative instrument and it does not become one through extensive use."[21]

Fascinated by the concept of organization, Bogdanov was the founder of a general science of organizing called tektology—from the Greek *tektolon*, to build—(1913–1922), for which he is considered today a forerunner of the systems theory. In the PROLETKULT mentor's conception, organization was the universal fundamental principle that structured

[17] James van Geldern, Richard Stites, eds. *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore 1917–1953*, Blooming on: Indiana University Press, 1995, p. 3.

[18] Idem, quoted p. 4.

[19] For Bogdanov, see James D. White, *Red Hamlet: The Life and Ideas of Aleksandr Bogdanov*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019.

[20] For the Lenin-Bogdanov polemics see Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

[21] Quoted in Sochor, p. 94.

both the natural and social worlds. Regarding society, Bogdanov believed that culture was the main organizing factor, which made it the strongest medium to change the world. Consequently, a true proletarian revolution was impossible without a truly proletarian culture, the sole that could guarantee the revolutionary character of the new society. If the power belonged to the proletariat, then culture should be his too. In the field of culture, the strongest organizing element was art that, differently from science, which was for Bogdanov "only an instrument of organizing the collective thinking and will," was able to go beyond the sphere of knowledge and be far more easily grasped by the masses.

Apart from his scientific treatises, Bogdanov popularized both his organizational theories and his vision of a future rational communist society in two science fiction novels, *Red Star* (1908) and *Engineer Menni* (1912).[22] He opposed the capitalist planet earth and collectivist and egalitarian Mars, where the revolution had been victorious a long-time ago. Considered the first Bolshevik utopia, *Red Star* was an immense success among the militants, who, according to Nikolai Bukharin, "had devoured the book."[23]

Bogdanov introduced many moral criteria and drafted a list of ten norms for the proletarian culture: (1) He did not hear instinct; he advocated rational collectivism beyond instinctive class solidarity. (2) No slavery that is no blind submission to authority. His conception of collectivism did not include the traditional hierarchy but was based on comradely collaboration. (3) No subjectivism. (4) No hottentotism, by which he meant no moral double standards. (5) No absolute norms. (6) No inertness. (7) No violation of purity of purpose that is it should not be corrupted by petty feelings from the past. (8) All-mastery of the greatest goal. (9) All understanding. (10) Pride of the collective.[24]

PROLETKULT theories, and especially those of the old Lenin's rival Bogdanov, came under heavy fire from the Bolsheviks, both for doctrinaire and political reasons. If, as Bogdanov maintained in his *Tektology*, the main factor to reach the communist society was a higher and higher

[22] Alexander Bogdanov, *Red Star, Engineer Menni, A Martian Stranded on Earth. The First Bolshevik Utopia*, ed. Loren R. Graham and Richard Stites, trans. Charles Rougle, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

[23] Nikolai Bukharin, "The Era of Great Works", 1921, https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1921/01/27.htm.

[24] Sochor, pp. 198–200.

degree of organization that would generate in the future a total rational self-regulation specific for the absolute harmony of communism, then where was the role left for the class struggle? The question was not just philosophical because it could be followed by the accusation that this conception was an attempt to distract the proletariat from its historical mission. More, in Bogdanov's conception, the proletariat alone would develop its own culture without giving any special role to the communist Party. To counter that Lenin would insist that all political education "in general and in the field of art in particular should be imbued with the spirit of class struggle."[25]

For Lenin, a distinct proletarian culture could simply not exist. The new culture must be shaped by a Marxist world outlook, and "Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture. Only further work on this basis and in this direction, inspired by the practical experience of the proletarian dictatorship as the final stage in the struggle against every form of exploitation, can be recognized as the development of a genuine proletarian culture."[26]

Lenin condemned the idea of a separate proletarian culture as cultural nihilism, an accusation the Soviet historiography would use against Bogdanov until the *perestroika*. Undeniably, had been PROLETKULT members who understood Bogdanov mechanically and imagined the proletarian culture in direct opposition with the bourgeois culture. One could read in *Griadushche* (The Future) that "the proletarian culture has to deny everything that the bourgeois culture asserts. It must never say yes when the bourgeois culture says yes." Notwithstanding these crude exaggerations, Bogdanov's approach toward bourgeois culture was far more nuanced, and his demand that the proletariat should create a culture of its own must be understood in that context. He urged that the proletariat's mastery of the old bourgeois culture is a necessary precondition for building the new proletarian one: "… acquiring its inheritance it [the

[25] V.I. Lenin, *Draft Resolution on PROLETKULT,* October 8, 1929, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/oct/08.htm.

[26] Idem.

proletariat] must master the artistic treasures created in the past and assimilate all that is great and beautiful in them, without submitting to the spirit of bourgeois and feudal society reflected in them." The art and literature of the past must be studied and their organizational principles critically appraised from the ideological point of view of the proletariat. Only then, when their structure and ideology are understood, the new proletarian creations become possible: "As soon as this is accomplished, there is no more influence of this strange type of organization, the knowledge of it becomes one of our most precious tools for the creation of our own organization."[27]

Often quoted as a "proof" of PROLETKULT's nihilism, Kirillov's celebrated verses: "Let them decry 'You're beauty's executioners!' We'll burn up Raphael for our Tomorrow's sake/Trample art flowers and destroy museums"[28] or his allegation that Venus of Milo's measurements were no longer fit for the girls of the future, could very well belong not only to Mayakovsky, who wanted to "throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy … from the steamboat of modernity"[29] but also to Marinetti. These slogans remained on the rhetoric level and the proletkultists rarely resorted to vandalism. The critic Osip Brik, then a futurist, commented, well before Walter Benjamin: "We all know that no one is going to destroy Pushkin's works or burn Raphael's painting or smash Michelangelo's statues. Everyone well understands that we're talking about the aura of sacredness surrounding these infallible popes of the aesthetic church."[30]

Nonetheless, the idea that a neutral process of assimilation of the old bourgeois culture by the proletariat could be imagined raised doubts even among the highest Bolsheviks leaders. In a note to Lenin, Bukharin, the chief editor of *Pravda* and who was quite sympathetic to PROLETKULT, wrote: "I personally consider that to 'conquer' bourgeois culture in its

[27] Aleksandr Bogdanov, "The Workers' Artistic Inheritance" in Bogdanov, op. cit., p. 45.

[28] Quoted in Galina Mardilovich and Maria Taroutina, *New Narratives in Russian and East European Art: Between Tradition and Revolutions,* London: Routledge, 2019.

[29] David Burlyuk, Aleksei Kruchonykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikovbnikov, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (1912) in Catriona Kelly ed., *Utopias: Russian Modernist Texts 1905–1940*, London: Penguin Books, 1999, p. 120.

[30] Osip Brik, "A Preserved God", *Iskusstvo kommuny,* December 1918, English translation by Natasha Kurchanova, *October,* Vol. 134, Fall 2010, p. 8.

entirety, without destroying it, is as impossible as 'conquering' the bourgeois state. What takes place in culture is what takes place with the state. Some of its constituent elements are assimilated … by the proletariat into its own ideology."[31]

At the same time, the attacks against PROLETKULT were motivated by its claim to independence. Even though administratively, it was under the authority of NARKOMPROS, PROLETKULT accepted the Commissariat for Enlightenment's funding but not its rule. They wanted not only autonomy but independence. The resolution presented by Pavel Lebedev-Poliansky, the chairman of PROLETKULT at the Pan-Russian Conference of the organization on September 16, 1918, read: "… the cultural-educational movement among the proletariat must occupy an independent place along with political and economical movements."[32] The proletkultists stated that there are three fields of the communist building: the political that belonged to the communist Party, the economical that belonged to the trade unions, and the culture that belonged to them only. So, they were not satisfied with being an alternative organization as they had the ambition to control the whole cultural field. At the Second Comintern Congress in 1920, they attempted even to give a global dimension to their movement by trying to launch a KULTINTERN, an independent international proletarian culture structure. Of course, this kind of claim infuriated Lenin who sent a note to Nikolai Krestinsky, the Party's delegate at the October 1920 First All-Russian Congress of the PROLETKULT, that clearly shows where the real power was: "1. proletarian culture = communism; 2. it is the responsibility of the R.K.P. (Russian Communist Party); 3. the proletarian class = RKP = Soviet power. Are we agreed on this?"[33] As a result of Lenin's pressure, the delegates reluctantly voted to accept to subordinate to NARKOMPROS. The Central Committee's draft resolution from October 8, 1920, written by Lenin himself, stipulated that: " Adhering unswervingly to this stand of principle, the All-Russian PROLETKULT Congress rejects

[31] Quoted in John Biggart "Nikolai Bukharin and the Origins of the Proletarian Culture Debate", *Soviet Studies*, vol. XXXIX, No. 2, April 1987, London: Routledge, 2019.

[32] Pavel Lebedev-Poliansky, "Revolution and the Cultural Tasks of the Proletariat" in William G. Rosenberg ed., *Bolshevik Visions. First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia,* Part 1, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990, p. 58.

[33] Quoted in Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art Under Stalin*, New York: Hölmes and Meier Publishers, 1991, p. 27.

in the most resolute manner, as theoretically unsound and practically harmful, all attempts to invent one's own particular brand of culture, to remain isolated in self-contained organizations, to draw a line dividing the field of work of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment and the PROLETKULT, or to set up a PROLETKULT 'autonomy' within establishments under the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment and so forth. On the contrary, the Congress enjoins all PROLETKULT organizations to fully consider themselves in duty bound to act as auxiliary bodies of the network of establishments under the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, and to accomplish their tasks under the general guidance of the Soviet authorities (specifically, of the People's Commissariat of Education) and of the Russian Communist Party, as part of the tasks of the proletarian dictatorship."[34]

However, as we will see in the next chapters, the real power would more and more concentrate in the hands of the *Agitpropotdel*, the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the communist Party. The PROLETKULT movement funding was harshly diminished and it practically disappeared institutionally from the cultural scene.

Nevertheless, despite its short administrative existence, PROLETKULT's influence on the Russian modernist culture was considerable. There were attempts to describe PROLETKULT' in total opposition with futurism, at the time a generic word that designated indiscriminately all avant-garde tendencies.[35] At a closer look, however, the two were not at all diametrically opposed. Certainly, many proletkultists reproached the futurists for their abstruseness, which made their works impossible to grasp for the masses. As Lynn Mally rightly pointed out, they rejected the new styles "not because they were new but because they were old."[36] They originated before the revolution, so they belonged to the old bourgeois culture; therefore, they were unsuitable for the proletariat. In this, the anti-futurist proletkultists joined the orthodox Bolshevik view that considered futurism a decadence of bourgeois culture.

[34] Lenin, *Draft Resolution* October 8, 1920, op. cit.

[35] For a discussion of the use of the word "futurism," see Iva Glisic, *The Futurist Files: Avant-Garde, Politics, and Ideology in Russia 1905–1930*, New York: NYU Press, 2018, p. 9.

[36] Mally, p. 145.

In turn, futurists often criticized proletkultists for their cultural conservatism. The head of IZO, Shterenberg, himself an avant-garde painter, wrote in *Iskusstvo kommuny* (The Art of the Commune) that one cannot create new proletarian art using old forms; what was needed was not realism, an old form, but a "new, inventive, and revolutionary form." In the same paper, Altman and Brik argued that the revolutionary class deserved the most revolutionary art; therefore the genuine proletarian art was futurism. In an article that became a classic piece, Altman refuted the idea that futurism cannot be considered proletarian art because it lacked accessibility: "A worker's figure in heroic pose with a red flag and an appropriate slogan—how temptingly intelligible that is to a person unversed in art and how terribly we need to fight against this pernicious intelligibility."[37]

Despite these polemics, in practice, the gap between the PROLETKULT and the avant-garde was not insurmountable and one could quote examples of proletkultists that were truly experimental. Indubitably, many workers favored old realist forms. Still, they were also others that favored the new forms of the avant-garde. The worker Aleksandr Mushtakov stated: "The proletariat needs art born out of the noise of factories, industrial plants, streets; which in its spirit should be thunderous art of struggle. Such art already exists. It is called futurism."[38] When in 1921 the avant-garde theorist Brik became the chairman of INKhUK, he established links with PROLETKULT studios to promote productivism as a doctrine for workers' art.[39]

Both PROLETKULT and the avant-garde shared the idea that the frontier between art and life must be abolished. The new proletarian art would no longer be confined in museums, galleries, or theaters, it should be available to all, and should permeate the whole daily existence "Art in the street" requested the proletkultists. "The streets are our brushes/the squares are our palettes," wrote Mayakovsky in his *First Order to the Army of Art* (1918). Concomitantly, both the PROLETKULT and the avant-garde attempted to demystify the status of the "old bourgeois" artist in

[37] Natan Altman, "Futurism and Proletarian Art" (1918) in John E. Bowlt ed. *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde Theory and Criticism 1902–1934,* New York: The Viking Press, 1976, p. 163.

[38] Quoted in Christina Lodder, *Constructivist Strands in Russian Art 1914–1937,* London: Pindar Press, 2005, p. 145.

[39] Vahan Barooshian, *Brik and Mayakovsky*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1978, p. 68.

his ivory tower. In 1924, Sergei Eisenstein, who worked at the time for the *PROLETKULT Workers Theater, imagined a kind of "theater without a theater."*[40] *For Sergei Tretiakov's Gas Masks* production, he declined using a stage, which put the actors on a pedestal and separated them from the audience. Instead, he staged the play in the Moscow gas factory using workers as actors.

Yet, the most spectacular endeavor to break the spatial confinement of art in a traditional cultural institution belonged without any doubt to Arseny Avraamov, a member of the PROLETKULT music section in Petrograd.[41] To renew proletarian music, Avraamov sent Lunacharsky a note asking to burn all pianos in Russia. The well-tempered instrument was accused to be responsible for accustoming the listener's ear to the 12 tones scale, which should be replaced with a 48 microtonal system invented by him. For this reason, Avraamov believed that Johann Sebastian Bach "was a great criminal who slowed down the logical evolution of sound perception by two centuries by deforming the hearing of millions of people."[42] Avraamov's most known composition is the *Symphony of Sirens*, performed for the fifth anniversary of the revolution on November 7, 1922, in Baku, the capital of The Azerbaijan republic. Inspired by Gastev's poem *Factory Whistles* (1913), in which the poet stated that the factory sirens were no longer "the slaves' call" but "the future's song," and Bogdanov, for whom factory whistles were both a symbol and a material element for workers' rallying. Avraamov's work is an interesting case in which PROLETKULT's ideas mingled with avant-garde experimental research and provided a new sound experience. Avraamov used the sirens of the Baku's factories, the city's church bells, the foghorns of the Caspian

[40] Donna Oliver, "Theatre without the Theatre", *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Vol. 34, no. 3–4, September–December 1994.

[41] For Avraaumov, see Douglas Kahn, Gregory Whitehead, *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992, Andrey Smirnov, Liubov Pchelkina, "Russian Pioneers of Sound Art in the 1920s" in *Red Cavalry: Creation and Power in Soviet Russia between 1917 and 1945*, Madrid: Casa Escondida, 2012, Della Duong Ba Wendel, "The 1922 'Symphony of Sirens', Baku, Azerbaidjan", *Journal of Urban Studies,* vol. 17, **no**. 4, 2012, Konstantin Dudakational Yov-Mashuro12 "Noise Music in Russian" in Günther Berghaus, ed., *International Book of Futurist Studies* 2016, Adrian Curtin, *Avant-Garde Theatre Sound: Staging Sonic Modernity,* London, New York: Palgrave, 2018.

[42] Quoted in Smirnov, Pchelkina, p. 4.

sea fleet, twenty-five steam locomotives, truck horns, seven infantry regiments, guns, machine-guns, cannons, and hydro-planes, together with a thousand-strong choir, and collective declamations of Gastev's and Mayakovsky's poems. At these, one had to add the *magistral*, Convinced that "from all the arts, music possesses the greatest power of social organization," he wanted to free it from the limited space of the concert hall and present a seven hours long soundscape at the colossal scale of the whole city. The endeavor was indeed impressive. Although he used a great orchestra too, he included it in an unconventional whole that included a special instrument he invented, composed of twenty-five steam whistles tuned to play *International* that was *i*nstalled on a destroyer. The *magistral* could be played only collectively. In this way, the workers were confronted with familiar industrial objects and could immediately participate fully, without the long practice that was necessary to be able to play the classical orchestra instruments. Instead of employing the usual baton, Avraamov conducted from the top of a radio tower, using a pair of red navy flags and a network of field telephones. The *Symphony of Sirens* was a lot more than an investigation of the limit between sound and noise, in the style of the Italian futurist Luigi Russolo. It eliminated the traditional separation between performers and listeners and it provided a collective aesthetic experience based on active participation, integrating art into life, both ideas dear to the PROLETKULT and the avant-garde.

In her classic book on PROLETKULT, Lynn Mally maintained that Bogdanov was opposed to experimentation and asked for new proletarian art that should be "simple in form but enormous in content."[43] And yet, Bogdanov's perception of the artistic experiment was by far more complex. In *The Ways of Proletarian Art,* he insisted that the proletarian artists should give up the technical means of the old art, which had developed separately from other spheres of life, and asked that "proletarian art should look for and conscientiously use photography, stereography, cinematography, the spectral lights, and the photographic reproduction."[44] In other words, the other important PROLETKULT art theorist, Gastev, requested the same: "we do not want to play prophets but, in any case, we must connect proletarian art with the extraordinary revolution of the

[43] Mally, p. 146.

[44] Bogdanov, "The Ways of Proletarian Art", *Proletarskaia Kulturan*, No. 15–16, 1920. French translation "Les chemins de l'art proletarien", *Action poétique,* No. 59, 1974, p. 84.

artistic means."[45] As we will see later, PROLETKULT's ideas on revolutionary culture, on the role of art, and the status of the artist in the new society influenced heavily the constructivists, the productivists, and Solomon Nikritin's projectionists. As a cultural theorist, Bogdanov interested Antonio Gramsci, and traces of his thinking could be found in the famous Walter Benjamin's essay *The Author as a Producer* (1934).

## Art and Power

In the 1970s, it was customary for art historians to describe the beginning of the 1920s as the golden years of the Russian avant-garde. However, if it is true that the revolution offered prodigious opportunities to the avant-garde, it was not the major cause of its flourishing. One must remember that the two major Russian contributions to modern art, namely Tatlin's constructivism, and Kazimir Malevich's suprematism, as well as Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov's *zaum*, the trans-rational sound poetry or the Acmeism of Nikolai Gumilev, Anna Akhmatova, and Osip Mandelstam, were all created before the Revolution. Meyerhold's research to renew the theatrical practice began well before 1917. Formalism, so important for the avant-garde art theory, was also formulated before the Bolshevik seizure of power. According to Boris Groys, who echoed Lenin's argument of the weakest link, the strength of the Russian avant-garde could be explained as a reaction to the backwardness of Russia.[46] In a more recent rather controversial essay, Groys even stated that, at the time when the Bolshevik revolution was successful, "the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s was—artistically and politically—already in its post-revolutionary phase."[47]

Notwithstanding Lunacharsky's broad-mindedness and modernist affinities, from the very beginning, the relationships between the avant-garde and the Bolsheviks were far from being idyllic. It was never really true that "the state had chosen the avant-garde as the revolution's new language," as it has been often asserted. If the relative cultural pluralism

[45] Aleksei Gastev, "Les tendances de l'art prolétarien", *Action poétique*, op. cit, p. 137.

[46] Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 4–5.

[47] Boris Groys, "Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich", *e-flux Journal*, No. 47, December 2013, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/47/60047/becoming-revolutionary-on-kazimir-malevich/.

of the first years of the Soviet power could be seen, superficially, as a heaven of freedom in comparison with the monolithic Stalinist 1930s, the attempt to submit creation to the communist Party's supervision was present from the start. For the Bolsheviks, ensuring the Party hegemony on the cultural front was a must. In this light, the eradication of the PROLETKULT could be seen as a major event in the development of a process that would culminate with the Stalinist takeover from 1934.

In contradiction with the People's Commissar for Enlightenment, Lenin did not share his interest in modernism. Although he lived a year on the *Spiegelgasse* in Zurich near the famous Cabaret Voltaire, the birthplace of dadaism, and it seems that he even played chess with Tristan Tzara, Lenin discarded the avant-garde experimentalism as mere rubbish. His taste for cultural matters was rooted in the great Russian cultural tradition of the nineteenth century. In literature, he preferred Pushkin, Nekrasov, Lev Tolstoy, and Chernyshevsky, whose novel *What Is to Be Done? (1863)* was his favorite. He was quoted saying: "Shameful not to know Turgenev."[48] Fluent in Latin and German, he read Virgil's *Aeneid* and Goethe's *Faust* in the original. In painting, he liked the *Peredvizhniki* (The Wanderers), with a predilection for Repin, who was also Stalin's favorite painter. He listened to Tchaikovsky and Italian opera in music but was also fond of Russian traditional folk songs and revolutionary standards such as *Internationale*, *Warshavianka,* or *March Bravely Comrades*.

When Lunacharsky authorized futurist artists to paint in red the trees around the Kremlin for the 1918 anniversary of the Revolution, Lenin was outraged. Notwithstanding its revolutionary acclamatory content, Lenin deeply disliked Mayakovsky's poetry, despite that the poet of the Revolution praised him repeatedly in his verse and even dedicated him a poem in 1920 for his fiftieth birthday: "but who can restrain himself/and not sing the glory of Ilich?" Complaining to Gorky, Lenin found Mayakovsky's poetry "difficult to read" and was baffled by its mass success. Reluctantly, he admitted that Mayakovsky's *150.000.000* was "interesting" but called it "hooligan communism." When, at the time when the Bolsheviks were confronted with a serious shortage of paper, he sent a furious note to Lunacharsky: "Aren't you ashamed to vote for printing 5.000 of Mayakovsky's *150.000.000?* It is nonsense, stupidity,

[48] Quoted in Adam B. Ulam, *The Bolsheviks: The Intellectual and Political History of the Triumph of Communism in Russia,* New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985.

double-dyed stupidity, and affectation. I believe that such things should be published one in ten, *and not more than 1.500 copies* for libraries and cranks. And for Lunacharsky, he should be flogged for his futurism."[49] To be sure that this could not happen again, Lenin sent also a note to Lunacharsky's deputy, Mikhail Pokrovsky, asking him to help fighting futurism and ordering him "to find some reliable anti-futurists."[50] As Piotr Krassikov, an old Bolshevik who became Prosecutor-General of the Soviet Supreme Court and was purged by Stalin in 1937 recalled that the revolutionary leader was unable to accept the younger generation's love for the "hooligan" poet: "I simply cannot understand their enthusiasm for Mayakovsky. All his work is cheap mumbo jumbo to which the label 'Revolution' has been attached. I am quite convinced that revolution does not need comic buffoons who flirt with it, such as Mayakovsky, for example."[51] The only merit Mayakovsky that Lenin admitted was the poet's critique of Communists' mania for "conferring and re-conferring in the satiric poem 'Lost in Conference'" (1922). "I do not know whether it is good poetry, but I promise you he is absolutely right from a political point of view."

Mikhail Gorlovsky, an art student who visited an exhibition with Lenin, recalled his rejection of abstract art: "We all belonged to the avant-garde and naturally approved of constructivism only.

Among the pictures at this exhibition, there was one detested artist we all contemptuously called "the dauber." But he remained undeterred with his realistic pictures. It was just this work that gave Lenin pleasure. "'This, you see, is clear to me. I understand this, so do you, But explain to me what do I see in your pictures? In all these paintings (painted by you) I cannot find either eyes or noses,' he said."[52]

After a visit to VKhUTEMAS (Higher Art and Technical Studios) on February 25, 1921, Lenin was shocked to see that the students favored futurism. His question if they fight futurism was answered with an astonishing negation and the statement; "We are all futurists." The students offered to give him books in the hope he will convert to the new trend.

[49] V.I. Lenin, http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/may/06.htm.

[50] V.I. Lenin, http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/may/06b.htm.

[51] Quoted in Annette L. Rubinstein, "Lenin on Literature, Language and Censorship", *Science & Society*, Vol. 59, No. 3, Fall 1995, p. 376.

[52] Victor Sebestyen, *Lenin the Dictator*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2017, p. 433.

Lenin replied meekly that "tastes differ" and that "he is an old man" but later on would take administrative measures, asking for the introduction of mandatory political courses in the VKhUTEMAS *curriculum*, and instructing Lunacharsky to reinforce the teaching of realist art in the school.[53] To all appearances, the first measure was never applied at VKhUTEMAS but students who came after were less lucky. Political indoctrination courses were to become *curricula* standards for all Soviet students, regardless of the field of study until the fall of communism. The same was true for the satellite communist countries.

When discussing art with the German communist Clara Zetkin, who visited him in Kremlin, Lenin asserted: "We are much too much 'Iconoclasts.' We must retain the beautiful, take it as an example, hold on to it, even though it is 'old.' Why turn away from real beauty, and discard it for good and all as a starting point for further development, just because it is 'old'? Why worship the new as the god to be obeyed, just because it is 'the new'? That is nonsense, sheer nonsense. There is a great deal of conventional art hypocrisy in it, too, and respect for the art fashions of the West. Of course, unconscious! We are good revolutionaries, but we feel obliged to point out that we stand at the 'height of contemporary culture.' I have the courage to show myself a 'barbarian: I cannot value the works of expressionism, futurism, cubism, and other isms as the highest expressions of artistic genius. I don't understand them. They give me no pleasure."[54] Lacking any interest in formal research, the Bolshevik leader was totally unable to understand experimentalism, which is undoubtedly the main element of modern culture: "I could not but admit that I, too, lacked the faculty of understanding that, to an enthusiastic soul, the artistic form of a nose should be a triangle, and that the revolutionary pressure of facts should change the human body into a formless sack placed on two stilts and with two five-pronged forks."[55]

Was Lenin a philistine concerning modernism? Probably yes, but it would be a great error to think that his will to confront the avant-garde

[53] Vahan Barooshian, pp. 65–66, Susan Buck-Morse, *Dreamworld, and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002, p. 301.

[54] Clara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin* (1924), http://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1924/reminiscences-of-lenin.htm.

[55] Zetkin, op. cit.

was motivated mainly by his personal taste. In 1921, H.G. Wells titled his famous interview with Lenin "The Dreamer in Kremlin."[56]

Rarely a title was so mistaken because Lenin was no dreamer at all, albeit one could call him a visionary. Although he certainly experienced pleasure with traditional art, literature, or music, he was mainly a radical and ruthless politician, and, as a politician, he considered culture primarily from an instrumental point of view. Lenin was also a formidable tactician who, as we have seen, when confronted with avant-garde art, asked for administrative measures to counter it. For him, the kind of culture that was needed at that time in revolutionary Russia was one that the Party could use for its immediate goals. From this perspective, avant-garde culture was useless because its very experimentalism prevented it from being understood by the "uncultured" masses, so therefore its propaganda value was nil. So, avant-garde art was simply inefficient. If the masses cannot understand it, how could it fulfill its mission and mobilize them to attain the communist Party's objectives? Accessibility was crucial. What was needed, believed Lenin, was a kind of art that everyone would understand. After all, Leninism, his contribution to Marxism, could be considered an attempt to simplify Marx's subtleties and achieve a kind of philosophy that everyone could and would understand.

Therefore, instead of trying to make the masses understand the new modernist culture, which would be a too long and uncertain undertaking, Lenin adopted a populist pragmatism and wanted the artists to adapt to the masses' taste, the only one that was important from a political point of view: "… our opinion on art is not important. Nor is it important what art gives to a few hundred or even thousands of a population as great as ours. Art belongs to the people. It must have its deepest roots in the broad mass of workers. It must be understood and loved by them. It must be rooted in and grow with their feelings, thoughts, and desires. It must arouse and develop the artist in them. Are we to give cake and sugar to a minority when the mass of workers and peasants still lack black bread? I mean that, not, as you might think, only in the literal sense of the word, but also figuratively. We must keep the workers and peasants

[56] H.G. Wells, "The Dreamer in the Kremlin", *The New York Times,* January 15, 1921, p. 1.

always before our eyes. We must learn to reckon and to manage for them. Even in the sphere of art and culture."[57]

Nonetheless, most avant-garde artists and writers believed that the revolution needed art that was new. In his "*Order Number Two to the Armies of Art*(1921)," Mayakovsky wrote: "Comrades/give us a new form of art/an art/that will put the republic out of the mud." In revolutionary Russia, this urge for the new went beyond the Baudelairian valorization of the newness, common to all avant-gardes. Repeatedly, the Russian avant-garde artists tried to establish a parallel between revolution in politics and revolution in art. In his *On New Systems in Art: Statics and Speed* (1919), Kazimir Malevich went so far as declaring that "cubism and futurism were revolutionary movements in art, anticipating the revolution in economic and political life of 1917."[58] Malevich's rival Tatlin was even more specific: "What happened from the social aspect 1917 was realized in our work as pictorial artists in 1914 when material, volume, and construction were accepted as our foundation."[59] Understandably, these sorts of precedence claims irritated orthodox Marxists, for whom art belonged to the superstructure. As such, it is determined by the political and economic structure. Thus, genuine revolutionary art and literature could not have preceded the revolution because they could be generated only by the revolution. Whence they perceived the avant-garde as bourgeois decadence.

More sympathetic to the avant-garde and acknowledging Mayakovsky's "enormous talent," Trotsky also emphasized the bourgeois origin of futurism. In his *Literature and Revolution*, he wrote that: "It would be extremely flippant to establish by analogies and comparisons the identity of futurism and communism, and so form the deduction that futurism is the art of the proletariat. Such pretensions must be rejected."[60] However,

[57] Zetkin, op. cit.

[58] Kazimir Malevich, "On New Systems in Art: Statics and Speed" in Ilia Dorontchenkov, N.A. Gurianova ds., *Russian and Soviet Views on Modern Western Art, 1890-mid-1930s*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, p. 149.

[59] Vladimir Tatlin, T. Shapiro, I. Meyerzon, and Pavel Vinogradov, "The Work Ahead of Us (1920)" in Stephen Bann ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*, New York: The Viking Press, 1974, p. 12.

[60] Lev Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 1923, op. cit., https://www.marxists.org/archive/trots1924/lit_revo/ch04.htm.

Trotsky considered futurism a necessary link between the art of the past and the art to come.

The debate on the question of monumental art was the first major clash between the avant-garde and the Bolshevik regime. This was not at all accidental sine, at the time when cinema was a little more than a new-born baby and television only a dream, monuments were considered the form of art that inherently touched the greatest number of people, especially in a country with such a percentage of illiterates as Russia, and therefore, had the highest value as political propaganda. The controversy was originated from the different ways in which the avant-garde understood to realize the famous *Leninist Plan of Monumental Propaganda*. The embryo of the plan was the SOVNARKOM's (Council of Peoples' Commissars) Decree *On the Dismantling of Monuments Erected in Honor of the Czars and their Servants and on the Formulation of Projects of Monuments to the Russian Socialist Revolution*, promulgated on April 12, 1918. To issue such a decree and to allocate resources for it at a time when the country was devastated by the civil war is surprising and significant for how important propaganda was for the Bolshevik leader. The project, a personal initiative of Lenin, probably inspired by Tomasso Campanella's *The City of the Sun*, stipulated the erection of monuments of great revolutionary figures of all times and outstanding personalities of mankind's cultural history. The list, strangely eclectic, naturally included Marx, Engels, Spartacus, Garibaldi, Bakunin, Robespierre, Blanqui, and Babeuf, but one could also find the names of Voltaire, Heine, Tolstoi, Dostoievsky, and Scriabin, or even that of the fifteenth-century Russian icon painter Andrei Rublev. These monuments had to replace the older ones that were deeply resented as the symbol of the Past: "The monuments of generals, of princes, of the lovers of Czarina and the Czar's mistresses continue to press with their heavy and indecent foot on the throat of the new life."

What was needed was a monument of a new type, capable to express revolutionary content and however, if Lenin was primarily interested in the plan's political impact, with its immediate agitating effects, the avant-garde saw it in a much more complex light. They approached the Leninist plan not only as a matter of subject choice but mainly as a new and difficult artistic problem, requiring complicated formal research. In a lecture of December 1918, Mayakovsky stated it clearly: "It is necessary to find a new artistic form. To raise a monument to a metallurgical worker it is not enough; it has to be different from the typographer's monument erected

by the Czar."[61] The traditional statues were no longer accepted; what, at the same time, modifying in a significant visual manner the image of the new socialist town.

The ardent discussion of monumental art directly affected Tatlin in his official capacity as the head of IZO, the Visual Arts Department of the city of Moscow. On June 18K, 1918, he sent a report to the SOVNARKOM in which he expressed fears about the aesthetic quality of future monuments. Yet the debate on monumental art deeply interested Tatlin not only in his administrative capacity but also as an artist. The idea of the *monument of a new type* fascinated him; in his conception, this new monument had to be so radically different that, compared to it, not only traditional monuments but also shocking contemporary realizations, such as Bakunin's Cubo-Futurist statues by Boris Korolev, would seem rather dull and insignificant. Tatlin objected to the *Leninist Plan* on two grounds. The first was doctrinaire: strongly influenced by Bogdanov's collectivist theories, Tatlin rejected as bourgeois and retrograde the idea of a monument dedicated to an individual. Punin would comment later, very likely using Tatlin's own arguments: "Figural (Greco-Italian) monuments embody a double contradiction of contemporaneity. They foster individual heroism and negate history. Torsos and busts of heroes (and gods) do not correspond to the contemporary comprehension of history. Torsos and busts ignore the ten-versts deep ranks of the proletariat; at best this form expresses the character, emotion, and thought of heroes. But what expresses the emotional tension and thoughts of the collective thousands? A type? But a type only confines and degrades the multitude."[62]

ln Tatlin's eyes, it was impossible, both from moral or theoretical points of view, to accept the idea that the *monument of a new type*, conceived for the new revolutionary society, in which the collective were to be placed above the individual, should glorify an *individual* hero, even if he was a revolutionary hero. If the political exigencies of the moment asked for it, this had to be a transition period only; old classical style monuments could be used as monumental propaganda in the same way the specialists of the prerevolutionary period must be used for the time being. For Tatlin, this

[61] Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Opere*, a cura di Ignazio Ambrozio, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1958.

[62] Nikolai Punin, *Pamiatnik III Internatsionala*. English translation by Kestutis Paul Zygas, *Oppositions*, 10. Fall 1977, p. 72.

transition character was precisely in contradiction with the very nature of monuments, which is permanence. His anti-individualistic views were shared by many other Russian avant-garde artists and writers of the time, such as Ilya Ehrenburg, who wrote in 1922: "… the personal is dying out, a monument should represent the age, the movements, and not any man."[63] Tatlin's second reason was that aesthetically, the traditional monument was not any longer adequate in a modern urban environment. As Punin advocated: "… their static quality further contradicts the contemporaneity of the organic means of expression. In the midst of noise, movement, and the dimension of the streets, the agit-effectiveness of such monuments is particularly meager. Perhaps thinkers on granite pedestals observe much, but no one sees them. They are bound by a form that was composed when loggias were plentiful, when mules were used for transport, when tones served as cannonballs. Now the wartime telephone twits the hero's nose: the tramway pole ridicules the obelisk."[64] Punin's hints were so broad that nobody could miss the target that is the far too traditional way in which the *Leninist Plan of Monumental Propaganda* was realized.

The *Monument to the Third International*, not only Tatlin's masterpiece but, undoubtedly, the most famous work of art of the Russian revolution, was meant precisely to be an obvious *alternative* to the narrow-minded spirit of the *Leninist Plan*. Tatlin's idea was to present the first true and Tatlin's first idea was to dedicate his monument of a new type to the Russian revolution, but a valid model of a *monument of a new type* as the genuine artistic and *revolutionary* option versus an "epidemic of plaster idiots quartered in our squares by the cunning of superior power."[65]

The foundation of the COMINTERN, on March 4, 1919, made him alter his plans. This is hardly surprising, not only because the creation of the Third International was unmistakably the major political event of the year but also because Tatlin himself was imbued with a certain characteristic "psychology of waiting" for the long-waited World Revolution. In 1919, they were far away from the idea of a revolution conceived as

[63] Ilya Ehrenburg, *A vse-ttaki ona vertitsia* (1922). Here quoted after *Vladimir Tatlin*, Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1968, p. 58.

[64] Punin, 1920, p. 72.

[65] Ehrennburg, p. 58.

a limited, almost national enterprise, as later sanctified by the Stalinist doctrine of "socialism into one country." The true socialist revolution had to be a world revolution, as Marx had written; thus, to the great majority of those who approved the Bolsheviks, including Tatlin, the Russian revolution was only a beginning, a commencement of a grand revolutionary wave that would cover the globe. This kind of revolutionary wishful thinking, apparently supported by such contemporary incandescent events like the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic or the Béla Kun's Republic of Councils in Hungary, was a common thought among the Bolshevik circles at the time, and if we read, for instance, Bukharin's apocalyptical speeches from the early twenties, we will get the feeling the long-expected World Revolution is a matter of weeks, if not of days. This state of mind strongly affected the Russian avant-garde. So, the monument was dedicated to the Third International. Far from being a minor episode, a mere political loyalty gesture, the change of title had major importance in the genesis of the work because it brought forth the idea of establishing a direct correlation between the dimensions of the monument and the actual physical dimensions of the terrestrial globe. Contrary to the Babel Tower, which separated mankind into different peoples, Tatlin's Tower had to re-unite mankind under the red banner of Comintern.

From the very beginning, Tatlin intended to reverse the accepted ideas; his monument was to be radically different from the obsolete notion of a *statue*, which rested passively in the middle of a square. It had to become active, to *function* as a huge machine. Rightfully, Svetlana Boym wrote that "Tatlin's goal was to create a radically antimonumental monument."[66] This machinistic side was very important to him and he was quoted to have said to his assistants that "we will not construct a samovar, as our enemies think, but a modern apparatus."[67] The monument was no longer expected to play only a commemorative role, to be a mere memorial, but it was mostly considered a social catalyst, a community gathering point. Therefore, the monument was not meant to be just contemplated; it had to be functional. As for its destination, initially, that is before the

[66] Svetlana Boym, *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 209.

[67] Oral comment made to Andrei B. Nakov by Tevel Shapiro, one of Tatlin's assistants, quoted in Andrei B. Nakov, *2 Sternberg 2: The 'Laboratory' Period of Russian Constructivism (1919–1921)*, London, 1975.

change in the title, the monument had been conceived as a mammoth *agitprop* unit.

Tatlin's main concern in designing the *Monument to the Third International* was dynamism. To attain it, he not only rejected too static programs, such as museum and libraries, in favor of the shifting rooms—incidentally, he was one of the first to suggest the use of the multifunctional spaces—but he also intended the monument to be "the center of a concentration of a movement." Everything had to be kinetic: "… there should be as little sitting and standing as possible, people should be instead mechanically led around, up and down." The monument was not to be "looked at," its interiors had to be "glimpsed" only, and its dynamism had to be inflicted on its traditionally dawdling visitors who, in Punin's description, curiously resemble the speeding characters of the silent films.

Tatlin's insistence on using the latest technical achievements to equip the monument with the very modern facilities, such as electrical heating and lifts, radio, telephone, telegraph, a giant screen, and projectors that could write letters in the sky, was not only significant for the fascination of the machine that thrilled the Russian avant-garde[68], but also for the influence that the PROLETKULT aesthetic theories had on him. As we have seen, Bogdanov asked the proletarian artist to use the most up-to-date techniques. Both for Tatlin and Bogdanov, these recent technical elements had a double aesthetic meaning: first, they embodied extreme novelty, and second, they were manifestly different from the traditional creative methods and overtly subversive of the old "Art" concepts they were attacking.

The final project consisted of a double spiral iron skeleton in which four volumes were suspended. Although the double spiral obviously played a constructive role as the resistance structure, it is highly probable that its use was mainly determined by symbolic and aesthetic factors. The spiral as a didactic symbol for the universal development was very familiar to the Marxist popularization literature and the DIAMAT (dialectical materialism) indoctrination textbooks used it for a long time after the project had been completed. Another direct source, a more direct one, may be found in a speech given by Lenin in 1917 in which he compared

[68] Tatlin's "art of the machine" was the subject of a violent debate, The artists and the Machine, which took place on March 31, 19,119 at the Red Cock Café, the former Café Pittoresque.

the flourishing of the ideological content of the Revolution to a powerful steel spiral, which was kept in a solid steel ring and then suddenly released.

As the monument was finally to become the headquarters of the COMINTERN, that is a building with a precise destination, the form and the function of the four inner volumes were much more accurately defined. The lowest volume, a cube, was meant to be an enormous conference hall for the COMINTERN congresses. The second volume was pyramidal and intended to contain the offices of the *COMINTERN* Executive Committee. The third, in the form of a cylinder, was the only one that reminded of the initial agitprop destination that had to shelter an information center. The fourth volume, a hemisphere, was designed as an astronomical station. The higher the volumes were, their scale was smaller and smaller to lighten the building.

The final destination of the monument made Tatlin emphasize its symbolic character. Intended to be the premises of a future international parliament and, at the same time, the seat of a world revolutionary government, the monument more and more became the symbol of the globe. At the same time, the presence of such a building in Petrograd or Moscow would have emphasized their status as international revolutionary centers to make obvious the association between his tower and the earth, Tatlin established direct relations between the elements of the monument and some physical characteristics of the planet. This search for symbolism went hand in hand with his concern for kinetics. Unsatisfied with the remarkable feeling of ascent created by the double spiral that pierced the sky like a giant gimlet, Tatlin looked for the further movement that would enhance the general dynamism of the building. Therefore, Tatlin who, quoted by George Annenkov, "had not been afraid to say that his heart was also a machine"[69] designed an interior mechanism, a machine heart to animate the monument. Thus he made the four inner volumes rotate at different speeds: the lower volume was to complete one rotation per year, the pyramid one rotation per month, the cylinder one rotation per day, and the hemisphere one rotation per hour. If the rotation of the two upper volumes was easily followed, the rotation of the two lower volumes was certainly too slow to be perceived by the human eye and was mainly only a symbolic element. The different speeds were related not only with the position and the dimension of the volumes but

[69] George Annenkov, *People and Portraits3 A Tragic Circle*, New York: The Inter-Languages Literary Associates, 1966, Vol. 2, p. 243.

also with their destination. The legislative element was the slowest, the executive was faster, and the information unit, the most dynamic by its nature, was the fastest of the three. As for the fourth volume, its rotation speed had very little if anything to do with its function; in fact, its hourly rotation could only impede a true astronomic observatory. To make the rotation movements possible, Tatlin imagined an ingenious system of double rings, one fixed on the spiral, and the other one surrounding every volume. The height of the monument was also fixed in accordance with the dimension of the earth; it had to be 1/1000.000 of the meridian which is 400 meters. This was a very remarkable height at that time, so the *Monument to the Third International* can really be considered as "the first European sky-scrapper."[70] Similarly, the materials which had to be used for the actual building of the monument were iron and glass. If Iron were used similarly to the *Eiffel Tower*, glass was to be used in a very original way. Forerunner of today's energy savers, Tatlin imagined a very unusual conditioning system; he designed double glass walls for every inner volume. A vacuum space was to be created between the walls, which in Tatlin's opinion, would act like a thermos flask and maintain a constant temperature in the interior.

However, despite Tatlin's alleged desire for architectural practicality, the aesthetic and symbolic ground prevailed on the constructive aspects of his choice. Aesthetically, the play of openings in the metallic lace of the double spiral skeleton and of glass volumes created double transparency that lowed an interpenetrating of the interior and the exterior space never achieved before in architectural work.

Symbolically, both iron and glass embodied modernity: they were "the materials of a modern Classicism." According to his theory of the "culture of materials,"[71] the inherent physical properties of metal made it the obvious choice for a dynamic utilization.

Despite this, certainly, his choice of metal was not motivated only by his will to experiment with the aesthetic possibilities of relatively new building material. In fact, Tatlin's preference matched with a true mysticism of metal that had developed in Russia in the first revolutionary years.

[70] Anatolii Strigalev, "Proekt pamiatnnika IIII internatsitsionala" in *Vladimir Tatlin*, Moscow, 1977, p. 17.

[71] Aesthetic theory developed by Tatlin from 1914 that maintained that the real mission of the artist is no longer to reproduce the world but to express the "true" nature of materials, which have to be used in a "rational" way.

As it has been previously discussed, this metal worship was rooted in PROLETKULT aesthetics, as well as in the well-known Marxist dogma that stipulated the amount of metal production can measure the degree of industrial development of a given society. So, Trotsky stated that "metal is the foundation of the scientific industrial organization and, consequently, it should also be the material of the new proletarian style in contrast to the past wood culture." The PROLETKULT considered metal the prerequisite of industrialization, thus an important factor for the birth and the development of the proletariat. Ehrenburg was also contaminated and "dreamed about metal." The symbolic character of materials was commonly admitted, as seen in El Lissitzky's dictum: "Iron is strong like the will of the proletariat; glass is clear like its conscience."

Very few of its viewers remained neutral in front of the model, which had been exhibited in Petrograd for the third anniversary of the revolution, in a prestigious place, where the Eighth All-Russian Soviet Congress was held. It was there that the *Monument to the Third International* was seen by Lenin, Trotsky, Lunacharsky, and other Bolshevik leaders, as well as by the delegates to the Congress, who came from all the corners of Soviet Russia. Its impact on the fellow-artists was indeed great, even though the model stayed on exhibition only for several days. It generated sharp and passionate polemics that lasted for years and which, in some respect, had not abated even today. The avant-garde writers and artists linked to the communists were generally favorable. Mayakovsky declared that "the new kinetic architecture made the *Eiffel Tower* appear like a mere bottle," and that the *Monument to the Third International* was among the most representative items of the art of October together of Meyerhold staging of *Mysteria Buff* and Vasily Kamensky's poem *Stenka Razin*. The same as Mayakovsky, Brik asserted that the monument is a more important creation than the *Eiffel Tower*, and Victor Shklovsky wrote a sympathetic article in *Zhizn' isskustva* (The Life of Art). Ehrenburg also admired the model greatly. Under the name of the "artistic-constructor" Vasily Belov, who was building the "monument of a new era," Tatlin would become the hero of one of Ehrenburg's short stories, *Vitrion*.

The reaction of the power was mostly negative. Lenin's opinion of the *Monument to the Third International* was not preserved but, considering his well-known traditionalist taste, it could not have been a favorable one. His interest in monuments was purely instrumental, what was important for him was their immediate use for propaganda. In a letter to

Lunacharsky, he recommended the use of cheap and perishable concrete instead of granite or marble, to speed up the project, and concluded: "At the moment, I cannot afford to think about eternity."[72]

Lunacharsky was horrified at the idea of seeing the monument erected: "Comrade Tatlin has created a paradoxical building that can now be seen in one of the halls of the Union House. Guyde Maupassant wrote that he was prepared to flee from Paris to avoid seeing the iron monster known as the *Eiffel Tower*, but in my opinion, the *Eiffel Tower* is a thing of beauty compared with Tatlin's slanting building. I believe it would be a matter of great exasperation, not only to myself, if Moscow or Petersburg were to be adorned with such a product from the creative imagination of one of our most important modern artists."[73]

Trotsky's reaction was more complex; he was responsive to the modernism of Tatlin's approach, who was "undoubtedly right in discarding from his project national styles, allegorical sculpture, modeled monograms, flourishing and tails, and attempted to subordinate the entire design to a correct constructive use of the material," but he was rather disappointed with Tatlin's final achievement. Trotsky described the metallic props and piles of the external skeleton of the monument as "unremoved scaffolding" and severely questioned the reason to be of the rotating devices and other mechanolatric provisions, which he dialectically interpreted as nothing else but "reflexions of the Russian backwardness."[74]

The *Monument to the Third International* was never erected and the Third International itself no longer exists. Communism itself was officially abandoned in Russia and the satellite countries, and only some leftists beyond redemption still dream of an international revolution to come. However, the story of Tatlin's *Tower* is still significant. It is true; the project was more than ambitious for the precarious state of the Russian post-revolutionary economy. Ironically, unable to find an electric engine, Tatlin had to make the base of the model hollow to hide an assistant who had to turn the inner volumes with a crank. The four volumes were in cardboard instead of glass, and the spirals were in wood instead of

[72] Natalia Murray, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde: The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin,* Leiden: Brill, 2012 p. 87.

[73] Anatolii Lunacharsky, "The Soviet State and the Arts", *Izvestiia VTSIK*, November 29, 1922. This excerpt is translated in *Vladimir Tatlin*, 1968.

[74] Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, op. cit.

metal, which was sacrilege for the author of the "culture of materials" theory, which stipulated that every material has its own peculiar nature. Nevertheless, the fact that the *Monument to the Third International* has not been realized cannot be justified by economic reasons alone. If Tatlin utopically wanted his monument to be a symbol of the possible unity between the avant-garde and the Bolshevik revolution, between the free development of art and communism, its non-fulfillment is highly symbolic for the failure of Utopia, anticipating the instrumentalization of art that became the rule in the communist system.

## The End of Art and the Construction of Life

If for avant-garde artists such as Naum Gabo and his brother Antoine Pevsner their art was limited to pure formal research, for a significant part of the other avant-garde artists their artistic practice had a strong political dimension. Understanding that their approach had no future in Russia, both Gabo and Pevsner emigrated in 1922. But the majority of the avant-garde who remained hotly debated the role of art in the new society. The very notion of the artist was suspected and considered a romantic relic that has no more use in the new world. The role of art, they believed, could no longer be the creation of an artistic object supposed to convey just aesthetic pleasure. Contemplation and enjoyment were not enough. Paradoxically, the only possibility to continue to justify art was to make it die and replace it with a new type of art, which had to merge into life. Taking out art from the confined space of the museum, gallery, and private art collection to make its renewal possible was mandatory. Moreover, art had to give up creating "beauty" and become useful. Painting and sculpture, even the abstract ones, were perceived as obsolete. Nikolai Tarabukin, surely the most interesting art theorist of the revolutionary years, published in 1923 a provocative essay, *From the Easel to the Machine*, in which he argued that painting was dead. The essay was a development of a lecture that he gave at INKhUK in 1921 entitled significantly "The Last Painting Has Been Painted." The title referred to a painting by Rodchenko, *Pure Red on Red* which, together with *Pure Yellow on Yellow* and *Pure Blue and Blue*, had been exhibited at the *5 xx 5 = 25* show (1921) in Moscow. The monochrome series was an attempt to continue the series of *Black on Black* paintings from 1918 and *go* beyond Malevich's suprematism. The use of primary colors, which, when mixed, could produce any color, and the abandon of any relation

between form and background, still present in Malevich's *White Square on White* (1918), were an attempt to expose the zero point of painting. In doing this, affirmed Tarabukin, Rodchenko "wanted to get rid of representation, he achieved this only at the cost of destroying painting and only at the cost of destroying himself as a painter."[75] In Tarabukin's opinion, the artist had reached an impasse because devoid of representation, Rodchenko's canvas was just "a meaningless, dumb, and blind wall." Hence, by searching the limit of painting, Rodchenko unwillingly demonstrated its inherent representational character. As a figurative art, painting is outdated and "must become silent." Tarabukin's second argument was that "abstracted from all content, the pure form around which art has evolved during the last decade has ultimately revealed its insubstantiality; it has exposed the fruitlessness of art divorced from life and the inability of the typical forms of creativity, suitable only for the graveyard of the museum, to survive in contemporary conditions." From a larger perspective, "the 'picture' as the typical form of visual art also loses its meaning as a social phenomenon." Inevitably a museum art, painting is inappropriate for the democratization of art imposed by the new social relations.

One year before Tarabukin, the constructivist theorist Aleksei Gan had expressed even more radical views. What has to die, maintained Gan in his book *Constructivism* (1922), was not merely painting but art as such. If Tarabukin's main argument was also internal to art history, Gan's reasoning was ideological. From a Marxist perspective, being a superstructure, art as a pure aesthetic activity had to die together with the bourgeois structure that generated it. There was no place for it in the new communist society. "Art is indissolubly linked with theology, mysticism, and metaphysics." Resultantly, "death to art! It aroused naturally, developed naturally, and disappeared naturally. Marxists must work to elucidate its death scientifically and to formulate new phenomena of artistic labor within the new historic environment of our time."[76] He distinguished between two types of constructivism, "the Western one and ours." The first "mate with art" while ours "has declared uncompromising war on

[75] Nikolai Tarabukin, *From the Easel to the Machine*, 1923, pp. 139–140, https://monoskop.org/images/9/98/Tarabukin_Nikolai_1923_From_the_Easel_to_the_Machine.pdf

[76] Aleksei Gan, "Constructivism" in John E. Bowlt ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism 1902–1924*, New York: The Viking Press, 1976, p. 221.

art."[77] The former was not fundamentally new but the second, "the slender child of an industrial culture"[78] was advancing.

The artists representing this second constructivism took the thesis of the death of art very seriously and made a shift in their creative activity. Even radical works of art as Tatlin's *Counter-reliefs* or Rodchenko's monochromes were considered anachronistic. Painting and sculpture became superfluous and had to disappear in favor of objects of use. The New Man will live in a new world and would naturally need new objects. Tatlin famously declared that "he would not create any more useless *Counter-reliefs* but produce useful pans instead," and dedicated himself to the production of utilitarian objects. The "Report of the Section of Material Culture" of Petrograd GINKhUK (1924) of which he was the head, mentioned: a fireplace-norm for workers' apartments was developed in three variants: a model of a complex stove-range with all the means for preparing food, a model of a simplified stove, and a model of an economical stove. Beside the stoves, they created clothes: "(1) A man's overcoat; (2) A jacket; (3) A smock; (4) Trousers for workers and citizens of the USSR."[79] Clothing[80] was strategically important because, more than simply covering the body, it played an essential social role. If traditionally, clothes had been one of the most powerful elements to express class differences, communist clothes were expected to promote the contrary, egalitarianism. New Man's dress had to fight individualistic tendencies and convey the feeling of belonging to mass. The idea to suppress sartorial differences to reinforce the cohesion of the social body was already present in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and taken up by Bogdanov who dresses his communist Martians from *Red Star* in identical garments. In Evgeny Zamiatin's celebrated satire *We* (1920),

[77] Kristin Romberg, *Gan's Constructivism: Aesthetic Theory for an Embedded Modernism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019, p. 61.

[78] Gan, p. 222.

[79] Vladimir Tatlin, "Report of the Section for Material Culture's Research Work for 1924" in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood eds., *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 329.

[80] For details, see Radu Stern "Ni vers le nouveau, ni vers l'ancien, mais vers ce qui est nécessaire: Tatline et le problème du vêtement" in *Europe 1910–1939: quand l'art habillait le vêtement*, Paris Musées, 1997, Radu Stern, *Against Fashion: Clothing as Art 1850–1930*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004, pp. 45–62, and Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions. The Socialist Object of Russian Constructivism*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005.

*The State Institute for Artistic Culture.

the citizens of the Single State had to wear the same blue "unifs," as "being original destroys equality." George Orwell's characters of his *1984* (1949) dystopia were dressed in the same blue overalls. At the time of the Cultural Revolution in communist China, this attempt to sartorial uniformization of society was put into practice. The prescribed puritan style *Mao* unisex garb discontinued any social distinction and also gender differences.

Tatlin's clothes were not supposed to be "smart" or "beautiful", even less "fashionable," as "fashion," a bourgeois phenomenon, was not taken into account. They had to be functional and economical, long-lasting, and easy to clean. The most interesting, the overcoat was designed to be adapted to the terrible shortage of cloth of that time. Tatlin noticed that parts of the outfit did not wear out in the same way, and constructed the first modular coat whose parts could be replaced separately when this was necessary. So, the overcoat lasted much longer than a usual one-piece one. The importance of the project went far beyond practicality and economy, as Tatlin imagined a design method in which the garment was not "drawn" but "constructed." Some critics consider Tatlin's clothes ugly but they were admired by Punin: "Then Tatlin showed us his suit. To me, it was simply aesthetically pleasant. Despite Petrograd State Clothing, it would be so great for Europe if people arrived from Russia in clothes of Tatlin's cut instead of Parisian jackets. What independence from Europe, what firmness of approach there would be in this simple and essentially completely attainable act!".[81]

From all artistic practices, easel painting was the most attacked. Brik wrote: "The easel painting is not only unnecessary to our present art culture but is one of the most powerful brakes for its development."[82] In this context, Rodchenko changed the orientation of his students from art to creating utilitarian objects: "I transferred the guys from visual arts work to design and modeling of furniture and club equipment."[83]

[81] Nikolai Punin, *The Diaries of Nikolai Punin* 1904–1953, ed. Sidney Monat and Jennifer Greene Krupala, trans. Jennifer Greene Krupala, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999, p. 129.

[82] Osip Brik, "From Picture to Calico-Print" in Harrison and Wood, p. 326.

[83] Aleksandr Rodchenko, "LEF Notebook" in Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, New York: The Museum for Modern Art, 2005, p. 201.

Rodchenko's wife, Varvara Stepanova, gave up "easelism" and began to design also clothes, which she divided into three categories, according to their use: *prozodezhda*, for work, *sportodezhda*, for sport, and *spetsodezhda*, for special use. Rather than painting, clothes were supposed to influence directly the psyche of people wearing them, helping to transform them into the New Woman and the New Man. Thus, Stepanova and Tatlin believed, they could act on the *byt*, the daily existence, and change the world. In doing so, the artist justified his role in the new society by his direct contribution at *zhiznestroenie*, the construction of life itself. The hierarchy between so-called "pure art", that is painting and sculpture, and what was wrongly called "applied art," namely the creation of objects, must be suppressed. "We do not understand why someone who makes paintings is spiritually more elevated than one who makes fabric,"[84] asserted Brik. In his opinion, all categories of artists are the same, workers in the field of art.

The utilitarian objects created by constructivist artists were meant to be prototypes for the industry. However, very few, such as the cotton-printing designs by Liubov Popova, had been put into production. Nevertheless, these objects were by far more ambitious than to be utilitarian. As Rodchenko explained in a letter from Paris, they had to be different from capitalist objects that were just "slaves," that is just useful. Socialist objects should be more than a possession, they were "comradely," they were considered "active, almost animated, participants in social life."[85]

> A successful painter himself, Rodchenko abandoned also painting in favor of photography that, in his opinion, was more adequate to act on the *byt*. A painting exhibited in a museum could be seen, at best, by several thousand people, a photograph published in *Pravda* could be seen by several million. As Sergey Tretiakov, the editor-in-chief of *N*ovyi *LEF* (the abbreviation for The New LEFt front of Art) argued: "Soviet reality fixed by the lens of a Soviet camera … which finds a place in the pages of an illustrated journal is as important and essential as daily bread. But the same material hanging on the walls of an AKhRR exhibition in the form of an easel painting—which for all its sympathies in this direction the AKhRR hasn't an idea

[84] , Brik, "Our agenda" 1921, trans. Natasha Kurchanova, *October*, Vol. 132, Fall 2010, p. 82.

[85] Kiaer, p. 1.

where to put or how to use—is material fixed by the outworn devices of a transplant art and therefore material ruined."[86]

## Social Condensers

Architects were expected to follow the same pattern. They did not build just edifices or houses, they wanted to build life itself. They were convinced that the architectural structuring of space could influence the behavior of its inhabitants and metamorphose them in New Women and New Men. For them, the building was not, like for Le Corbusier, just "a machine for living in" but a machine to mold the New Man. The types of buildings the architects dealt with were not chosen primarily because of need but because of the social impact that was estimated from an ideological point of view. At a time when schools and hospitals were badly needed, they built clubs like Konstantin Melnikov's *Russakov Workers Club* (*1927–1928*) or *Zuyev Club* (1929) by Ilya Golossov. The clubs' function was to organize the workers' collective leisure, thus reinforcing the New Man's collectivism. They were supposed to operate as "social condensers," a term coined at the time to express the social impact of this new type of architecture. According to the architect Ivan Leonidov: "We need not merely new clubs, but clubs—inventions, insofar as these are not clubs for playing whist and dancing the quadrille, but clubs designed for brand new, previously unheard-of human relations, new 'Social Condensers' of our time."[87]

Another ideologically motivated project was the crematorium, like the one designed by Melnikov in 1919. The crematorium was a central element in the regime's anti-religious propaganda. Orthodox religious people believed they would not resurrect if they were not properly buried. Communists were supposed to select cremation against the observance of the traditional ground burial rite as an ultimate proof of their atheism.

Housing was conceived in the same way, not as a neutral shelter but as an instrument that helped to produce the New Man. Constructivist architects firmly believed in the potential of architecture to do so. Individual

[86] Sergei Tretiakov, "We Raise the Alarm," *Novyi LEF*, No. 11–12, http://theoria.art-zoo.com/we-raise-the-alarmsergei-tretyakov/.

[87] Quoted in Michal Murawski "Revolution and the Social Condenser: How Soviet Architects Sought a Radical New Society", *Strelka,* September 26, 2017, https://strelkamag.com/en/article/architecturerevolutionsocial-condenser.

housing was not advised because it was expected to generate individualism. Instead, they favored *dom-kommuna* (communal house) meant to facilitate "new relations falling under the notion of community."[88] In this type of housing, workers were allowed a certain level of privacy in very small individual units, but in which the main kitchen, cafeteria, laundry, and spaces for children's raising were common. Like this, the workers' were almost all the time under control: eight hours of work in the factory, eight hours of rest in a *dom-kommuna*, and eight hours of leisure to be commonly experienced in a club. This model of housing was supposed to have a great impact on behavior and reinforce the workers' collectivism. The most celebrated building designed to meet this goal was undoubtedly Moisei Ginzburg's *Narkomfin*[89] (1932) in Moscow. Ironically, only bureaucrats, managerial staff from *Narkomfin* (The People's Commissariat for Finance) lived in it; ordinary workers could not even dream to get an apartment there.

Due to the difficult economic conditions, very few such *doma-kommuny* were actually built. In practice, the housing model in which ordinary people lived was the *kommunalnaia kvartira*, in which several families shared a common apartment expropriated from its former owners. Many of these still subsist today, as they never succeeded to solve the problem of housing.

Urbanism was also approached from an ideological point of view. For a Marxist, the town had generated the bourgeoisie but it had also the power to transform backward and uneducated *muzhiks* (pejorative for peasants) into self-conscious proletarians, considered the most advanced class in the world.

## A Literature of Fact

In the same way that the artist worker gave up obsolete artistic practices such as easel painting and produced utilitarian objects, writers must abandon traditional literary genres such as the novel and the story and

[88] D. Movilla Vega, "Housing and Revolution: From the Dom-Kommuna to the Transitional Type of Experimental House (1926–30)". *Architectural Histories*, Vol. 8, No.1, 2020, p. 2. http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.264

[89] For Narkomfin, see Victor Buchli, "Moisei Ginsburg's Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow: Contesting the Social and Material World", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,* Vol. 57, No. 2, June 1988.

orient themselves toward more concrete forms. The psychological plot was considered outmoded, too individualistic, and not adapted to reflect Soviet life. This was the *credo* of a group of theorists and writers that gravitated around the avant-garde magazine *Novyi LEF* (The New LEFt Front of Art), the most important being Tretiakov, Brik, and Nikolai Chuzhak. What was needed instead, they believed, was *literatura fakta*, the literature of fact. This gave the name of the group, *faktoviki*, the factists.

Highly critical of the romantic idea of the "creative personality" of the writer,[90] the *faktoviki* recommended an impersonal style of writing. Influenced by the collectivist theories of the PROLETKULT, Tretiakov imagined a "literary *artel*", *a* literary cooperative that was based on collective writing. The idea was put into practice by the Leningrad publisher Izogiz.[91] In doing so, Tretiakov frontally attacked the concept of authorship and the aura that surrounded the writer. At the time when the Party and the Central Committee studied the facts scientifically and took political decisions, commented he ironically, the writer claimed to be "his own supreme judge, to have his own directions and his own political bureau." The writer's individualism, his aspiration for independence are politically dangerous. The solution: "The dezindividualization and the deprofesionalization of the writer are the two paths through which we can crush the malignant resistance of the aesthetic caste."[92] The new literature was to be rationally planned, as Katerina Clark correctly noted, "the cultural correlative of the Five-Year Plan."[93]

The traditional hierarchy that stipulated the superiority of the novelist over the mere newspaperman must be abolished together with the admiration for *belles letres*. The author's subjective vision was no longer adequate and must be substituted by the "objective" approach of the factist writer. For Tretiakov, the personal style of a writer was an antiquated notion. The "literature of fact" did not require figures of speech but clarity and precision. Instead of writing traditional books, the factist writer was advised to write in newspapers or/and in magazines. The newspaper, asserted

[90] For LEF's theory, see Dobrenko, 2005, pp. 52–74.f.

[91] Dobrenko, p. 66.

[92] Sergei Tretiakov, "To Be Continued", *October*, Vol. 118, Fall 2006, p. 52.

[93] Katerina Clark, *Moscow, Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941,* Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 49.

Tretiakov in an anthology entitled *The Literature of Fact* published by Chuzhak in 1929, "is for today's Soviet citizen the same thing as the Bible for the Christian in the Middle Ages." Any Soviet citizen, wrote the LEF theorist, reads regularly the newspaper, "the Bible of today." Newspaper reading was more important than reading a sentimental novel because the reader could be informed of the most recent political decisions. The reportage was the preferred literary genre because it was based on facts, by far more interesting than an invented plot. "Now we know that a real fact is a thousand times more meaningful than an artistic invention. We need facts in order to know life, to study it, to change it," stated Brik.[94] As such, the reportage was the most adequate literary form for *zhiznestroenie*, the life-building. Besides reportage, Tretiakov recommended other non-fictional genres such as the biography, the autobiography, or the interview, all based on the collection of facts.

However, explained Tretiakov, all facts were not the same: "For us, factist (*faktovikov*) there is no such thing as a fact 'as such.' There is fact-as-effect and the fact-as-defect. Facts that strengthen our socialist positions and the fact that weakens it. Fact-as-friend and fact-as-enemy."[95] Surely, the true communist factist would deal only with the first category of facts. The "objectivity" claimed by the *faktoviki* disappeared in front of their political commitment. The selection of facts passed through a politically-oriented filter. As the literary critic Lydia Ginzburg noted: "The literature of facts, in which Brik believes ((if he *does* believe in it.) has a need for ethics instead of (bourgeois)) aesthetics. It should be honest."[96] In fact, in their eyes it **was** honest except that their loyalty was not directed to the reader, their honesty and sincerity were offered to the communist Party. What was directing them in their search for facts was not the search for "truth" but the will to fulfill the *sotsialnyi zakaz*, the social command.

[94] Brik, "Photomontage", trans. Natasha Kurchanova, *October*, Vol. 134, Fall 2010, p. 85.

[95] Tretiakov, "To Be Continued", p. 5.

[96] Quoted in Emily Van Buskirk, *Lydia Ginzburg's Prose: Reality in Search of Literature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 76.

## A Photograph by Rodchenko

To understand better how Tretiakov's theory of "effective and defective" facts operated, let us analyze a photograph by Rodchenko, *The Orchestra*, representing an orchestra playing in a gigantic construction site. Photographed in 1932, it was published in the December 1933 issue of *USSR na Stroike* (USSR in construction), a propaganda publication edited in several foreign languages and printed in luxurious typographic conditions. The magazine was distributed mainly abroad.[97]

Photography,[98] as a medium, was favored by the *faktoviki* for its exactitude. Brik praised pure photography, non-contaminated by any kind of artistry or what the critic called "photographic trifles."[99] As such, Brik thought the medium was inherently objective and an ideal propaganda instrument. Evidently, such a photograph cannot exist because any photograph is the consequence of a sum of decisions taken by the photographer, not a mechanical copy of "reality."

In Rodchenko's case, the most striking visual element is the abrupt, almost vertical perspective. At the time, Rodchenko, as almost all professional photographers worked with Rolex cameras, which were commonly used at the navel level. In several texts, he criticized the choice of the frontal point of view, a position from "the middle to the middle."[100] He maintained that this choice, which he called "the perspective of the navel," could produce only banal images.

The top-down point of view was chosen as a photographic equivalent of the formalist concept of *ostranenie*, usually translated as estrangement. In his article "Art and Technique" (1917), which became famous, the formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky asserted that the estrangement, the negation of habit, that is the new way in which an object or a situation is viewed or described, is a *sine qua non* condition to render it artistic. By selecting that very unusual angle, Rodchenko succeeded in creating a new, unseen view of the orchestra, which made his photograph artistic. One cannot but highlight the contradiction between Rodchenko's photographic practice and his theoretic declarations. Four years before the

[97] Katerina Clark, *Moscow, Fourth Rome,* p. 6.

[98] For a very stimulating discussion of the relation between factography and photography, see Leah Dickerman, "Fact and Photograph", *October*, Vol. 118, Fall 2006.

[99] Brik, "Photomontage", op. cit., p. 86.

[100] Aleksandr Rodchenko, "LEF Notebook", p. 199.

creation of the photograph, he wrote: "Art has no place in modern life. It will continue to exist as long as there is a mania for the romantic and as long as there are people who love beautiful lies and deception. Every modern cultured man must wage war against art as against opium."[101] Nevertheless, during the debate about formalism and naturalism in photographic art that took place in 1935 around the exhibition Masters of the Soviet Photographic Art, Rodchenko had to make a severe self-criticism and recant his former formalist leanings.

The choice of eccentric points of view was not just an artistic decision. By using unusual perspectives, Rodchenko believed he could influence perception: "I shall summarize: in order to teach man how to see from new viewpoints it is necessary to photograph ordinary, well-known objects from completely unexpected viewpoints and in unexpected positions …".[102]

Apparently, Rodchenko's image showed an ordinary construction site in which workers work in the sound of music. But if someone read the caption, one learned that the "workers" were in fact "thieves, bandits, *kulaks* (wealthy peasants that opposed collectivization and were treated as class enemies), wreckers and criminals." In reality, the construction site was a very special one, the site of the *Belomorkanal* (The White Sea Channel), one of the main projects of the *piatiletka*, the Five-Year Plan; 227 km long, the channel had to link the White Sea to the Baltic Sea, passing through Leningrad.

It was also the first giant *GULAG*, the site being placed under the authority of the OGPU, the new name of the secret police, it was also the first time slave labor was used on such a large-scale. The "bandits" and "thieves" mentioned in the caption were in truth in the vast majority political prisoners. The working conditions were terrible. Almost without mechanical equipment, the prisoners had to dig with picks and shovels into hard rock The deadline of twenty months was impossible for building a channel that could function. The number of victims is under debate, the lowest estimation being 25,000. Lacking depth, the channel had never been really used. However, this absolute fiasco was presented as one of

[101] Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Against the Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot", *Novyi LEF*, 1928, https://theoria.art-zoo.com/against-the-synthetic-portrait-for-the-snapshot/.

[102] Aleksandr Rodchenko, "The Path of Contemporary Photograph" in Rodchenko, 2005, op. cit., p. 211.

the great achievements of the *piatiletka*. As in many other communist examples, the bigger the failure, the bigger the lie about.

The channel had been baptized *Stalin* and was advertised as a major step for the modernization of the Soviet Union. It generated a huge propaganda campaign: the press published regularly reportages and the radio followed the advancement of the project; also posters were everywhere. Even a popular cigarette brand was named *Belomorkanal.* Stalin, together with Sergei Kirov, Kliment Voroshilov, and Genrich Yagoda, the chief of the OGPU, inaugurated the channel on August 2, 1932. The event was immortalized in a big painting by Dmitri Nalbandian. Five years later, when Yagoda was arrested on false charges as a German spy and shot, his figure was erased from the painting and repainted with a mantel put on a chair, to balance the composition.

The OGPU invited a group of writers and artists to visit the channel and to write about it. Maxim Gorky was the leader of the group but finally did not join. Nevertheless, he edited a collective volume *The History of the Construction of the Stalin White Sea-Baltic Channel* (1934), "one of the most suspect texts of the Soviet literature."[103]

In the first issue of *URSS na Stroike,* Gorky wrote: "just as the sun cannot be accused of disturbing the facts, photography is the best reflection of the dynamics of socialist construction." In this vision, which makes one now smiling, photography was presented as the medium that, necessarily, tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! But what was the truth of Rodchenko's photograph?

Along with the building of the channel, the *Belomor* project had an even greater ambition than just the construction of an important economic objective. That ambition was a large-scale attempt of *perekovka*, [104] the reforging of men in New Men. Through hard work and political reeducation, the "enemies of the people" were offered a chance of redeeming to become obedient Soviet citizens. This model of "reeducation through hard work that redeems" had been largely used also by Nazism and after WW2 was exported to the satellite countries. It is still

[103] Mary A, Nicholas and Cynthia A. Ruder, "In Search of the Collective Author: Fact and Fiction in the Soviet 1930s", *Book History,* Vol. 11, 2008, p. 224.

[104] For details about *perekovka*, see Julie Draskoczy, *Belomor: Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's G*ULAG, Ch. one, "The Factory of Life". Brookline: Academic Studies Press, 2014.

used in communist China now. The collective volume mentioned above-prized *perekovka* as well as the actual construction. Nonetheless, none of the Soviet writers reached the exaltation of Louis Aragon, who declared that *perekovka*, "the prodigious science of man's reeducation, which transforms a criminal into a useful man" is an extraordinary experience, as important as Newton's apple in physics or the transformation of apes into men.[105] Full of admiration, Rodchenko wrote that: "Man arrives downcast, punished, and embittered and leaves with a proudly held head, with a decoration on his breast, and with a start in life. And it reveals to him all the beauty of real, heroic, creative labor. I was staggered by the sensitivity and the wisdom with which the reeducation of the people was fulfilled."[106]

As the caption of the photograph read further: "For the first time, aware of the poetry of work, of the romanticism of construction, they are working in the rhythm of their own orchestra." In the light of the above, it is clear that the caption had been written according to the Tretiakov distinction between facts-as-effect and facts-as-defect. Rodchenko's photograph follows the same logic. There are no barbed wire, no watchtowers, no police dogs, no armed guards, and no dead bodies in the image. All these existed, of course, but they were facts-as-defects, they were facts that were enemies that must not be taken into account. Only the facts belonging to the first category should be present in the image. In this view, the hellish environment of the *Belomorkanal was* metamorphosed in an open-air concert area, the OGPU was presented as a group of "educators" and the *GULAG* glorified as a reeducation center. In a way, this image could be seen as anticipating the views of another infamous camp orchestra that played near the odious words. *Arbeit Macht Frei*.

From an art-historical point of view, the aesthetic value of this work is enormous, one of the essential elements of the history of photography. Its artistic quality was created using the formalist principle of transfiguring the facts. However, for Rodchenko's contemporaries, this image had to principally function as a documentary photograph. Nevertheless, this photograph does not document the factual reality of the construction of the *Belomorkanal* other than for the archives of an Orwellian Ministry

[105] Louis Aragon, *Pour un réalisme socialiste*, Paris: Denoël, 1935, p. 7.

[106] Quoted in Julie Draskoczy, op. cit., p. 135.

of Truth. The photograph has absolutely a documentary value but, paradoxically, generated not by the facts that are present in the image but by the absent facts. The image showed a fictional "reality" but documented the communist propaganda use of the photograph, a medium that does not tell the truth but induces the feeling of truth in the viewer. It would be an error to interpret Rodchenko's praxis as self-censorship or as a strategy for survival. At the time still a convinced communist, Rodchenko did not follow the reality of facts but another reality, that of the *sotsialnyi zakaz*, the social command. What was factually true had to subordinate to what was ideologically "true." His allegiance was not to truthfulness but to the communist Party. His actual task then was not to produce an objective reportage but to conceive and convey propaganda images that had to look "true." In fact, Rodchenko did not operate with truth but with veracity.

## Fellow Travelers

Despite Lenin's already quoted maxim "those who are not with us are against us," there was an intermediate section of the *intelligentsia* that was not officially affiliated with the Bolsheviks but was not against them either. To name them, Trotsky coined the term *poputchik*, translated as fellow traveler. In a speech given on May 9 at the Press Department of the Central Committee on *Party Policy in the Field on Imaginative Literature*, he gave the following definition: "What is a fellow-traveler? In literature as in politics, we call by this name someone who, stumbling and staggering, goes up to a certain point along the same road which we shall follow much further."[107] Trotsky's criteria were not literary but political, so in the group, there were writers with very different styles such as the peasant poets Nikolai Kliuev and Sergei Esenin, Vsevolod Ivanov from the Serapion Fraternity,[108] and Marietta Shaginyan who, not notwithstanding she was described as "anti-revolutionary through her very essence," was given nevertheless a place as *poputchitsa*.[109] In Trotsky's opinion, the fellow travelers were a transitional category, meant to disappear when the

[107] Leon Trotsky, "Class and Art", in Appendix, The Selected Works of Alexandr Bogdanov, op. cit., pp. 50–51.

[108] The name o the group was inspired by the hermit Serapion, a character from E.T.A. Hoffmann's stories.

[109] Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, Ch. 2.

truly revolutionary literature would be developed enough. He made an essential distinction between the *émigré* writers, who had to be banned, and the *poputchiki*, who should be let to publish.[110] As early as June 1922, Trotsky sent a letter to the Politburo in which he complained that "without a doubt, we are risking losing the young poets, artists, and others who are drawn to us," and advocated a policy of publishing them: "… only in an extreme case would their publication be subject to prohibition."[111]

The proletarian writer's association RAPP ((Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), which claimed the status of Party's voice in the literary field, rejected the very idea of fellow travelers. Their slogan was explicit enough: "Not a fellow traveler, but an ally or a foe."[112] The fellow travelers were considered class enemies on the literary front. *Their main argument* against them was that the fellow travelers did not have a proletarian origin. As literature has a class character, the non-proletarians can create only bourgeois literature. According to the RAPP members, only a true proletarian can create genuine proletarian literature.

In this conception, one could find the germs of the "healthy origin" policy that would develop in the Soviet Union and was exported after in the satellite countries. In the communist meritocracy system, the "healthy origin" was as important as that of being "well-born" under the *ancien régime*. Needless to say, it was applied to all social life. When candidates were screened to get a job or a promotion, the "healthy origin" criterion was the first to be examined, not their personal qualifications. The policy of proletarization of the Party, the state administration, and the *intelligentsia* initiated by Stalin was strictly enforced. In Hungary, for instance, the candidates for the entrance examination for the university were classed in several categories according to their social origin. The absolute priority was given to the sons and daughters of the Party apparatus. The last category, marked with the code "X" designated "the class

[110] Evgeny Dobrenko, Galin Tikhonov, *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet* Age *and Beyond*, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2011, p. 19.

[111] Leon Trotsky, "Letter to Politburo from June 30, 1922" in Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko, with Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov, *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917–1953*, New Haven: Yale Universty Press, pp. 34–35.

[112] Dobrenko and Tikhonov, p. 19.

enemy," and their children were not admitted to accessing higher education Another example, Romania, where the Party had an official positive discrimination policy for admission at the university: the candidates with "healthy origin" were admitted with an average of five, the highest mark being ten. Those with "unhealthy origin" had to have an average of at least seven. These rules were valid till the beginning of the 1960s.

Answering the criticisms of the proletarian writers of the *Na Postu* (On Guard) group that objected to the space given to fellow travelers, Trotsky complained about the quality of proletarian literature and stated that, till then, it was more a political event than a literary one.

CHAPTER 2

# Stalinist Culture

Was the avant-garde the true art of the Revolution? Although that was stated so many times, one may doubt it. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Lenin fought against it from the very beginning. More sympathetic to the avant-garde, Trotsky nevertheless refused explicitly the idea that futurism was the art of the proletariat. Although a long series of books and exhibitions tried to convince us that this was the case, avant-garde art did not really concern the "New Men in-becoming," otherwise than in theory and remained a marginal phenomenon from a sociological point of view. In spite of its revolutionary rhetoric, it never succeeded in interesting the majority of people and its actual impact on the masses was much exaggerated. It is true, Tatlin's model for *The Monument to the Third International* has been paraded in the streets at revolutionary festivals but the reasons for were ideological, not aesthetic.

With rare exceptions, when they were interested in art at all, the workers favored traditional art. When in Moscow in 1922 for the Fourth Congress of the Comintern, the Croatian writer August Césarée remarked that there was not a single worker in the exhibition of Larionov, Malevich, and Tatlin. On the other hand, workers were jostling each other to see the Repin's paintings in the TretiakovGallery.[1] Their formidable

[1] Alexandar Flakker, "Presuppositions of Socialist Realism" in Hans Günther ed., *The Culture of the Stalin's Period*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 97.



R. Stern and V. Tismaneanu, *Communism and Culture*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82650-5_2

theoretical interest notwithstanding, the avant-garde periodicals, such as *LEF* and *Novyi LEF* had a better circulation due to quotations in recent Western anthologies than at the time of their publication, as the number of copies printed was small. Therefore, their actual influence on the whole cultural life must not be overestimated.

Until the end of the 1980s, Western cultural history was based on a Manichaean antagonism between "the good-ones," namely the avant-garde, and "the villains," namely the Stalinist totalitarian persecutors. This was particularly true in the field of art history, which emphasized the role of seminal artists such as Malevich and Tatlin in the evolution of modern Western art. The silencing of the avant-garde accomplished at the beginning of the 1930s was mourned as a disaster. In this perspective, socialist realism was superficially interpreted mostly as a terrible regression.

It was the merit of Boris Groys' controversial book *The Total Art of Stalinism* to have changed this misleading view. According to him, the avant-garde was not an innocent victim and socialist realism was not a regression, as it was often interpreted, but *a development*. The avant-gardist project of merging art and life was fully realized by socialist realism. In Groys' opinion, the avant-garde's and particularly the LEF-ists' negation of the autonomy of art as a specific aesthetic activity, its will to collaborate with the Soviet power and accept the *prikaz* (order) of the social command as the true mission of the artist, in fact, paved the way for socialist realism.

However, Groys erred when he stated that socialist realism has nothing to do with the masses' taste and explained its emergence as generated just by one main element, namely the avant-garde will to power, its search for hegemony, and its submission to the political authority. As for the other cultural phenomena, the causes were multiple; among many: the problem of accessibility, the Russian tradition of socially concerned art and literature, which rejected art for art's sake, the historical precedent of the potemkinades, and the changed political conditions of building socialism into one country. Although the others were important, the last cause was the decisive one. The slogan was: one Party, one state, one Leader, one way of thinking, therefore one culture. Pluralism had to be abolished. On April 23, 1932, the Resolution of the Central Committee of the communist Party "On the Restructuring of Artistic and Literary Organizations" decided: "1. Liquidation of the association of writers. 2. To unite all writers, supporting the platform of Soviet rule and endeavoring to participate in socialist construction, into a single Union of Soviet

writers with a communist fraction in it. 3. To conduct similar changes in other forms of art. 4. To instruct the organizations to work out practical measures to fulfill this decision."[2] Initially, many artists, writers, and musicians welcomed the Resolution, because it suppressed RAPP and RAPM, the Russian Association of Proletarian Artists, and the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians, which regularly attacked creators that did not have proletarian origins.

The emergence of unique creative unions that covered the entire cultural field was essential for Stalin's stick and carrot cultural policy. The crucial element that favored control was legitimacy. Before the establishment of the creative unions, any person could declare himself a writer or a painter. After, only one who was a member of one union could be officially recognized as such. This new organization gave an extraordinary powerful control instrument, because it was very easy to manipulate admissions or to organize exclusions. The carrot was as big as the stick. Prominent members were given considerable material advantages: large and comfortable apartments in central Moscow, *dachas* (week-end houses) in Peredelkino, the writers' village or in other villages around Moscow, vacation villas at the seaside and in the mountains, chauffeur-driven cars, access to the Kremlin hospital and special sanatoriums, access to special shops that sold impossible to find elsewhere goods at low special prices, access to exclusive restaurants and clubs, generous funding during the creation periods, very important royalties, regular well-paid commissions, profuse grants, a liberal system of loans, and important artistic, literary, and musical prizes. The most prestigious was the Stalin Prize, created for the *Vozhd*'s sixtieth anniversary in 1939, as a Soviet equivalent to the bourgeois Nobel Prize. Differently from its Swedish counterpart, the Stalin Prize was awarded not only for science and literature but also for music and fine arts. The prize carried a money reward of 100,000 rubles, a considerable sum that was a serious incentive. Actors, classical musicians, and ballet stars could be awarded special titles such as "Distinguished Artist" or "People's Artist" that came with important financial benefits. Of course, not all the members of the creative Unions were rewarded in the same way but even the less considered of them had access to loans and other advantages.

[2] https://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv8n1/litart.htm.

If someone was excluded from a creative union, he would immediately lose all these advantages. If a writer, it would have been very difficult to get published. If a composer, his works could not be played in the state-owned opras and concert halls. If a painter, it would have been almost impossible to be exhibited, as all galleries were controlled by the Party-state. More than that, he would lose his status as an artist or a writer and become socially vulnerable, risking being arrested as a vagrant or a parasite. Hence, rebelling against the party line was a very difficult decision. After WW2, the same organization would be imposed on all satellite "people's democracies."

The centralization process based on unique creative unions was further enhanced by the establishment in 1936 of a new administrative body, the Committee on Artistic Affairs led by Platon Kerzhentsev, the former PROLETKULT member. This committee supervised both the cultural departments of NARKOMPROS and, quite strangely, the cultural section of the Central Committee of the CPSU. The new institution's power was considerable. It had authority on GLAVLIT, and the specialized structures censoring specific domains, such as cinema and theater, and controlled all important appointments in the cultural field.

## Socialist Realism

The term "socialist realism" was used for the first time in the *Literaturnaia Gazeta* of May 25, 1932, by Ivan Gronsky, the editor of *Izvestia* (The News, the second daily in importance after *Pravda*) and President of the Organizing Committee of the USSR Union of Soviet writers Congress: "'Truth' in depiction of the revolution is a demand that we all can put before all the Soviet revolutionary process in the society, its labor and victories, and accomplishment indeed of such a social formation in which there will be no exploitation of man by man. Truth is a threat for our enemies. A truthful examination of our reality and its faithful reflection in their artistic works is the finest way of understanding the just cause and the strength of the working class and for creating pieces of art that are needed by the people building socialism and struggling for the victory of the socialist revolution in the whole world. The masses demand from the writers – *sincerity and truth about the revolutionary*

*process of socialist* realism in the depiction of the proletarian revolution."[3] It is highly ironic that the first text in which the style that would develop in what could be called the greatest cultural manipulation of truth ever claimed truthfulness so much.

In October 1932, the concept was further developed during a dinner at Gorky's place attended by Stalin, Gronsky, and other leaders. The *Vozhd* liked the term and the legend says that it was then when Stalin famously defined writers as "the engineers of human souls." The phrase was actually Yuri Olesha's but the *Vozhd* would make it his own. The formula was, as Isaiah Berlin superbly demonstrated, "was faithfully derived from Marxist premises."[4] The use of "engineers" was typical of the technocratic vision in Lenin's *The State and the Revolution* and of the *Vozhd*'s own technolatry expressed in his favorite slogan: "technique solves all problems."

Although a member of Stalin's first circle, Gronsky was purged in 1938, arrested, and spent sixteen years in the GULAG.

Already on July 28, 1934, the first page of *Pravda* read: "Our Party and Comrade STALIN [named in capital letters, just as the Tsars had once been] chose socialist realism as the path for Soviet literature and art."[5] At the First Congress of Soviet writers on August 17, 1934, in an interminable speech, Maxim Gorky, who chaired the presidium, presented a critical summary of the whole literary history from the beginnings till the contemporaneity in which socialist realism was depicted as the legitimate summit of the world literature's evolution: "Life, as asserted by socialist realism, is deeds, creativeness, the aim of which is the uninterrupted development of the priceless individual faculties of man, with a view to his victory over the forces of nature, for the sake of his health and longevity, for the supreme joy of living on an earth which, in conformity with the steady growth of his requirements, he wishes to mold throughout into a beautiful dwelling place for mankind, united into a single family."[6]

[3] Ivan Gronsky, "To Work!", *Pravda*, May 29, 1932, p. 1. https://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv8n1/litart.htm.

[4] Isaiah Berlin, *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture Under Communism*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institutions Press, 2004, p. 135.

[5] Jeffrey Brooks and Sergei I. Zhuk, *The Distinctiveness of Soviet Culture*, https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/1.

[6] Maxim Gorky, *Soviet Literature*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1934/soviet-literature.htm.

Another rapporteur at the Congress was Karl Radek, the chief of the Bureau of International Information of the Central Committee of the communist Party. He drew up an overview of contemporary Western literature, which was presented as "decadent," and deplored that some Soviet writers were influenced by it. At the end of his speech, Radek opposed James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, "a reflection of that which is most reactionary in the petty bourgeoisie" to the "healthy" socialist realism: "The literature of socialist realism does not set out to portray the world in order to satisfy curiosity, in order merely to hold the mirror up to humanity. It sets out to be a participant in the great struggle for the new Renaissance of mankind, or, to speak more exactly, not for the re-birth, but for the birth of mankind."[7] Two years later, Radek was purged, arrested, and condemned at the Second Moscow show trial at ten years of hard labor. He died in a camp.

The third rapporteur was Bukharin, who spoke about *Poetry, Poetics, and the Problems of Poetry in the USSR*. Quoting Zola celebrated statement *L'imagination n'a plus d'emploi* (Imagination is no longer needed), Bukharin emphasized the difference between the French author's naturalism and the socialist realism, which included revolutionary romanticism: "…. socialist realism does not merely register what exists, but, catching up the thread of development in the present, it leads it into the future, and leads it actively. Hence an antithesis between romanticism and socialist realism is1 devoid of all meaning."[8] Arrested in 1937, Bukharin was condemned to death and executed in March 1938.

However, although the shortest, the key speech at the congress was delivered by Andrei Zhdanov, a prominent member of Stalin's team and the true Party representative at the congress, the new rising star whom the *Vozhd* expected would replace Bukharin as the expert in cultural affairs and ideologist. After Sergei Kirov's assassination on December 1, 1934, Zhdanov succeeded him as head of the Leningrad Party organization and was a champion of repression during the Great Terror. He fancied himself as an art expert and cultural arbiter. It was clear for everyone that it was him who was the Party's voice that delivered the social command. Quoting Stalin's famous definition of writers as "engineers of human

[7] Karl Radek, *Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art*, www.marxists.org/archive/radek/1934/sovietwritercongress.htm.

[8] Nikolai Bukharin, *Poetry, Poetics, and the Problems of Poetry in the USSR*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1934/poetry/5.htm.

souls," Zhdanov clearly indicated in his speech that socialist realism was the official style of Soviet culture; "To be an engineer of human souls means standing with both feet firmly planted on the basis of real life. And this in its turn denotes a rupture with the romanticism of the old type, which depicted a non-existent life and non-existent heroes, leading the reader away from the antagonisms and oppression of real life into a world of the impossible, into a world of utopian dreams. Our literature, which stands with both feet firmly planted on a materialist basis, cannot be hostile to romanticism, but it must be a romanticism of a new type, revolutionary romanticism. We say that socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet *belles lettres* and literary criticism, and this presupposes that revolutionary romanticism should enter into literary creation as a component part, for the whole life of our Party, the whole life of the working class and its struggle consist in a combination of the sternest and sober practical work with a supreme spirit of heroic deeds and magnificent future prospects. Our Party has always been strong by virtue of the fact that it has united and continues to unite a thoroughly business-like and practical spirit with a broad vision, with a constant urge forward, with a struggle for the building of communist society. Soviet literature should be able to portray our heroes; it should be able to glimpse our tomorrow. This will be no utopian dream, for our tomorrow is already being prepared for today by dint of conscious planned work."[9] Zhdanov's definition of socialist realism would be included in the Charter of the USSR Union of Writers[10] that every member had to conform to.

The reactions to this tightening of control were diverse. Among the sycophants, there were also some discordant voices. Among them, the Formalist theorist and literary critic Viktor Shklovsky, who stated that if Dostoevsky would have attended the congress, he would have been condemned as a traitor.[11] However, the most daring speech was Isaac Babel's. Often quoted as Babel's, the statement that "the Party and the government gave the Soviet writer absolutely everything and took away from him only one thing - the right to write badly" belonged in fact

[9] Andrei Zhdanov, S*oviet Literature: The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature*, https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zdhanov.htm.

[10] Evgeny Dobrenko, *Late Stalinism: The Aesthetics of Politics*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020, p. 24.

[11] James von Geldern, *Writers' Congress*, http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1934-2/writers-congress/.

to Leonid Sobolev.[12] However, Babel had resumed ironically Sobolev's statement adding: "Comrades, let's be honest, this was a very important right and not a little is being taken from us This was a privilege we largely availed ourselves," which provoked laughter. He slyly added that he invented a new literary genre, the genre of silence. This was probably a broad hint to one of the chapters of Max Eastman's book *Artists in Uniform*, published in the United States shortly before the Congress. Entitled "The Silence of Isaac Babel," the chapter was a protest against the lack of freedom of creation in the Soviet Union: "Babel refused to surrender its incomparable pen into the hands of these new slave-drivers of creation, these brigadiers of the boy scouts of poetry, these professional vulgarians prostituting the idea of the liberation of all society by the proletariat to the task of enslaving utterance and all creative life to an iron-ribbed bureaucratic political machine."[13] In what would become sadly an anticipatory phrase, Eastman added: "He (Babel) learned that even silence is treasonable when artists are in uniform." The writer would pay dearly his bravery. Arrested in May 1939, he was tortured, and "confessed" he was spying for both France and Austria. Implied in the NKVD chief Nikolai Ezhov's trial, Babel was condemned to death and executed in 1940. In Stalin's Soviet Union, being a writer was a dangerous profession. From the 700 writers who participated in the congress, only 59 were still alive in 1954, the rest were shot or died in the camps.[14]

In 1923, Trotsky wrote in chapter seven of *Literature and Revolution*, "Communist Policy towards Art," that: "The Party leads the proletariat but not the historic processes of history. There are domains in which the Party leads, directly and imperatively. There are domains in which it only cooperates. There are, finally, domains in which it only orients itself. The domain of art is not one in which the Party is called upon to command. It can and must protect and help it, but it can only lead it indirectly. It can and must give the additional credit of its confidence to various art groups, which are striving sincerely to approach the revolution and so help an artistic formulation of the revolution. And at any rate, the Party cannot and will not take the position of a literary circle which is struggling

[12] Herman Ermolaev, Alex Shane, "Letter to the Editor", *The American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3, October 1960, p. 478.

[13] Max Eastman, *Artists in Uniform* 1934, Reprint Edition, New York: Octagon Books, 1972, p. 102.

[14] Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 297.

and merely competing with other literary circles."[15] However, ten years after, the Party did exactly that, it suppressed the debate and competition replacing them with a unique model. Initially theorized for literature, considered to be the major art, socialist realism would become the mandatory creative method for the whole "cultural front," from architecture to music and film.

As defined by Zhdanov, despite being labeled "realism," socialist realism was supposed from its emergence to have a "dialectic" relationship with reality. It was not expected to represent "objective" reality but "reality in its revolutionary development." That meant that socialist realism should include a dose of revolutionary romanticism.

Although Zhdanov absolutely avoided any reference to the avant-garde and tried to present socialist realism as evolving directly from the Russian socially committed tradition of the nineteenth century, which was baptized after the fact "critical realism," the connection between socialist realism foundation and Tretiakov's theory of "effective" facts and "defective" facts analyzed in the first chapter is manifest. The difference is in their relationship with time. If Tretiakov's *faktovik* (writer of facts) had to select between the present facts those favorable for socialism building and discard the other facts, the social realist writer was prescribed not to just select the "effective" facts of the present but to deal mainly with "facts" that do not exist yet but that will be in the bright future, as promised by the communist gospel. As Zhdanov declared in his speech, the writer or the artist had to offer "a glimpse of tomorrow," which is a confirmation of that promise. As such, Soviet socialist realist art and literature had a mission, to "actively help to remold the mentality of people in the spirit of socialism." Its openly assumed goal was to contribute to the creation of the New Man. Therefore, the instrumentalization of culture was clearly and officially proclaimed, leaving no space between artistic and literary creation and propaganda. As it was supposed not to represent reality as it is but as it should be, socialist realism could be better called social optimism: "Soviet painting is optimistic, it speaks of joyous feelings."[16] The typical socialist realist novel protagonist was a "positive hero" and the happy end of the plot was matching that of the Hollywood films.

[15] Trotsky, op. cit., https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch07.htm.

[16] "Introduction to the Soviet Pavilion, the World's Fair 1939" in *The Aesthetic Arsenal: Socialist Realism Under Stalin*, New York: Contemporary Institute of Arts, 1993, p. 13.

Let us not forget that already Trotsky in the introduction of *Literature and Revolution* insisted that the new art of the Revolution "is incompatible with pessimism, with skepticism, and with all the other forms of spiritual collapse. It is realistic, active, vitally collectivist, and filled with a limitless creative faith in the Future."[17] Entertaining optimism was an essential element for socialist realism from both the *partiinost* and the *ideinost*—concepts that will be defined below—point of view.

Many times, some Western art historians described socialist realism as a kind of "photographic art." In the light of the above, it is difficult to find something less true. As a unique style, it was supposed to help create a unique culture using a single method. It is essential to remember that, from the time of its creation, socialist realism was opposed to formalism but also to naturalism, defined as "vulgar, lacking in artistic for, and a mere 'photographic' rendering of the world."[18] If socialist realism was illusionistic, it was not by chance; it had to ensure accessibility, it was not a "slavish imitation of reality" but a thoughtful ideological construct. Among many possible "realities," socialist realism was expected to always represent just one version of "reality" that one which had been chosen as "real" by the *agitprop*. As the Hungarian dissident writer, Miklós Haraszti penetrantly wrote in his classic *The Velvet Prison*: "Socialist Realism is more than faithfulness to reality: it contributes to reality; it creates reality. Whatever the genre in which we work, we will regard reality from the point of view of the state…".[19]

In this light, Tzvetan Todorov was only half-right when he stated that the doctrine of socialist realism "consecrated the universal reign of the lie"[20] In an older but important article, John E. Bowlt made already the same error when he stated that "In the 1930s-50s, socialist realism came to denote a figurative narrative art form that glorified a reality that did not exist. Painters painting harvest festivals at the time of forced collectivization and rural starvation, for example, found it impossible to locate the

[17] Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, op. cit., https: //www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/intro.htm.

[18] Maria Silina, "The Struggle against Naturalism. Soviet Art from the 1920s to the 1950s", *RACAR*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2016, p. 91.

[19] Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism*, New York: The Noonday Press; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987, p. 124.

[20] Tzvetan Todorov, *Le triomphe de l'artiste: La révolution et les artistes Russie 1917–1941*, Paris: Flammarion Versilio, 2017, p. 28.

raw materials in the derelict countryside."[21] Of course, socialist realism did not describe accurately the Soviet life under Stalinism. However, that was not its goal. A socialist realist painting was not supposed to point only to the present; it was particularly expected to point to the future too. The referent of socialist realism was not the immediate reality at the moment when the painting had been painted but precisely a reality that did not exist **yet** at that very moment. The keyword is **yet.** Th*e* avalanche of victuals on the *kolkhoz* tables did not exist in reality but they were present in the ideological promises. The role of socialist realism images was to illustrate the ideological promises in the same way in which the medieval religious scenes were supposed to convince the viewers of the reality of the Last Judgment to come. Of course, the huge majority of Soviet men and women were not happy in reality but one is necessarily happy in the socialist society to come! Socialist realism's relation with the truth was a complex one, its truthfulness was judged not in relation to real life but in relation to ideology. Therefore, socialist realist works did not document Soviet real life, but they did document the Party's tight control and instrumentalization of the artistic and literary creation.

The socialist realist works were not intended for individuals with a developed personal taste. As a unique style, it was supposed to help create a mass of people with identical taste. This kind of social uniformity that feared Zamiatin and Bulgakov did not frighten Stalin and his henchmen because it would increase the collective feeling, which would necessarily reinforce the new Soviet identity.

What was important was not the work of art as such but its capacity to convey the Party-state's message. The socialist realist cultural model did not include either a free literary market or independent art galleries. However, if painters could find some private collectors willing to buy their works, writers could get published only with the Party's approval. Totally dependent on the Party-state, the creator became a "state writer," to use Evgeny Dobrenko's concept,[22] a kind of cultural civil servant with hefty benefits but no desire for freedom. The "state writer" was so integrated into the system that he self-censored himself so well that the censorship became almost useless.

[21] John E. Bowlt, "Some Thoughts on the Condition of Soviet Art History", *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 71, No. 4, December 1989, p. 546.

[22] Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

As a style and as a method of creation, socialist realism developed as a rigid system that was applied to every creative field, from painting to poetry or from architecture to music. The socialist realist works had to express a series of ideological properties. These properties were meant from the very beginning to replace the traditional aesthetic categories.[23] The list of these properties offered a convenient benchmark for socialist realism criticism.

The most important, because it determined the work's propaganda value, was *partiinost*, the Party-mindedness. The origin of this goes back to Lenin who, already in 1905, called for the *Party-literature*:

> In contradistinction to bourgeois customs, to the profit-making, commercialized bourgeois press, to bourgeois literary careerism and individualism, "aristocratic anarchism" and drive for profit, the socialist proletariat must put forward the principle of **Party literature**, must develop this principle and put it into practice as fully and completely as possible.
>
> What is this principle of Party literature? It is not simply that, for the socialist proletariat, literature cannot be a means of enriching individuals or groups: it cannot, in fact, be an individual undertaking, independent of the common cause of the proletariat. Down with non-partisan writers! Down with literary supermen! Literature must become **part** of the common cause of the proletariat, "a cog and a screw" of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organized, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work.[24]

As Lenin claimed, all Soviet literature was expected to be a Party literature. The Party-spirit had to be the main element that determined the genesis of the work. For the New Man, inspiration, too linked to individualism, had to be replaced by the social command. *Partiinost* was linked to the principle of *klassovost*, the class point of view, which the author must consciously adopt. The degree of *partiinost* could be measured by the artist's or writer's ability to conform as closely as possible to the Party line. Therefore, *partiinost* implied the author's militant attitude and a

[23] Leonid Heller, "A Word of Prettiness: Socialist Realism and Its Aesthetic Categories" in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko eds., *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, p. 52.

[24] V.I. Lenin, "Party Organization and Party Literature" 1905, www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/nov/13.htm.

necessary link to the immediate problems of the Party-state. *Partiinost* was also proof of the author's loyalty to the Party and of his willingness to conform strictly to the Party line. Any deviance from *partiinost* inevitably generated distortion of what the Party wanted to present as "promoting." Consequently, the work would not fully contribute to promote the Party's goals. For that reason, the work was considered weak or even hostile, as socialist realism's official duty was to devote itself to the emergence of the New Man. If he failed to do that, its author could be accused of not fully contributing to the building of communism, which could lead to an exclusion from the respective creative union or even worse. In the socialist realist theory and practice, the value of a work was determined by the Party's judgment. As the Party line evolved constantly, the successful socialist realist creator had to be rather versatile, pragmatically adapting as much as possible to the social command of the moment.

A second property of the socialist realist work was *ideinost*, that is the ideological content. Every socialist realist work was expected to be ideologically committed. Even if it necessarily represented or depicted a peculiar event, *tipicnost*, it should be always generalized: the work was supposed to necessarily have a higher ideological content. For example, if a socialist realist painting represented a scene of the *kolkhoz* life, it should do that as a reference to higher ideological content, that is the success of collectivization or, if a writer depicted the building of a plant in the Ural mountains, he should do it as an aspect of the success of the *piatiletka* and the industrialization process, both being successes on a higher plane, the building of communism. A landscape or its depiction in reportage should never limit themselves to show the beauty of the place but must show the successful changes brought by the New Man. The choice of subject was then of utmost importance. In visual art, socialist realism replaced in fact the history painting of the classical theory of genres; the scenes from the past had been less replaced with scenes from the history of the Revolution, although they were not absent, but mainly with works that dealt with an immediate future.

The third category of the socialist realist work was *narodnost*, the national spirit. That meant the work had to be rooted in the national tradition of the respective culture. This principle was used by many Soviet scholars to emphasize the link between socialist realism and the Russian tradition of the nineteenth century. In this view, socialist realism was not a cultural break but developed "naturally" from the Russian "critical"

realism.[25] In this model of interpretation, any connection between avant-garde and socialist realism was denied. However, as we have seen, the link between the two is documented and Evgeny Dobrenko was undoubtedly correct in stating that socialist realism "was a natural and historically inevitable phase of the development of revolutionary culture."[26]

*Narodnost* meant also that art should be linked to the people. As such, it should be understood by everyone. Socialist culture must belong to all. Rather than trying to increase the masses' access to high culture, socialist realism had to reach the people. Hence the work needed *dostupnost* (accessibility). To achieve this, the work needed clarity of form. Any attempt to experiment could diminish accessibility and endanger the work's capacity to convey the Party's message, therefore it was strongly discouraged. The artist or the writer who could be tempted could be accused of formalism, which was a terrible sin. More and more, "formalism" was associated with "bourgeois," which gave the accusation a strong political dimension.

After its exacerbated interest for formalism and experimentalism, the second major accusation that the socialist realist theorists launched against avant-garde art was precisely the lack of *narodnost*. With the important exception of the Italian futurism, which favored a nationalist approach, the avant-garde was international and transnational, thus irremediably cosmopolitan. For them, by not supporting socialist realism tenets, the avant-garde acted against the sense of history, thus it was inevitably decadent.

A formal treatment that was perceived as too personal was condemned as individualism. In this regard, socialist realism could be considered a collective creation. That is why socialist bigger, for the meeting room? realist artworks resemble so much one with another. In a certain sense, one may say that socialist realist art is interchangeable, as many artists shared the same iconography of the real or invented episodes from the history of the Revolution or specialized themselves in stereotyped portraits of Lenin, or Stalin, or of both, as Isak Brodsky, that were always in demand. What director of a Soviet institution would have dared to

[25] N.N. Scheidman, "The Russian Classical Literary Heritage and the Basic Concepts of Soviet Literary Education", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 32, No. 3, September 1972, p. 626.

[26] Evgeny Dobrenko, *Aesthetics of Alienation*, op. cit., p.110.

refuse to buy a Stalin's portrait for his office and one much bigger for the meeting room?

*Dostupnost* (reachability), the quality to be accessed by everyone, implied also *mastertsvo* (professionalism) that is the mastery of the academic painterly techniques or the methods of the literary creation. As such, socialist realism was expected to abrogate the difference between high culture and low culture by producing a new type of creative work that was neither high-brow nor low-brow.

All official artists, that is members of the creative Unions, were expected to comply. Applying to be admitted in one Union, which brought about considerable material advantages, was also an informal pledge to create within the limits of socialist realism. As we will see in the next chapter, rebuffing socialist realism was dangerous. Rejection was not interpreted only as a stylistic choice, in the eyes of the Soviet authorities it was a political gesture. The main element of social realism being *partiinost*, refusing it was refusing to help the communist Party, which was not tolerable. The artists who did so were not reliable at best. At worst, they were perceived as enemies of the Party-state and punished accordingly.

## The Moscow Metro

After succeeding to defeat both the Left and the Right oppositions and consolidating his power, Stalin had to reinvent himself. He was then the uncontested leader of the Party-state and could capitalize on the apparently impressive results of the *piatiletka*. It was time for an image change. The Man of Steel was presented as the person who generated this success. At the beginning of the 1930s, noted Anita Pisch, Stalin began to be associated with the sun in the propaganda posters instead of with the giant industrial buildings from the time of the Five-Year Plan.[27] As Louis XIV at Versailles, Stalin could say "*l'Etat c'est Moi !*" (The State is I). He was beaming everywhere, the author of present achievements and, at the same time, the guide who would lead the Soviet people to communism. Nevertheless, economic realizations were not enough for the blooming leader. He needed prestige, he needed grandeur.

[27] Anita Pisch, The *Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters 1929–1953, Archetypes, Inventions, and Fabrications*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2016, p. 204.

For that, Stalin allowed himself some extravagance, such as coating in marble and granite the stations of the Moscow subway, and expected that the 1930s would develop into a grand cultural era. The metro was not one more utopian project; it represented a major shift in the history of Soviet culture. Boris Groys was undoubtedly right when he implied that it inaugurated Stalinist art: "The utopian projects of the 1920s focused either on the surface of the earth or the skies above. They ignored the depths of the underground or the inner earth. In other words, they looked at heaven and earth, but thought not of hell—the infernal realm of the underworld. The early avant-garde did not think dialectically enough and overlooked the possibility that a totally utopian project should also include the underworld to avoid being one-sided and, with that, too topical or place-bound. It was the Stalinist era that led heaven into hell and made the synthesis possible."[28]

From the beginning of the underground building, it was clear that the underground had to be the window case of communism's success. At a time when the capitalist countries were finishing the Great Depression, the achievement of such a gigantic project would prove the superiority of the communist system. No expense and no effort were spared to attain this goal, and the construction took the shortest time possible (1934). A very large publicity campaign accompanied the building, including a famous poster by Gustav Klucis, *All Moscow is Building the Metro,* symbol of what the communist propaganda called "the bright future." Four years later, Klucis was arrested, condemned to death by a NKVD *troika,* and executed.

In his speech at the inauguration of the first line on May 14, 1935, significantly entitled "The Victory of the Metropolitan is the Victory of Socialism,"[29] Lazar Kaganovich, the *Narkom* in charge with Transportations, declared: "The Moscow metropolitan goes far beyond the ordinary understanding of technical construction. Our metropolitan is a symbol of our new socialist society currently being built…"[30] The

[28] Boris Groys, "Underground as Utopia" in *Aleksandr Deineka: An Avant-Garde for the Proletariat*, Madrid: Fundacion Juan March, 2011, p. 257.

[29] Josette Bouvard, "Réalisme socialiste et métro de Moscou (1935–1954)" in Michel Aucouturier et Catherine Depretto eds., "Le réalisme socialiste dans la littérature et l'art des pays slaves", *Cahiers Slaves*, No. 8, 2004, p. 45.

[30] Quoted in Mikhail Ryklin, "The Best in the World: The Discourses on the Moscow Metro in 1930s" in Evgeny Dobrenko, Eric Naiman eds., *The Landscape of Stalinism: The*

Moscow metropolitan was by far more than just a transportation system; it was at the same time a military objective, to be used as a shelter in case of war but also: an ideological asset, a monument that glorified the success of the Party-state. The Moscow metropolitan was better than the subways of the capitalist countries and this fact was used symbolically to "prove" the preeminence of the communist society. As such, aesthetics were more important than technique. Unusually for technical construction, they used precious materials such as marble, bronze, and gold leaves. The costs were huge but Stalin accepted that furbishing such a weapon for the psychological war against capitalism and imperialism had a price and was willing to pay it. As an architectural marvel, the metro world was expected to become one of Moscow's main attractions and enhance its status as the capital of the communist world. As in their eyes, the future was inevitably communist, which meant Moscow would become the capital of the whole planet.

The result was indeed impressive. "The Moscow subway makes New York subway look like a sewer A People's Versailles, where re chandeliers cast their glow on the red granite archways and the huge allegorical mosaics" reported, Frank Lloyd Wright.[31] The comparison with Versailles is certainly an exaggeration but it was induced by the metro propaganda that regularly described the stations as "palaces." Lighting was given special attention "to create the illusion for passengers that rather than being underground they were in a sunlit palace in an unknowing location."[32] The Stalinist metro had to be as bright as the promised bright communist future. The metro ride was not just transportation from one point to another; it had to offer passengers a glimpse into that future. It had to convey *zhizneradostnost*, the joy of life.[33]

Art was not just decoration but a central element of the project, as important as the technical specifications. The metro corridors were conceived also as museum galleries. Some of the best Soviet artists were

*Art and Ideology of the Soviet Space*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2003, p. 262.

[31] J. Hoberman, *The Red Atlantis: Communist Culture in the Absence of Communism*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998, p. 24.

[32] Mikhail Ryklin, op. cit., p. 264.

[33] Karen L. Kettering, "An Introduction to the Design of the Moscow Metro in the Stalin Period: The Happiness of the Underground", *Studies in the Decorative Arts*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Spring–Summer 2000.

commissioned works for the metro. Among the most famous, were the thirty-five mosaics of Aleksandr Deineka evoking the Soviet mastery of the motherland's sky from Mayakovskaya station. The specificity of the station was the use of steel by its architect Aleksei Dushkin. Steel connoted aviation and its reflection of light expressed the radiant future promised by the communist utopia. The combination of apparently opposed materials such as mosaics and steel illustrated a principle of socialist realism, the use of traditional elements linked to *narodnost* together with elements suggesting *sovremmenost*, contemporaneity.[34]

The metro architecture with its Stalinist monumentality and its abundant use of ornament was the contrary of the constructivist architecture of the 1920s.[35] As such, it was considered an example of socialist realism in architecture. To further enhance the international reputation of the metro, a large-scale model of one of its interior spaces was exhibited in the Soviet Pavilion at the New York's Word Fair from 1939.[36]

## Stalin and Culture

Although he was described by many, such as Trotsky or Shostakovitch, as a coarse and uneducated person, Stalin was a far more complex personality.

It may be of interest to remember that at a certain point at the height of the revolution, Lenin furiously lambasted the Russian intelligentsia. In a letter to Maxim Gorky from September 15, 1919, Lenin wrote that intellectuals were "the lackeys of capital" and claimed that *intelligentsia* was not the "brain of the nation," but simply "*govno*," or shit.[37] Indeed, Lenin's rage notwithstanding, the relationship between the communist regime and the *intelligentsia* was a kind of cat and mouse game. Stalin was fully aware of the need to build robust and viable superstructures and such a task could not be achieved without intellectuals. Court them, bribe

[34] Jane Friedman, "Soviet Mastery of the Skies at the Mayakovsky Metro Station", *Studies in the Decorative Arts*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Spring–Summer, 2000, p. 52.

[35] Josette Bouvard, op. cit., p. 48.

[36] Alessandro de Magistris, "Underground Explorations in the Synthesis of the Arts: Deineka in Moscow Metro" in *Aleksandr Deineka*, op. cit., p. 248.

[37] V.I. Lenin, To: Maxim Gorky, September 15, 1919, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/sep/15.htm.

them, flatter them, co-opt them, and corrupt them. If these techniques fail, silence them.

At the end of the documentary film *Stalin Thought of You*, Stalin's favorite cartoonist, Boris Efimov, over one hundred years old, brother of Bolshevik journalist Mikhail Koltsov, who had been a friend of Ernest Hemingway and André Malraux, expresses his gratitude for not being executed like his sibling. But he adamantly refuses to unequivocally condemn Stalin: "He was not a man, he was a phenomenon." Ilya Ehrenburg, another famous survivor of the Great Terror, most probably had similar thoughts on the subject. Explaining such situations, such human cataclysms remains a moral and intellectual duty if we wish to avoid their repetition. The fact that so many Russians continue to worship Stalin's memory is equally disconcerting, revolting, and revealing. But Stalin was not only a Russian phenomenon. Similar to Hitler, he embodied, in an extreme and criminal fashion, modernity's pathologies.

Shocking as it might sound, one cannot deny the fact that Stalin had a *Weltanschauung* and that he was, in his own way, an intellectual. A self-taught, homicidal, liberticidal, and fanatical one, but an intellectual nevertheless. Wasn't Engels a self-taught philosopher as well? Similarly, one cannot ignore the affinities between Bolshevism and the tradition of political distinctions between good and evil; it defined the good in utilitarian fashion, instrumentally philosophical radicalism, Russian and European. Marxism was the apotheosis of ethical relativism; it suspended the traditional distinction between good and evil; pragmatically, they defined "good" in a utilitarian fashion as all that served the cause of a Messianic proletariat, the alleged redemptive class. But what was "good" for the proletariat was not decided by the proletarians themselves but by the omniscient communist Party. This was a recipe for what Alain Besançon (echoing Vladimir Soloviev) coined as the falsification of the good. In several annotations, long kept secret, Stalin defined his own table of values, he signaled out what he considered vice (or, sin, if you want) and virtue. For instance, he said that "gratitude is a dog disease."[38]

He understood the importance of culture, owned an important personal library of about 20,000 volumes, listened to classical piano music, liked Mozart interpreted by the pianist Maria Iudina, although his favorite song was the Georgian sugary *Suliko*. In his youth, Stalin

[38] Quoted in Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin and the Court of the Red Czar*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001, p. 43.

even wrote some poetry under the pen name Soselo and maintained an interest in poetry all his life. "Stalinism ratified a veritable cult of culture in the 1930s, in which achievements in the cultural realm became a key part of a broader Stalinist superiority complex."[39]

But all culture is political and Stalin was absolutely persuaded that culture, like anything else, can be imposed from above in an authoritarian way. The culture he needed was one that celebrated Him. More often than once, Stalin liked to surprise artists and writers with unexpected direct phone calls. Repeatedly, even if thousands worked in the various censorship organizations, Stalin involved himself directly and took the time to personally decide the sort of a poem, novel, or film. The *Vozhd* personally edited the lyrics of the Soviet national anthem written by Sergei Mikhalkov in 1943.[40] More than thirty years after, the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu would do the same, modifying the last lines of the newly replaced Romanian national anthem *Trei culori* (Three Colors).

Stalin's despotic like or dislike could mean life or death for the author or the artist concerned. The "cultural front" was too sensitive to be left entirely to others. For example, Stalin personally censored the film *The Laws of Life* by Aleksandr Stolper and Boris Ivanov, based on the screenplay of the novelist Aleksandr Avdeenko, a pure product of *perekovka* and a rising star of Soviet literature. It seems that Stalin did not like the scenes of heavy drinking sessions of Soviet students. Strangely, if one remembers the dehumanization present in the indictment of the general prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky, who described Bukharin as "an accursed mix between a fox and a pig" and asked the defendants to be shot "as rabid dogs," Stalin pleaded against the use of schematic characters: "I would prefer that the enemies are shown not as monsters but as people hostile to our society without being deprived of certain human features. The last of bastards has human features, he loves someone, respects someone, is willing to sacrifice himself for someone. Why not show Bukharin, any monster he was, with some human features? Trotsky is an enemy but is someone capable,

[39] Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

[40] Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was for Ever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 43.

he must be indisputably shown as an enemy with negative features but also with good features because they indisputably exist."[41]

In Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1945) the main character, an Old Bolshevik, Nikolai Rubashov, declares that "Number one" (Stalin) kept Machiavelli's *The Prince* as his favorite night-table book.[42] Here we are, witnesses, of a ***sui generis*** Machiavellianism, not the recognition and cultivation of the humanist dimension of Florentine's work. Historian Robert Service was allowed access to Stalin' personal library and could check Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, the 1939 edition, with the annotations of his "most faithful collaborator and disciple." At that hour of history (*il faisait minuit dans le siècle)*, wrote once Victor Serge), the general secretary had no significant rival. The Great Terror had reached its genocidal aims; a year later, Trotsky, his unforgivable nemesis, was assassinated in Coyoacan, Mexico, by the NKVD agent Ramon Mercader. In 1939, the *Short Course of the History of CPSU (b)* was published—the ultimate codification of the Stalinist cosmology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and demonology. An important resolution, "On the Organization of Party Propaganda in Connection with the Publication of the History of CPSU (b) *Short-Course*" declared: "The short course is a scientific history of Bolshevism. It sets forth and generalizes the tremendous experiences of the communist Party, an experience unequaled by that of any other party in the world.[43] Only seventeen years after, speaking at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, Nikita Khrushchev said about this text," a bible of the Stalinist cult: "This book speaks mainly about Stalin - about his speeches and his reports. Everything without the tiniest exception is linked to his name."[44] Therefore, the textbook was withdrawn and a new history was ordered. The history of the communist Party proved a very difficult book to write because what happened with the *Short Course* would happen in other communist countries. For instance, shortly after being in power, Nicolae Ceaușescu asked that a new history

[41] Michel Niqueux, "Staline et les écrivains soviétiques: La fabrication et la disgrâce d'Alexandre Avdeenko", *Vingtième Siècle*, Vol. 98, No. 2, 2008.

[42] See E.A. Rees "Stalin and Machiavelli" in E. A. Rees, *Political Thought from Machiavelli to Stalin*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

[43] https://thecommunists.org/2018/08/01/news/history/andrei-zhdanov-on-the-principles-underlying-soviet-literature-and-art.

[44] Paul Avrich, "The Short Course and Soviet Historiography", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 75, No. 4, December 1960, p. 539.

of the Romanian Communist Party had to be written. It was the main task of a special research unit, the Institute for the History of the RCP. However, when Ceaușescu was executed at the end of 1989, the project was far from being finished.

On the blank page at the end of Lenin's volume (which in itself was a manifesto for rudimentary philosophical materialism, equally naive and aggressive), with no connection to the polemic between Bolshevism and epistemologists Mach or Avenarius, Stalin scribbled: "NB! If a person is: 1. Strong (spiritually), 2) active, 3) intelligent (or capable), then he is a good person regardless of other vices." After this, the "coryphaeus of science" enumerates what he held to be vices: "1) weakness, 2) laziness, 3) stupidity." This is all that Stalin writes; nothing about pride, egocentrism, cruelty, avarice, deceit, greed, hypocrisy, envy, infamy, rabid jealousy, or carnal sins. In this context, one is not amazed anymore by how Stalin ignored Nikolai Yezhov's (homo)sexual orgies or the notorious transgressions perpetrated by Beria, a serial pedophile rapist. It is striking that in these lines, never meant for the public eye, Stalin adopts a traditional ethical vocabulary that he talks of virtues and vices. But it is in no way rehabilitation; even as a mere intimate personal confession, of the Christian tradition, which he once studied at the Theological Seminary in Tbilisi. On the contrary!

Robert Service is right: "The content of the commentary is deeply unchristian; it is reminiscent more of Niccolo Machiavelli and Friedrich Nietzsche than of the Bible. For Stalin, the criterion of goodness was not morality but effectiveness. … Furthermore, the fact that the characteristics despised by Stalin were weakness, idleness, and stupidity is revealing. Stalin the killer slept easily at night."[45] Rubashov, the protagonist of the celebrated Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at* Noon, former People's Commissar, hero of the Revolution, "unmasked" as a traitor, similarly imagined Stalin. Koestler himself, after his experiences during the Spanish Civil War, disenchanted with the show trials in Moscow, resigned from the German Writers' Union in exile, which was under complete communist control. The text of his letter of resignation is the embryo of his great political novel that would later influence entire generations,

[45] Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 343.

truly becoming an anti-communist manifesto (to use the title of John V. Fleming's excellent book[46]).

It is only symptomatic that these reflections on what one could call Joseph Dzhugashvili's personal anti-ethics were written down on the last page of a Lenin volume. Without Lenin, Dzhugashvili would have never morphed into Stalin. We know that Lenin kept in his bookshelves *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with his notes. For further details on the intellectual relationship between Bolshevism and Nietzsche, see Bernice Glaser Rosenthall's book.[47]

Gorky, Bogdanov, Lunacharsky tried to reconcile Marx and Nietzsche, to establish a new political religion of the New Man as *Übermensch*. For Lenin, this was heresy not in terms of the overall goal of the project, but of its mystical undertones. A no-nonsense, uncompromising single-minded revolutionary, with little patience for what he regarded as idle metaphysical squab.

Service remarked, and he is not the first to do so, that Stalin had his own copy of *The Prince*, with personal annotations on the sides, but the copy disappeared from the archives. Where might it be now? Maybe in the bookshelves of one of Russia's oligarchs. Some authors claim that Hitler owned a copy of the book as well and that he was particularly fond of it. The Marxist Gnostic, Antonio Gramsci, referring to Lenin's vanguard party, called it admiringly "the modern Prince." Marxism thus turned into sociology of revolutionary will and virtue embodied in the redemptive image of a Party, the predestined repository of absolute truth.

According to Stalin, courage was the cardinal value that ennobled and justified human action regardless of the latter's finality. Service writes: "His insistence on the importance of courage could have derived from Machiavelli's supreme demand on the ruler: namely that he should have *vertù*. This is a word barely translatable into either Russian or English; but it is identified with manliness, endeavor, courage, and excellence. Stalin, if this is correct, saw himself as the embodiment of Machiavellian *vertù*."[48] He was a paranoid and sociopathic despot, who projected himself in those heroes who changed the fate of the world, who believed himself on

[46] John V. Fleming, *The Anti-Communist Manifestos. Four Books that Shaped the Cold War*, New York: Norton, 2009.

[47] Bernice Glaser Rosenthal ed., *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adverrsary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

[48] Robert Service, op. cit., p. 343.

the same level with builders of empires and religions. Projecting himself obsessively into these empire-builders, he became one. Turning ends into absolutes and the exaltation of violence did not begin with Stalin. Revolutionary Machiavellianism, to use E. A. Rees's concept, comes close to both visions equally cynical and fanatical about "metapolitics" (see Peter Viereck's classical study), about the romanticization, re-enchantment of the world by way of myth, community, self-abandonment, and sacrifice. Metapolitics emphasizes the centrality of myth in all human experience. We don't believe that in Stalin's case we encounter a *vertu*, in the real sense of the concept, as it was used by Machiavelli. We don't agree with Bertrand Russell, who once called *The Prince* a "handbook for gangsters." But it is true that ideological gangsters know how to twist and disfigure a philosophical text so that what was previously envisioned as a glorification of civic virtue converts into the justification of cynical non-virtue. What historian Robert C. Tucker once identified as the key component of the Soviet political mind, the obsession with the universal transformation of nature, society, and man reached its climax in the vindictive pageants staged throughout that year. Being the capital of Stalin's utopian empire, Moscow's life concentrated and exacerbated the tyrant's fixation on enemies and his compulsive need to purify society of any real and especially imagined enemies. The propaganda machine presented the purges as the will of the people and organized a mass dramaturgy of hatred, endless rituals of exposure, and vilification meant to generate a universal sense of panic and unconditional surrender of any critical faculties. Under these circumstances, no one, not even the bloody dwarf Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the dreaded NKVD, Stalin's secret police, could feel safe. The masterminds of the catastrophe benefited from the complicity of Western fellow travelers, who refused to take the measure of the abysmal atrocities happening in the Soviet Union. There is no exaggeration saying that in 1937 Bolshevism, in its Stalinist incarnation truly ran amok. What made the situation insanely puzzling was the mixture of normalcy and aberration in everyday experiences: on the one hand, people continued their lives as nothing extraordinary was happening; on the other, they knew that life would never be the same in the aftermath of the catastrophe. It is important to de-normalize the appearance of normalcy and highlight the various survival strategies under unspeakable conditions of generalized fear and pathological suspicion. The suicide of Sergo Ordzhonikidze, one of Stalin's most trusted lieutenants and a prominent member of the dictator's inner circle, reveals the expansion of paranoid delusions at the

highest level of the bureaucracy. It did not matter anymore if one had known Koba (Stalin's youth nickname) for decades. As a matter of fact, history needed to be rewritten to accommodate the distribution of power relations at the top.

## Returning Home

The main political shift initiated by Stalin implied the *de facto* hope for an immediate world revolution to be abandoned together with the Party rejection of Trotsky's "permanent revolution" theory. The new policy was to concentrate on the building of socialism into one country. The slogan "Proletarians of all countries, unite!" had not been entirely abandoned but the new one, "The Soviet Union is the homeland of world's proletariat" was favored. The emphasis was on the accelerated modernization of the Soviet Union, whose rapid industrialization was expected to prove to the whole world the superiority of the communist system. More and more foreign states recognized the Soviet Union and established diplomatic relations. What Stalin wanted was respectability and public recognition of his status as a top world leader. One of the ways to achieve this was to convince major cultural personalities of the Russian emigration to return home. Every big name who returned was an asset immediately used both internally and externally, as an endorsement of Stalin's success, so exorbitant promises had been made, and sometimes even kept. The most significant case was undoubtedly Maxim Gorky's. No other writer had been more praised by Lenin and Stalin for his exemplary commitment to the proletarian cause than him. Maxim Gorky (Aleksei Pechkov), born in 1868, was a prolific novelist and playwright, a vocal critic of Czarism, and a prominent journalist. No other Russian writer enjoyed his fame in the West. After the Bolshevik coup, Gorky was initially a supporter of Lenin's government, but he distanced himself from the use of terror against real and imaginary enemies. In a series of articles that made Lenin quite angry, Gorky defended the intelligentsia's right to freedom of thought and freedom of expression. Because of his political reservations and medical condition, Gorky and his family left the USSR and established themselves in Italy. He received munificent financial rewards from the USSR; his writing was printed in millions of copies. His pre-revolutionary proletarian novel *Mat'* (Mother), later considered the first socialist realist novel *Avant la lettre*, became mandatory reading in Soviet schools. Then, lured by Stalin's invitation and tempted by the

promised glorious status, Gorky returned to Moscow. The legend was back home and Stalin made everything possible to keep him if not happy, at least content. Nothing was spared to attain this goal. Recently discovered documents from the Soviet archives show that Stalin was implied personally in Gorky's flattery. At the time when an ordinary doctor's salary was three hundred rubles a month, the Soviet government spent one hundred and thirty thousand rubles a month for Gorky's family.[49] In his memoirs, Ivan Gronsky recalled the preparations for Gorky's 1932 fortieth literary jubilee: "At one of the sessions, Stalin made a proposal: 'Give Nizhnii Novgorod and the *oblast* (region) Gorky's name. Rename Tverskaia Street - a main commercial artery in Moscow beginning in the Red Square near Kremlin - after him.'" Gronsky reacted negatively, saying that this was laying it on too "thick," but Stalin replied: "That doesn't matter. That doesn't matter.' Leaning over, very quietly, he said to me: 'He's an ambitious man. We have to bind him to the Party."[50]

However, this seemed not enough. A resolution of the Presidium of the Central Committee announced the foundation of an Institute of Literature named after Gorky, which still exists today. Hundreds of schools over the country were renamed Gorky. These extraordinary honors were accompanied by superb material gifts: a townhouse in Moscow, a villa in Gorky, and a summer house in Tessseli, Crimea.[51]

Stalin's manipulation worked because Gorky, flattered, paid back, and complied with his demands. He approved publicly the forced collectivization campaign, the extermination of the *kulaks*, and endorsed the infamous camps of Solovki and *Belomor Kanal*. As we have seen before, at the First Writers' Congress in 1934, Gorky's speech delineated the tasks of progressive literature: emphasizing the bright future, offering behavioral models to Soviet citizens, exposing the class enemies. His speech synthesized what turned into the official Soviet aesthetic doctrine until the 1960s and beyond/ socialist realism, as this Procrustean framework was named, implied an optimist worldview, the exaltation of Soviet values and virtues, and the rejection of "formalism," "subjectivism", "decadent

[49] Anita A. Kondoyanidi, *The Prophet Disillusioned: Maxim Gorky and the Russian Revolutions*, Ph. Diss, Georgetown University, 2019. p. 214.

[50] Katerina Clark, Evgeny Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917–1953*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 87.

[51] Tovah Yedlin, *Maxim Gorky: A Political Biography*, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999, p. 196.

psychologism," and other dangerous deviations from the prescribed Party Line.

When he died in 1936, grandiose state funerals were organized to glorify his literary legacies. In the Red Square, Stalin himself carried his urn, military bands played and cannons boomed.[52] In March 1938, his once friend, the former NKVD boss, People's Commissar Genrikh Yagoda, was sentenced to death in the Bukharin trial for having masterminded, on orders from Zinoviev and Kamenev (both Old Bolsheviks executed in August 1936), several poisonings, including Gorky and his son. The Feuchtwanger Case After the relative success of the *piatiletka*, the Party-state felt strong enough to open a little bit the borders and to let in selected visitors to convince them of the superiority of the Soviet system. Modernizing the Russian tradition of potemkinades, the tourists were kept under the strict supervision of their guides and lured to believe that what they were shown was really the true Soviet life. Special attention was given to emphasize Stalin's role as the uncontested leader of the USSR and his position as one of the greatest world personalities. One of the ways to achieve the recognition of Stalin's status as a top world leader was a program managed by VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations Abroad) of invitations of Western cultural personalities. The visitors could see only objectives from an approved list, such as the compulsory Lenin's mausoleum and the Moscow metro, and also some potemkinades organized especially for them. VOKS and The Writers' Union organized also meetings with selected Soviet writers and also with some of their readers, naturally cleared before by the NKVD to meet foreigners. They were offered an array of considerable material advantages, including very generous royalties that were paid in hard currency. In exchange, the visitors were expected to write positively about the Soviet Union and, more than everything, to praise Stalin. Celebrated writers such as Theodore Dreiser. Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, G.B. Shaw, or André Gide participated in this program.[53]

Among them, there was the German exiled writer, Lion Feuchtwanger,[54] one of the most successful novelists of what W. H. Auden called

[52] Walter Duranty Cable, *The New York Times*, June 21, 1936.

[53] Ludmila Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–1940: From Red Square to the LEFt Bank*, London: Routledge, 2006.

[54] Ludmila Stern, Ch., "The Interpreter's Story", op. cit.

"a low and dishonest decade." He notoriously entrusted publicly Stalin's version of the witch-hunts and published an infamous book with the title *Moscow 1937*,[55] an apologia for the official Soviet line regarding the need to eliminate all those who challenged or may have challenged the leader's omniscience. The invitation of Feuchtwanger was an attempt by Aleksandr Arosev,[56] the chief of VOKS, to neutralize the disaster provoked by André Gide who, in spite of all kinds of tempting incentives, including a choice of ephebes from the Red Army to match his sexual preference, published in 1936 a very negative book *Le Retour de l'URSS* (The Return from URSS). 150,000 copies of Gide's book had been printed and the damage in terms of image was considerable Thus, he had to act as an "anti-Gide."[57] The idea to choose Feuchtwanger was Koltsov's, probably following a suggestion of his wife, the German anti-Fascist Maria Osten. A Bolshevik Mikhail Koltsov was a member of *Pravda*'s editorial board, the paper's correspondent to Spain, and one of Stalin's most trusted journalists. He unflinchingly toed the Party line, yet it is hard to imagine Koltsov condoning the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939. Ernest Hemingway, in his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, based on the civil war in Spain, represented Koltsov as the character Karkov. Recalled to Moscow at the end of 1937, he remained close to the tyrant until, out of the blue, he fell out of favor. Koltsov was arrested, summarily tried by a *troika*, and executed in February 1940. Most likely, he knew too much. In January 1938, he had a confidential conversation with writer Ilya Ehrenburg about the insanity of the Great Terror. He confided in Ehrenburg this joke: "You know, they took Teruel." "How about his wife?" Maria Osten was also arrested and shot two years after, in 1942. Arosev was purged in 1937 and shot one year later.

Personally invited by Stalin to assist at the second show trial Piatakov-Radek, Feuchtwanger described it as follows: "...to me also, as long as I was in Western Europe, the indictment in the Zinoviev trial seemed utterly incredible. The hysterical confessions of the accused seemed to have been extorted by some mysterious means and the whole proceedings

[55] See Karl Schlogel, *Moscow, 1937*. Translated from German by Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012.

[56] For Arosev, see Michael David-Fox, "Stalin Westernizer? Aleksandr Arosev's Literary and Politicalof Europe", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 62, No. 4, Winter 2003.

[57] Anne Hartmann, "Un anti-Gide allemand: Lion Feuchtwanger", *Cahiers du monde russe*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2011.

appeared as a play staged with consummate, strange, and frightful artistry. But when I attended the second trial in Moscow, when I saw Piatakov, Radek, and his friends, and heard what they said and how they said it, I was forced to accept the evidence of my senses, and my doubts melted away as naturally as salt dissolves in water. If that was lying or prearranged, then I don't know what truth is. So I took up the records of the trials, and reflected on what I had seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears, and considered once more the pros and cons of the charge."[58] Feuchtwanger supported the mendacious indictment of Old Bolsheviks accused of surreal charges and described Stalin as a statesman dedicated to the defense of his country. Till quite recently, the question if he believed or not was difficult to answer, the publication of the report that his VOKS guide Dora Karavkina wrote daily for her hierarchy and the NKVD during his visit mentioned that he "complained almost of everything" and asked provocative questions about "first show trial, Trotskyites, Soviet dislike of foreign criticism, censorship, the 'cult' of Stalin, and the decline of the Soviet avant-garde, and spoke endlessly about the insufficiencies of life in the Soviet Union and about the service in the hotel."[59] The discrepancy between his public and private discourse shows clearly that Feuchtwanger was neither "blind" nor naïve. He was completely aware of what was going on in Moscow. However, the substantial paychecks he received as royalties for his works translated into Russian anesthetized successfully his eventual quest for truth. His justification of the Great Terror belongs to the history of infamy in a century plagued with turpitude, moral idiocy, deliberate emasculation of critical thinking, and fanaticism.

Unfortunately, Feuchtwanger was not alone. Differently motivated, *New York Times* correspondent Walter Duranty contributed to the dissemination of the Stalinist legends. US Ambassador Joseph Davies, a champion of gullibility, was convinced that the Old Bolsheviks had indeed conspired to murder Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, etc. One should not diminish the importance of these declarations in favor of Stalinism. As François Furet stated "Communism was certainly the object of a systematic lie, as testified to, for example, by the trips

[58] Lion Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937: My Visit Described for My Friends*, trans. Irène Josephy, New York: Viking Press, 1937.

[59] Michael David-Fox, "The Fellow-Travellers Revisited: The Cultural West Through Soviet Eyes", *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 75, No. 2, June 2003, pp. 319–320.

organized for naive tourists and, more generally, by the extreme attention the Soviet regime and the Communists parties paid to propaganda and brainwashing. (...) Communism's power came not from its material or military strengths, although they were important contributing factors--but from its hold over the political imagination of the twentieth-century men and women."[60] Pretense, duplicity, mystification… One of the most amazing, truly paradoxical facts that German political historian Karl Schlogel examines thoroughly in his book *Moscow 1937* is that even under those circumstances some people continued to keep diaries. It was one thing for the American ambassador to keep notes of his impressions and another for the writer Mikhail Bulgakov, the author of the great novel of those times, *Master and Margarita*, a "drawer" masterpiece, published only decades later).

One of the most important diaries was kept by Georgi Dimitrov, a Bulgarian communist and anti-Fascist hero, head of the Communist International (the Comintern). Dimitrov was one of the participants in a reception held on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution. We owe to him the transcript of Stalin's toast on that occasion, one of the most cynical and outspoken confessions of the dictator's view of the need to liquidate the "enemies of the people" not only for crimes they had presumably committed but also for crimes they might have planned to commit, for what they might have thought.

On that occasion, Stalin insisted that the purges should aim not only at the designated enemies but also at their kin, to the end of times. This was the (i) logic of Hitler's exterminism, transformism wedded to genocide. In February 1937, at the Plenum of the Central Committee when Lenin's favorite Nikolai Bukharin was horribly humiliated, Stalin elaborated his theory of the sharpening of class struggle as the country advanced toward socialism, the ultimate dialectical nonsense. Members of the Bolshevik Olympus listened to the *Vozhd* (leader) without ever expressing their revulsion or anguish. They enthusiastically approved of the infamy. This was an adjustment to absurdity rooted in the hope that somehow they would be spared the inclement fate of those denounced as traitors. Historian Adam Ulam once called this abject abdication "the price of sanity." In fact, 1937 was the year of absolute insanity and Moscow became the capital city of diabolical delirium.

[60] François Furet, *Lies, Passions, and Illusions: The Democratic Imagination in the Twentieth Century*, University of Chicago Press, 2014, pp. 4–5.

### *The Circus*

There is no hazard that Stalin's musicals thrived precisely in the 1930s, a misleadingly joyful counterpart to the cruel realities of the Great Terror. Over one million were executed, others were deported to the GULAG, but the officially acclaimed and truly popular films depicted wonderfully rosy life. The dictator was happy and so needed to be his obedient subjects. Stalin's favorite actress Lyubov Orlova, called the Soviet Marlene Dietrich, starred in musicals directed by her husband Grigori Aleksandrov. All were extremely successful: *The Happy Boys* (1934), *The Circus* (1936), and *Volga-Volga* (1938). It would be an error to consider these films as escapist.[61] Director Aleksandrov would have been shocked by this idea, as his films were not at all intended to help the audience mentally escape the Soviet reality in favor of an imaginary realm. On the contrary, they were meant to link the viewers even more to the Soviet reality, trying to convince them through their inherent optimism that all present difficulties would be solved and that the future would be bright. "Life has become better, life has become merrier!" announced the *Vozhd*. The companion, to the dialectical optimism, was the exaltation of the Soviet lifestyle and the glorification of the healthy, uncorrupted, unperverted Soviet values.

Among the three musicals, Stalin preferred *Tsirk* (The Circus), which contrasted American, i.e., capitalist selfishness, heartlessness, and racism to the wonderfully egalitarian Soviet paradise. The screenplay has been written by the famous Ilf and Petrov, helped by Petrov's brother Valentin Kataev, also an established writer. However, Aleksandrov wanted to modify the colloquial language used by the three authors, being afraid that it would diminish the seriousness of the political content and lower the film's propaganda value. In an interview, Aleksandrov declared: "We were afraid that the genre of light, eccentric comedy would not be able to accommodate significant social context and switched to melodrama. *Circus* is not a comedy, but a melodrama with comic scenes."[62] Pure comedy was not possible under Stalin, simple aimless laughter was not accepted, and even the entertainment had to convey ideology. Laughter

[61] In Anna Lawton's description, the musicals were "a welcome escape from the grim reality of the day." Anna Lawton, ed., *Red Atlantis: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 4.

[62] Rigaila Salys, *The Musical Comedy Films of Grigorii Aleksandrov: Laughing Matters*. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2009, p. 128.

and joy were by definition political experiences. Love itself was politically determined. The New Woman or the New Man could not love a class enemy.

As a result, the three authors refused that their names be present on the credits. They were replaced by another famous writer, Isaac Babel. The film music was by Isaac Dunaevsky, the top composer of those years. For its director, *Circus* had to be the Soviet perfect equivalent of an American Hollywood super-production. The plot told the melodramatic story of circus actress Marion Dixon, who had to flee the United States because she had a mulatto son. She arrived in the USSR to perform a circus act, *The Flight on the Moon*, in which she was fired from a giant cannon on the Big Top, a tall piece of scenery. Blackmailed by her agent von Kneischitz, she prepared to leave but fell in love with another circus actor, the perfectly fulfilled Soviet citizen Ivan Martynov and was integrated in the great Soviet egalitarian society. Finally recuperated from the villain Kneischitz, her toddler Jimmy is "adopted" by the Soviet circus audience. A Ukrainian, a Georgian, a Tatar, a Jew, and a black person even sang him a lullaby. A key moment in the plot, the lullaby episode was a metaphor of the fraternal multinational Soviet Union, thus superior to the racist America. The Jew was played by a real Jew, the celebrated actor Solomon (Shloyme) Mikhoels, who would be killed on Stalin's orders in 1948. His Yiddish lullaby was subsequently cut from the film and restored only after Stalin's death in 1953. Isaac Babel was arrested in 1937 and killed in 1940. Vladimir S. Nielsen, the cameraman, had been also arrested in 1937 and shot in 1942.

One of the songs interpreted by Ivan Martynov, *Pesnia u rodine* (Song for the Motherland) contributed enormously to the success of the film. The verses by Vasily Lebedev-Kumach had a high patriotic content: "Broad is my motherland/With it forests, fields, and rivers/I know of no other country/In which man can breathe with more freedom. As Hans Günther noticed,[63] the song was very different from the revolutionary marches of the first years after the Revolution. Even the keyword "Revolution" was indeed missing. At the time of the building of socialism into one country, the call for world revolution had been conveniently replaced by the celebration of the motherland. Broadcasted extensively by Radio

[63] Hans Günther, *"Broad Is My Motherland" The Mother Archetype and Space in the Soviet Mass Song* in Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, op. cit., p. 77.

Moscow, the song became "a second national anthem,"[64] For many years, Radio Moscow would use it as a signal. Paul Robeson, the Afro-American singer revered in the Soviet Union, performed it regularly. It was also a standard of the celebrated Aleksandrov Red Army choir. In a rock variant, the song survived even in Putin's times. To state that the Soviet Union was the freer country in the world precisely at the moment when the arrests, deportations, and executions increased exponentially could seem paradoxical. In fact, it is not, because the real function of the Stalinist comedy was not to make people really happy but to give the illusion of happiness.[65]

## Stalinist Culture as Mythocracy

Totalitarian regimes are mythocracies. Political myths are their driving forces, the mobilizational narratives meant to create mass enthusiasm, passions, illusions, commitments, and engagements. The ideologues convert political myths into doctrines claiming to offer perfectly coherent responses to the baffling questions the individuals are confronted with. French sociologist and political philosopher Raymond Aron was of the most astute thinkers who reflected on the seductive power of political myths, in particular, the Marxian vision of communism as a new Golden Age of bliss and exuberance. His book *The Opium of the Intellectuals* came out in 1955 and has endured as a clear-minded deconstruction of the radical utopian visions. The first part, dealing with political myths, included the following chapters: The Myth of the LEFT, the Myth of the Revolution, and the Myth of the Proletariat.[66]

Myths do not claim to be rational. They are not attempts to offer accurate analyses of reality. They are deliberately nebulous, elusive, and allegorical. They are open to various competing interpretations. Understanding the history of Communism means grasping the meaning of the never-ending squabbles about revolutionary time and space (apocalyptic

[64] Salys, p. 150.

[65] Richard Taylor, "The Illusion of Happiness and the Happiness of Illusion: Grigorii Aleksandrov's 'The Circus'", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 74, No. 4, October 1996.

[66] Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, With a New Introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield, New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2001, pp. 3–93.

or gradual, limited to one country or planetary, transient or permanent). The communist elites become the self-appointed custodians of the Gnostic truth. They, only they, are in the know. Political myths contain esoteric kernels, accessible only to the enlightened prophets. This may explain the oracular tone in, say, Lenin's *State and Revolution* and Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century*. Their tone is by definition exhortative, comminatory uncompromising. Political myths pledge to make the impossible possible, to bring about the City of God in the historical immanence, to merge historical and Messianic time. Bolshevism as a political religion could not be but mythocratic. Its foundational myth was the vanguard revolutionary Party endowed by History to accomplish miracles and allow mankind to accomplish the chiliast emancipation.

The Stalinist culture was a mythocracy[67] The narratives disseminated through all the channels of the Party-state propaganda were pedagogical myths crucial for the shaping of the New Man's mindset. They were constructed with a precise goal: to eradicate all traces of the old, bourgeois, anachronistic, reactionary morality and instill a new set of virtues into the minds of the human targets. Poetry, novels, printed media, fine arts, film, music, including opera, were the vehicles for these rites of ideological inebriation.

First, Pavlik Morozov, the "heroic pioneer" who denounced his father to the OGPU in 1932 for hiding grain. Then, the story said, Pavlik was killed in retribution by members of his own family. For this "heroic" deed, Pavlik Morozov became the model and the saint patron of Soviet pioneers. What better proof of loyalty to the Party-state than denouncing his own father to the secret police? The peasant boy Pashka Morozov had a miserable life but he was given a glorious posterity. His first name changed *postmortem* into Pavlik, he became the first hero of the Stalinist *agitprop* pantheon. Gorky raised funds for his memorial. Schools, parks, streets, and squares were named after him, books and poets told his legend, songs and even symphonic pieces have been composed in his honor. Sergei Eisenstein made a film about him, His statues and his portraits after his untimely death were present in every Pioneer's Palace of the Soviet Union. After WW2, Pavlik Morozov's cult was extended in

[67] The concept of mythocracy was developed by Vladimir Tismaneanu in his book *The Crisis of Marxist Ideology in Eastern Europe: The Poverty of Utopia*, London: Routledge, 1988.

all countries of the Soviet zone of influence. Even after Stalin's death, the myth did not die. In 1954, they still unveiled a monument in his honor in Gerasimovka, his native village. However, the reality was different. Research by Yury Druzhnikov[68] and a masterful historic investigation by Catriona Kellly[69] revealed that Trofim Morozov, Pavlik's father, did not hide grain but left his wife and children to live with a younger lover. Probably instigated by his mother, the young Pashka denounced his father for his behavior. Other versions claim that the reason for the denunciation was selling forged documents. Arrested, Trofim Morozov was sent to GULAG, never to come back. Soon after, Pashka and his younger brother Fedor were found murdered. And then the myth was created. As this local piece of family drama happened during the anti-*kulaks* campaign, this news item was given political content and national attention. Trofim Morozov's misbehavior became hiding grain, the typical *kulaks*' offense at the time of the forced collectivization of agriculture, Fedor's murder was put aside, as he had not been given a role in the scenario because one could not pretend his assassination was linked to the denunciation, and Pavlik's domestic complaint was transformed into a heroic gesture. Pavlik was given a political conscience and his father's denunciation became a political act. The official reason for his assassination was presented as the relatives' revenge for informing on his father. The *agitprop* story had its dramatic climax: the official version pretended that Pavlik paid with his life for his "patriotic" action. A boy had died, a Soviet martyr was born. Although he died when he was still a child, the mythic Pavlik Morozov, as imagined by the *agitprop*, was already a New Man, whose loyalty was directed primarily to the Party-state even when this implied betraying family ties. It is highly symbolic for the functioning of the Soviet society that for the most positive hero to celebrate they chose a police informer. Second, Nikolay Ostrovsky, the bed-ridden, paralyzed, blind author of *How the Steel Was Tempered (1932–1934)*. It was Mikhail Koltsov's 1935 *Pravda* celebration of that autobiographical novel that led to the myth of the saintly warrior-worker-writer. In *The House of Government*, Yuri Slezkine rightly highlights the enormous impact of Ostrovsky's novel and its main character, the author's alter ego, Pavel Korchagin: *How the Steel*

[68] Yuri Druzhnikov, *Informer 001: The Myth of Pavlik Morozov* (1997), London and New York, 2012.

[69] Catriona Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero*, London: Granta Books, 2005.

*Was Tempered* would become "the most widely read, translated, reprinted, and, from what one can tell, beloved book by a Soviet writer in the history of the Soviet Union and the Communist world as a whole."[70] Till today, it remains the most famous communist *Bildungsroman*, the tale of the evolution of Pavka from an uneducated boy to a dedicated Bolshevik, who sacrificed everything for the Revolution. At the same time, as his forces weaken as a result of his wounds when he was in the Red Army, with his two legs and one arm paralyzed, and going blind, Pavka became psychologically stronger. Through the power of his will, Korchagin prevailed upon his ailing body and became a model of behavior for several generations. According to Lilya Kaganovsky, "the writing process was a 'heroic' act," as Ostrovsky, already blind, did not dictate the novel but wrote the majority of it with his own hand using a special paper device to keep the lines straight.[71]

After being first published as a serial in the *Molodaia Gvardiia* (The Young Guard), the KOMSOMOL magazine, the novel was printed as a book. Heavily edited, it was considered immediately a classic of socialist realism. The success was huge: till 1936, they printed sixty-two editions in Russian, not counting the translations in the languages of the other Soviet republics. Two institutions contributed decisively to the book's popularity: the Red Army, which bought a great number of copies and distributed them to soldiers. and the KOMSOMOL.

The novel had a special impact in China, where the book "accompanied several generations of Chinese through their youth and deeply influenced their views of the world."[72] The Korchagin character had been heavily used by the Chinese Communist Party propaganda as an "ideal--typed hero and commission him for a political mission aimed at remolding people."[73] Even after the Cultural Revolution, the novel remained a best-seller.

During WW2, a third major myth was manufactured and disseminated: the heroic teenager partisan Zoia Kosmodemianskaia who waged attacks against German troops in the outskirts of Moscow. Zoia had to arson

[70] Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government,* p. 641.

[71] Lilya Kaganovsky, "How the Soviet Man was (Un)Made", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 63, No. 3, Autumn 2004 note 11, p. 581.

[72] Miin-ling Yu, "A Soviet Hero, Pavel Korchagin, Comes to China", *Russian History*, Vol. 29, Nos. 2–4, Summer-Fall-Winter 2002, p. 329.

[73] Miin-ling You, op. cit., p. 329.

houses with German troops. She was captured, horribly tortured, and publicly executed by hanging. The *agitprop* version of the execution story, published in *Pravda* by Pavel Lidov under the title "Tania," the fake name she gave under torture, maintained that her last words were "Stalin is with us! Stalin will be victorious!" In this way, Zoia was presented to the Soviet reader as Stalin's "daughter."[74] The story of Zoia the *konsomolka*[75] became one of the most popular in the Russian history of WW2.

Her brother Shura died on the German front in 1945. Both Zoia and Shura were awarded *postmortem* the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. Her mother, a high school teacher, Liubov KosmodemianskaIa, wrote about her children a memoir titled *The Story of Zoia and Shura*. It was translated into many languages and imposed as required reading in the countries of the Soviet Bloc. The name of Zoia Kosmodemianskaia was given to many schools both in the Soviet Union and in the satellite countries. In Romania, for example, it was the name of the school for the *nomenklatura* children till the beginning of the 1960s. After the *perestroika*, the myth was revisited and the fact that she had been betrayed by a fellow partisan, omitted in the official version not to tarnish the heroic reputation of the Soviet fighter, came to light.

After the war, Aleksandr Fadeev, the chairman of Stalin's Writers' Union, was entrusted to write a novel about the heroic teenagers in the German-occupied city of Krasnodar who organized an underground partisan commando. They were caught and killed. They resisted torture and died with dignity. The title became synonymous with the Party's expectations from the Leninist youth: *The Young Guard*.

But for Stalin this was not sufficient. The novel was attacked not for literary reasons but on ideological grounds. Fadeev was criticized for not having emphasized enough the decisive role of the underground Party organization in guiding the Young Guardists: "The criticisms of *The Young Guard* clearly revealed that the vast historical content of our era cannot be fully expressed in a work of art unless the latter describes the great role played by the Party in the life of the people and creates

[74] Yuliya Minkova, "Werewolves, Vampires, and the 'Sacred Women' of the Soviet Discourse in Pravda and Beyond in the 1930s and 40s", *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 4, Winter 2009, p. 599.

[75] Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to the Cold War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 185.

vivid figures of Bolsheviks as men in the vanguard of the people."[76] It's a classic example in which history and literary creation had to bow in front of ideology. The obedient "engineer of the human soul" rewrote the novel. Received the Stalin Prize, and the studio Mosfilm produced a mega-hit. The myth continued to imbue the Soviet pedagogy until the 1970s when it faded away like so many of the Stalin-era relics.

One should also mention the myths of Aleksei Stakhanov, Pasha Angelina, and other socialist labor shock-workers. Stakhanov was a Donbas hewer miner, a *virtuoso* of the pneumatic drill who, according to the myth, succeeded to increase 14 times his quota of coal production. His achievement was highly advertised by the Soviet press and he was glorified as a Stalinist labor hero who was emblematic both for the New Man and for the success in building socialism. Stakhanov's celebrity became international and he even made the cover of *Time* or the newsreels of the French Gaumont Pathè.[77] For his accomplishment, Stakhanov was superbly compensated and his status was coveted. His example generated the Stakhanovite movement, which aimed to drastically increase the number of shock-workers in every economic sector. The Stakhanovite movement was given a lot of publicity, which described not only their work achievements but also their new style of life. Stakhanov received a car, a large apartment in central Moscow, access without passing the very difficult entry examination to the prestigious Mines Institute, and finally a good job at the ministry. The fine clothes and much-improved housing that the other Stakhanovites got made them also envied by their fellow workers. At the same time, the *agitprop* used to present the Stakhanovites' new possessions as "proof" of the amelioration of the Soviet workers' material conditions.[78]

However, at the time of the *perestroika*, his record was contested and described as an *agitprop* propaganda operation, the summit of Stalin's workerist shift in industrial policies. In reality, Stakhhanov had several

[76] L. Subozky, *Novyi Mir*, February 1948, p. 309, quoted in Marc Slonim, "Soviet Prose After the War", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 203, May 1949, p. 109.

[77] Nadège Mariotti, "A. G. Stachanov in Gaumont Pathé's Soiet Film Archives: Between Physical Performance and Instrumentalisation", *SLOVO*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Summer 2017.

[78] David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003, p. 137.

helpers who were conveniently omitted from the official story. The worker's resistance to the Stakhanovite movement used to significantly increase production quotas for all, a taboo subject, began also to be studied.

The Stakhanovite movement survived Stalin's death and Leonid Brezhnev could declare in 1975 at the 40th anniversary of Stakhanovism that "the movement is immortal."[79] The *perestroika* proved him wrong.

The Stakhanov model of the shock-worker was exported after WW2 to the satellite "people's democracies." For example, the German Democratic Republic tried to promote the Stakhanovite miner Adolph Henneke but he never went beyond the status of local glory.[80] The same for the Hungarian Stakhanov, Ignác Pioker. The Stakhanovite myth was superbly debunked by Andrzej Wajda's unforgettable *Man of Marble*, released in 1977 after many years of struggle with the Polish communist censorship.[81]

Last but not least, the worshiping of aviation heroes, Chkalov, Serov, Papanin. Their cults predated and offered the main tropes for the secular canonization of Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, and Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman astronaut (cosmonaut). These mythologies substantiated the communist Party's ideological claims about the inevitable triumph of Lenin's ideals and the indisputable superiority of Communism over capitalism. Siniavsky proposed the term monocracy to capture the nature of Sovietism. So, we may talk about monocratic mythocracies.

## Strategies of Resistance

During the first period of the Cold War, Soviet studies were dominated by the totalitarian paradigm with its emphasis on Party, ideology, and terror. In the 1970s, revisionist historians challenged this perspective, emphasizing a history from below and the persistence of certain diversity even during the worst Stalinist years.

[79] Mariotti, op. cit., p. 14.

[80] François Bafoil, "Adolph Henneke: Le Stakhanov de la RDA", *Ethnologie française*, T. 46, No. 3, Juillet-Septembre, 2016.

[81] For *Man of Marble*, see Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005, pp. 46–51.

The demise of the USSR in 1991 led not only to the disbandment of Leninist institutions but also to a formidable archival revolution. Documents have emerged that allow for the coalescence of a new wave in Soviet/Communist studies: one that would maintain an emphasis on the totalitarian view of propaganda, cultic rituals, supervision, and repression, yet, at the same time, would recognize the importance of non-regimented forms of subjectivity and the existence of more political infighting than the old school would have admitted. In spite of terror, there were people who resisted, accepting to pay the price, at best being silenced, at worst being sent to the GULAG or even shot. These were the times of the "desk-drawer literature." Writers that chose not to be tempted by the enormous material benefits enjoyed by those who complied with socialist realism and the Party line tried to maintain their literary independence. They did not have the slightest hope to have their work published. The best example is Mikhail Bulgakov's masterpiece *The Master and Margarita*, arguably the best novel of the Russian literature of the twentieth century, written between 1929 and 1940 but published in a complete version in the Soviet Union only in 1973.

However, even writing for the desk drawer was extremely dangerous. A house search was very common those days and if the NKVD could find the manuscript it could mean many years in a hard labor camp or even a bullet in the neck. Nevertheless, some poets developed very ingenious strategies to continue to create. A celebrated example is the Acmeist[82] poet Anna Akhmatova, whose poetry could not be published from 1925. Refusing to emigrate and, at the same time, to submit to the Party's social command, she chose the tremendously demanding position of the "internal exile." "I'm not of those who left their country/For wolves to tear it limb from limb/Their flattery does not touch me/I will not give my songs to them" wrote her in a 1922 poem. In spite of the ban on her work, Akhmatova continued to be a poet. Inspired by Pushkin who, to avoid the Czar's censorship, used a poetic technique based on double meanings to hide the political content of his verses, she used the same technique of *tainopis*, literally "secret writing," for her own poetry. For even more sensitive poems, she did not put them on paper but recited them to several trusted friends who were asked to learn the verses by heart. Like this, she could continue to create freely with less fear. If not in

[82] Acmeism was a poetic trend that emerged in 1912 in Russia. Opposing Symbolism, it favored clarity of expression.

print, her poetry could survive in her friends' memories, even in a dematerialized form. Her masterpiece *Requiem*, inspired by her standing in line at the Leningrad prison to have news about her arrested son, survived in a memorized form and was published abroad only in 1963. Ironically, Akhmatova commented on the impossibility of having her poetry printed by saying: "I live in a pre-Gutenberg era!"

## The Stalin's Epigram

Sometimes, alas, the precaution of not putting someone's verses on paper was not enough. Undoubtedly the most famous literary example was a poem by Osip Mandelstam known as *The Stalin's Epigram*. Also an Acmeist poet, Mandelstam was under heavy attack by the proletarian writers who reproached him for his "individualistic" art for art's sake poetry. At the beginning of the 1930s, that was a very serious accusation. Hoping that the attacks would calm down if the poet would be far from Moscow, Bukharin, who admired his poetry, sent him to Armenia under the fake pretext of writing about the collectivization process. Returning to Moscow, Mandelstam did not yield under pressure and was willing to take the risk. He was quoted as saying: "Only in Russia is poetry respected. It gets people killed. Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for murder?" Unable to submit to communist rule, Mandelstam declared: "I divide all world literature into authorized and non-authorized works. The first is all trash, the later - stolen air. I want to spit in the face of every writer who first obtains permission and then writes."[83] Very critical of Stalin, he was the author of a poem known as *The Stalin Epigram*. Admiring the poet's courage and talent, Isaiah Berlin wrote that "It is a magnificent and blood-chilling poem that needs no commentary."[84] However, some comments are necessary. Mandelstam's title was *The Mountaineer from Kremlin*. Created in May 1933, the poem called Stalin the "slayer of *muzhiks*," (peasants) a broad hint of the *Vozhd*'s role in the extermination of the Ukrainian peasantry, his mustache was described as a cockroach and his fingers like greasy worms. Stalin's use of death sentences was depicted in a verse that became celebrated:

[83] J.M. Coetzee, "Osip Mandelstam and the Stalin's Ode", *Representations*, No. 35, Summer 1991, p. 79.

[84] Isaiah Berlin, op. cit., p. 44.

"He rolls the executions on his tongue like berries." Of course, with such content, those sixteen verses could not be put on paper. In spite of the danger, Mandelstam recited the poem in front of some friends. Among them, Boris Pasternak, who was terribly frightened, said that Mandelstam never recited it and he never listened to such a poem and called Mandelstam's verses a suicidal act he did not approve.[85] Nonetheless, braving the peril, the poet continued to recite the poem, wanting it to be known by more people who could remember it. In Mandelstam's scale of values, poetry was valued more than life, even if the life was his own. The survival of the poem was more important than his personal survival. The inevitable happened: one of the listeners was a *stukach*, an informer, who reported the poet to the dreaded NKVD. Arrested on May 13, 1934, the poet admitted he was the author of the epigram and, at the demand of the *chekist* (person who worked for the secret police) who interrogated him, Mandelstam put the verses on paper. It was the first time the poem existed in writing. After *perestroika*, the manuscript was discovered in the KGB archives by Vitaly Shentalisky. According to his wife Nadezhda Mandelstam, when the *chekist* asked him what was the reason for his poem, Mandelstam answered with incredible courage: "I hate fascism."

The case was so serious that Stalin dealt with it personally. At 2 a.m, he called unexpectedly Boris Pasternak, wanting to know if Mandelstam was really a master. Pasternak did not give a clear answer and Stalin hung up. Contrary to all expectations, probably due to Bukharin's intervention, Mandelstam was not summarily shot but only sent in "administrative exile" for three years at Cherdyn, in the Ural mountains. After a suicide attempt, their exile place was changed for Voronezh. After three years, the Mandelstam's returned illegally to Moscow, their residence permit is canceled.

In January 1937, when still in Voronezh, Mandelstam wrote a second poem, this time not an epigram but an *Ode to Stalin*. This controversial work has been differently interpreted: some researches read the text literally, as a "true" ode, an understandable attempt to survive, while others interpret the ode as *tainopis*, as an ironic reoffending.[86] Anyway,

[85] For a thorough analysis of the poem, see Jose Manuel Prieto, "On Translating a Poem by Osip Mandelstam", http://www.bu.edu/translation/files/2011/01/Allen-Handout2.pdf.

[86] Oleg A. Lekmanov, *Mandelstam's Stalin Ode within the Context of the Overall Poetic Glorification of Stalin in 1937*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2017.

if it was not ironic, it did not work. Arrested for the second time in 1938, Mandelstam was given five years in the GULAG for "counter-revolutionary activities." He died in the transit camp of Vtoraya Rechka, near Vladivostok. The cause of death is uncertain: typhus, a heart attack, or "only" hunger, cold, and exhaustion. There is no Mandelstam grave, his body was thrown into a common pit. The poet was 47 years old.[87] As Pasternak said, making fun of the comrade Stalin was a suicidal undertaking. Regimentation was total and the Party line in culture was absolutely unquestionable.

## The Stalin Cult

In order to understand the overwhelming, ubiquitous, and asphyxiating impact of ideology, it is important to know the birth, dynamics, functions, and decline of Stalin's cult. As Jan Plamper argues in his book *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*,[88] in Soviet ideology, centrality meant sacrality. The Party's Central Committee was in fact the Sacred Committee. This explains the positioning of certain figures at crucial points in the iconic structure, with Stalin symbolizing omnipotence and omniscience. Stalin was himself fully involved in erecting the cult, while pretending, especially in conversations with foreign guests, for instance with Feuchtwanger, that he resented, even lambasted hagiographic excesses. Plamper accurately describes Stalin's attitude as 'immodest modesty'. All-Union competitions were organized to select the most convincing artifacts meant to immortalize Stalin's genius. The celebrations of Stalin's 50th birthday in December 1929 were the beginning of a full-fledged cult. Lenin's cult was a justification for Stalin's fervent worshiping. In fact, Lenin despised such rituals and never enjoyed such mystical adoration during his lifetime. The seeds, however, had been planted with the cult of the Party as the embodiment of universal reason, the infallible epistemic subject. Richard Pipes, in his *The Russian Revolution*,[89] maintained that Lenin's cult was already in high gear by the end of his life. More important, however, is the fact that, unlike Hitler's

[87] Peter B. Maggs, *The Mandelstam File and the Der Nister File: Introduction to Stalin-era. Prison and Camp Records*, London: Routledge, 1995.

[88] Ian Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012.

[89] Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, New York: Random House, 1990.

cult, or Mussolini's for that matter, Soviet propaganda insisted on the role of the Party as a providential entity, the privileged agent of historical necessity. This is what political scientist Ken Jowitt had in mind when he wrote about the charismatic impersonalism of Leninist parties. The cult was first and foremost dedicated to the Party, and this explains why, in spite of the blows dealt on Stalin's myth by Nikita Khrushchev, the ideology of communism could outlive such a devastating experience. The cultic processions were systematically manufactured in order to maintain a sense of universal fidelity to the sacred symbols of power, first and foremost epitomized by the *Vozhd* (leader). Stalin was in fact the ultimate dispenser of ideological purity certificates, he decided upon appointments to crucial positions within the apparatus. The Leader's personal engagement in controlling the different versions of Party history resulted in a complex process. Initially, the saga was told in abstract terms, with little mobilizational power. In the 1930s, as a result of Stalin's direct intervention, it became much more "humanized," incorporating stories meant to generate popular enthusiasm and identification. As the regime propaganda focused on heroic workers and pilots such as Stakhanov or Chkalov, the Party history insisted on the long-neglected personal details of the revolutionary lives of Bolshevik paragons. The Great Terror, as historians David Brandenberger and Stephen Kotkin convincingly argue, killed not only hundreds of thousands of loyal Party members but also the "usable past" resurrected in history texts of the previous period. Stalin was a true believer, an ideological zealot. He manipulated one group of Party historians against another, finally imposing his *own* understanding of the Bolshevik teleology as the only acceptable one. There were intense rivalries between Party hacks to be allowed to write Stalin's biography. These are not mere historical details, but powerful examples of how ideological choices interacted with personal vanities, jealousies, and ambitions in times of moral dereliction and political despair. Stalin had a paramount role in defining the ideological agenda of the propaganda state. *The Short Course of History* is in fact the result of Stalin's writing, rewriting, and merciless editing of drafts proposed by trusted brigades of historians. At the height of the Great Terror, in 1937–1938, the Boss was busy not only with approving long lists for executions but also with completing the definitive Bolshevik gospel. Often described as a pragmatic opportunist, Stalin was in fact obsessed with ideas and made sure these ideas would become the ultimate expression of orthodoxy.

For Stalin, the passionate quest for the New Man was a political, philosophical, and moral imperative. In this respect, he was pursuing the Bolshevik anthropological utopia. Biology, physiology, linguistics, economics, were all supposed to serve the Party's version of Truth. Stalin conceived of himself and was lionized as the Coryphaeus of Science. The 1948 onslaught on genetics with the charlatan agronomist Trofim Lysenko personally supported by the *Vozhd* was meant to eliminate all vestiges of "bourgeois science," and eliminate allegedly corrupting Western influences.[90] *Pravda* published daily the proceedings of the completely supervised academic show presented as a joining session of various academies dealing with agronomic topics. Highly regarded scientists were vilified as promoters of "imperialist pseudo-science." The party line in science and culture consisted, at this point, in a rudimentary, overly simplified version of "dialectical materialism." Acquired characters could be genetically transmitted, so pedagogy and biology could ensure the generational transfer of Soviet values and virtues. Officially, Stalin and the Politburo encouraged open debates. In reality, the purpose was to purge the scientific community of those who continued to believe in objective truth. Science and arts were superstructures; they reflected the interests of different social classes, not art for art's sake, nor science for science's sake.

As we will see in a future chapter, in 1956–1957, Mao Zedong would emulate this kind of ritual, pretending that he was encouraging open debates. In fact, as for Stalin, the goal was to identify the "enemy."

Trotsky had called him "the most blatant mediocrity among the Central Committee members." Stalin was a consummate Bolshevik, with far better Leninist credentials than his nemesis. He was not only Genghis Khan with a telephone, as an Old Bolshevik called him, but one with an ideology. In March 1939, at the moment of the 18th Party Congress, the Great Purge was over, the *Short Course* had anointed the general secretary as Lenin's only true apostle, and he was the Redeemer.

For Stalin and his underlings, first and foremost the ideological hacks Andrei Zhdanov, Politburo member, CC secretary, and Lev Mekhlis, a former worker in Stalin's office appointed editor-in-chief of the Party's official organ, *Pravda*, the Soviet culture meant bureaucratic lingo, pompous ornaments, kitsch paraphernalia, spineless obedience, simplistic

[90] Ethan Pollock, *Stalin and the Soviet Science Wars*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006. See also https://www.genetics.org/content/212/1/1.

banalities codified as the pinnacle of human wisdom. The successive communist Party purges, called *chistka* (cleansing) eliminated almost completely the Old Bolsheviks guard, people who were well-read, spoke several languages, and true for many, had the experience of exile in the West. They were brutally replaced by a category of communist bureaucrats who did not have any of their qualities. The only culture they were aware of was socialist realism and the only thing they knew about different cultures was that they were "decadent." As Stalin got the upper hand in his struggle for total domination, he embraced the aesthetic tastes, prejudices, and idiosyncrasies of the bureaucratic caste known as the *nomenklatura*, whose members were mostly what could be called communists parvenus. In this sense, Leszek Kolakowski was undoubtedly right when he wrote that "these features of the parvenu mentality can be recognized in the essential traits of Stalinist culture: its nationalism, the aesthetics of 'socialist realism', and even the system of power itself. The parvenu combines a peasant-like subservience to authority with an overmastering desire to share in it; once raised to a certain level in the hierarchy he will grovel to his superiors and trample on those beneath him. Stalin was the idol of parvenu Russia, the incarnation of its dreams of glory. The parvenu state must have a pyramid of power and a leader who is worshiped even while he scourges his subordinates."

## *Zhdanovschina*

During and after the Great Terror, Zhdanov was Stalin's most trusted political lieutenant. A telegram in the summer of 1936 from Sochi to the Politburo in Moscow, signed by the *Vozhd* and Zhdanov, led to Genrikh Yagoda's immediate replacement with Nikolai Yezhov as *Narkom* for Internal Affairs. Zhdanov was a Politburo member, CC secretary, and head of the Leningrad city Party organization. Ruthlessly fanatical, he was directly involved in thousands of arrests and executions. During WW II, Zhdanov stayed in Leningrad even under the terrible conditions of the 900-days blockade. Needless to say, he continued to benefit from special privileges.

After the victory in WW2, Stalin was at the summit of his power. The Yalta Conference accepted the extension of Soviet interests in the European Eastern countries and East Germany. The influence of Western communist parties was considerable. In France, communist ministers entered the government. In the eyes of the communist world, Stalin was

the uncontested leader and his prestige was immense. Exalting Stalin and the USSR was a mandatory ritual for communist artists and writers. Some abode by it because of fear and obligation, but many others acted because of conviction. Once again, the propaganda machine mobilized committed comrades as well as fellow travelers. As we will see in the next chapters, art giant Pablo Picasso's politically charged drawings turned into anti-American, pro-Soviet manifestos: The dove as a universal symbol of peace, the man with the carnation, Greek communist Nikos Beloyannis, of the selfless resistance to dictatorship.

For most of the post-war period, even the most open-minded Western communist parties, the French and the Italian rejected the idea of art as fully autonomous and expected intellectuals to act as partisan voices. Ex-communist writers Arthur Koestler and Ignazio Silone, two of the contributors to the collected volume *The God that Failed* were pilloried as vicious renegades. Young communist intellectual Jean Kanapa, later a Politburo member and proponent of Eurocommunism, responded to Koestler's book *The Yogi and the Commissar* with a Stalinist propaganda tract titled *Le Traître et le Proletaire* (The Traitor and the Proletarian). In the late 1940s and early 1950s, international "Peace Congresses" continued the tradition of the Paris Congress for the Defense of Culture (1935).

However, the former allies against nazism were then the new rivals for world dominance. On May 5, 1946, Winston Churchill gave his famous speech in which he deplored the iron curtain that separated the Soviet zone of influence and the Western democracies in Europe. Zhdanov was busy elaborating the Zhdanov doctrine, which would be revealed on September 22, 1947, at the foundational conference of Cominform at Szklarska-Poreba in Poland. In his speech, Zhdanov spelled out the theory that the world was divided into two competing camps, the imperialist and reactionary one, headed by the United States, and the anti-imperialist progressist one, headed by the USSR. The Western communist parties were openly expected to support the Soviet camp, not their own countries.

In the meantime, the Soviet Union had to be prepared for the Cold War to come. For Stalin, it was necessary to tighten control in the cultural field. By 1946, Zhdanov and the Leningrad group enjoyed Stalin's much-coveted confidence. No surprise therefore that the *Vozhd* entrusted Zhdanov with the mission of articulating the imperatives of the new ideological freeze.

In August 1946, three resolutions of the Central Committee reinforced the Party's control in cinema, theater, and literature. The most celebrated is undoubtedly "On the Journals *Zvezda* (Star) and *Leningrad*," which was personally edited by Stalin himself. The resolution's influence was tremendous: "For four decades, it stood as the basic statement Party's expectations about 'good' Soviet literature."[91] Although usually credited entirely to Zhdanov, documents show that at least part of it had been initiated by Georgy Malenkov's and Lavrenty Beria's faction, that tried to diminish Zhdanov's influence by attacking the Leningrad group under his responsibility.[92]

Zhdanov was given the task to explain the resolution. With that opportunity, he gave a speech that become as celebrated as that one in which he defined the Zhdanov doctrine. According to Dobrenko, Stalin liked the speech so much that he called it "superlative."[93] Following the resolution terms, Zhdanov detailed the accusations. In his story *The Adventures of a Monkey*, Zoshchenko "makes the monkey act as a supreme judge of our social customs, a dictator of morality to Soviet people. The monkey is depicted as an intelligent creature capable of assessing human behavior. The writer deliberately caricatures the life of Soviet people as unattractive and cheap, so as to have the monkey pass the judgment, filthy, poisonous, and anti-Soviet as it is, that living in the zoo is better than being at liberty, that you can draw your breath more freely in a cage than among Soviet people. Is it possible to fall morally and politically lower than this?[94]

If Zoshchenko was criticized for his innuendos concerning Soviet life, Akhmatova was scolded for the intimate character of her poetry: "Akhmatova's subject matter is individualistic to the core. The range of her poetry is sadly limited; it is the poetry of a spoilt woman-aristocrat, frenziedly vacillating between boudoir and chapel. Her main emphasis is on erotic love themes interwoven with notes of sadness, longing, death, mysticism, fatality. A sense of fatality (quite comprehensible in a dying group), the dismal tones of deathbed hopelessness, mystical experiences shot with eroticism, make up Akhmatova's spiritual world; she is a leftover from

[91] Kees Boterbloem, *The Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov 1896–1948*, Montreal: The McGill Queen's University Press, 2004, p. 281.

[92] Dobrenko, *Late Stalinism*, op. cit., p. 159.

[93] Dobrenko, idem.

[94] Andrei Zhdanov "Report on the Journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*", https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/zhdanov/lit-music-philosophy.htm.

the world of the old aristocracy now irrevocably past and gone, the world of 'Catherine's good old days. It would be hard to say whether she is a nun or a fallen woman; better perhaps say she is a bit of each, her desires and her prayers intertwined."[95]

For Zhdanov, the origin of the authors' mistakes laid in their previous affiliations, the Serapion Brothers for Zoshchenko and Acmeism for Akhmatova, both groups that did not share the revolutionary ideals. To "unmask" Acmeism, in an unprecedented move, Zhdanov quoted Mandelstam, which would have been normally immediately censored as the poet had been condemned for his *Stalin Epigram* and died in a camp. It was forbidden to mention him. But nobody, except Stalin himself, could censor Zhdanov in 1946.

Motivated by Stalin's absurd thesis of the sharpening of the class struggle under socialism, which served as the "theoretical" justification of the Great Terror, Zhdanov imposed a strictly militant approach of cultural matters. To doubt was heresy and just neutrality was not acceptable. Anyone active on the "cultural front" had to take a stand and behave as on a real front line. The tone had to be combative and the vocabulary was inspired by that of the soldiers. Consequently, the percentage of critical contributions that included the words "the fight against…" or "the struggle against…" had increased dramatically. Everything was organized into campaigns with specific objectives, such as in the military.

One essential target of *Zhdanovchina* was cosmopolitanism. Gone were the days when internationalism was a central element of revolutionary Soviet Russia. The Stalinist slogan "Socialism into one country" inherently weakened the internationalist thinking of the first revolutionary years. In the late 1940s, it was the time of the exaltation of the Soviet, and specifically Russian values. Flattering Russian nationalism helped Stalin for his own political agenda.

During the 946 discussions about the magazines, Stalin scolded Boris Likharev, the co-editor of *Leningrad*, for "fawning with the West."[96] Already the "Resolution on Journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*" deplored that "Works appeared in the journal that cultivated a spirit foreign to the Soviet people of servility before the contemporary bourgeois culture

[95] Zhdanov, "Report…", op. cit.

[96] Kees Boterbloem, op. cit., p. 279.

of the West."[97] In his speech, Zhdanov emphasized the anti-Western criticisms: "No wonder literary journals started giving space to cheap modern bourgeois literature from the West. Some of our men of letters began looking on themselves as not the teachers but the pupils of petty-bourgeois writers and began to adopt an obsequious and awestruck attitude towards foreign literature. Is such obsequiousness becoming in us Soviet patriots who have built up the Soviet order, which towers higher a 100-fold, and is better a 100-fold, than any bourgeois order? Is obsequiousness towards the cheap and philistine bourgeois literature of the West becoming in our advanced Soviet literature, the most revolutionary in the world?"[98]

As the Cold War was getting increasingly warmer and Stalin's paranoia advanced, the fight against cosmopolitanism expanded into a veritable campaign. The propaganda apparatus began to promote themes on Soviet patriotism, which were frequently tainted with Russian nationalism. Following the *Vozhd*'s obsessions, the anti-foreign element became truly xenophobic. When on May 13, 1947, Stalin discussed with Aleksandr Fadeev, the head of the Soviet Writers' Union, and his deputy Konstantin Simonov the various topics the Soviet writers were working on, the leader stated: "The main task for writers, the general task, is fighting against kowtowing to foreigners."[99] Zhdanov initiated immediately a veritable witch- hunt for "worshipers of the West, "admirers of the dollar civilization," "slavish imitators of foreign bourgeois culture," "supporters of the alien mentality," or "groveling before capitalism."

The same as in Nazi Germany, jazz was forbidden as an expression of the American decadent spirit and a dangerous influence on the Soviet youth.[100] If the nazis had always disliked jazz, for the Soviet Union that new anti-jazz policy represented a sharp political turn. After a short period of anti-modernist persecution in 1928–1929, at the beginning of the 1930s jazz had been welcomed as the music of the oppressed black minority. Sometimes, it could be listened to even at the Kremlin's receptions and was played by the Red Army's Band. This changed

[97] "Resolution…", op. cit.

[98] Zhdanov, "Report…", op. cit.

[99] Quoted in Dobrenko, *Late Stalinism*, op. cit., p. 393.

[100] Gleb Tsipur, *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption and State-sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union 1945–1970*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016.

abruptly during the post-WW2 anti-formalist and anti-cosmopolitarianist campaigns. In a meeting at the Central Committee of the CPSU, the orchestra director Boris Khinkin asserted to his fellow musicians that, if it was true that, at its historic origins, jazz had been the music of the working people but these were "long lost and since have been replaced by trashy philistine motifs."[101]

Then jazz was stripped of any positive elements and depicted in a similar way to Nazi propaganda, as a symbol of American degeneration. To help convey this idea, they often quoted an older Gorky's article of 1928, "The Music of the Gross." The writer, who hated jazz, described it as "a rattling, howling and screaming like the clamor of a metal pig, the cry of a donkey or the amorous croaking of a monstrous frog." Another theme, that will be also used by Goebbels' men, was the association of jazz with leashed sexuality: "Listen to this scream for only a few minutes, and one involuntarily pictures an orchestra of sexually wound-up madmen, conducted y a Stallion-like creature who is swinging his giant genitals."[102] A famous scene from the successful Gregorii Aleksandrov's film *Meeting on the Elbe* (1949), with music by Shostakovich, evoking the meeting in1945 of the Soviet and US armies on the Elbe river in Germany, takes place in front of a nightclub where a black soldier was beaten on a devilish jazz rhythm, symbolizing American decadence. Ironically, the Russian composer was notorious for his love for jazz. Nevertheless, he had to follow the Party line.

There was even an attempt to state that jazz disturbs not only human behavior but affects also animal behavior. *Izvestia* published an article that maintained dolphins swimming around a Soviet ship swam away when they had heard jazz music from the ship's loudspeakers.[103]

Moreover, at the beginning of the Cold War, playing jazz was considered unSoviet and unpatriotic, almost fraternization with the enemy. A popular saying of the time claimed that: "Today he plays jazz. Tomorrow, he will sell out his homeland." Radios were prohibited to broadcast jazz

[101] Alexei Yurchak, op. cit., p. 166.

[102] Maxim Gorky, "O muzyke tolstykh", *Pravda*, April 18, 1928, quoted in Martin Lücke, "Vilifiebidden: Jazz in the Stalinist Era", *Music and Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer 2007, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mp/9460,447.0001.201/-vilified-venerated-forbidden-jazz-in-the-stalinist-era?rgn=main;view=fulltext.

[103] Victoria Khiterer, "Seekers of Happiness: Jews and Jazz in the Soviet Union", *Kultura Poopularna*, Vol. 1, No. 51, 2017, www.academia.edu.

and jazz records could not be played on public occasions. Many jazz orchestras were disbanded and those who were not had to change their name. Jazz stars such as Leonid Utesov or Aleksandr Tsfasman were forbidden to perform their preferred music. Saxophones were banned and many jazz musicians were arrested.[104] It is said that the jazz ban was deeply but secretly regretted by Viktor Abakumov, the former chief of SMERSH[105] and then Minister of State Security, who was a known jazz fan and regularly invited the famous jazzman Eddie Rossner to sing at his private parties. Another jazz fan, Khrushchev's son, got his jazz records broken by his father.[106]

However, in spite of the official ban, they never succeeded in completely eradicating jazz, which survived mainly in dance clubs, bringing despair to the KOMSOMOL patrols that had to enforce the ban. In spite of their efforts, jazz remained the favorite music of the *stiliagi* (the "styled" ones), a 1950s youth counterculture interested in Western music and fashion.

In his speech concluding the second conference of the Soviet philosophical workers for the discussion of Aleksandrov's book on the history of Western philosophy, Zhdanov heavily criticized the very concept of the book. He maintained that it was a serious error to have treated the subject geographically instead of writing the history of philosophy as the history of the struggle between materialism and idealism. This geographical approach led to a separation between Western and Eastern contributions. Because of this distinction, Marxism was presented as a mere " regional Western current." This view, stated Zhdanov, ignored the influence of the Russian tradition and the Russian school of philosophy. Moreover, the "arbitrary termination at 1848" belittled the Leninist and Stalinist developments of Marxism.[107] In 1947, not extolling Stalin's role in any domain, even in the history of Western philosophy till 1848, that is thirty years before his birth, was a mortal sin.

[104] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 212.

[105] SMERSH, an abbreviation for *smert shpionam*, death for spies, the Red Army counter-intelligence during WW2.

[106] Simon Sebag-Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, p. 154.

[107] Andrei Zhdanov, "On Philosophy: Speech at a Conference of Soviet Philosophical Workers 1947" https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/zhdanov/lit-music-philosophy.htm.

Exposing the "corruption" of the Western culture, that recruited "gangsters, pimps, spies, and criminal elements," Zhdanov targeted Jean-Paul Sartre. The French philosopher presented favorably in his journal *Les Temps modernes* Jean Genet's book *The Diary of a Thief*, which opened with "treason, theft, and homosexuality," which in Zhdanov's eyes represented "the last word of the bourgeois culture."[108] Slavishly following his Kremlin master ideologist, Jean Kanapa, then a rising star in the French Communist Party, accused Sartre of corrupting youth by putting homosexual characters in his novels.[109]

As the Stalinist slogans claimed the absolute superiority of the socialist system over, from a doctrinal point of view, everything had to be better in the Soviet camp. Nonetheless, during WW2, millions of Soviet soldiers had crossed Central Europe and could compare the quality of life to that of home. In the impossibility to provide the same as the capitalist system, the Stalinist solution was confinement. Interdiction to travel abroad, which existed even prior to the founding of the Soviet Union, was extended to the satellite countries. This confinement strategy was not abolished after Stalin's death, its obvious summit being the infamous Berlin Wall. Even more, a decree from February 15 1947 forbade marriages between Soviet and foreign citizens, which was revoked only after 1953. But keeping its citizens in the great GULAG was not enough. Isolationism had to be not only physical but also cultural. Stalin wanted total control and total control implied necessarily the Thought Police. Therefore, they **had** to believe that everything is better in their existence, and if they did not, they had to be forced to. In the confined socialist camp, the praise of anything Western, from film to toothpaste or from literature to plumbing began to be a dangerous endeavor, as one could be immediately accused of being a cosmopolitan, necessarily "anti-Soviet" or "anti-patriotic," accusations that could lead to from five to ten years in a hard labor camp or worse.

In the field of humanities, teaching and researching the history of Western literature or Western art became unsafe. Discussing one possible Western influence on Russian or Soviet works could be immediately denounced as "kneeling to the West." Any Western influence on Russian

[108] Zhdanov, op. cit.

[109] Ian H. Birchall, *Sartre Against Stalinism*, Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books Inc., 2004, p. 127.

art and literature was denied. Comparative literature was particularly suspected and revered scholars such as the nineteenth century Aleksandr Veselovsky, author of *Historical Poetics*, an attempt to establish a general theory of world literature, were negatively reevaluated.[110] As a consequence of the same anti-Western campaign, the Moscow State Museum for the New Western Art was accused of holding "formalist collections," which were "a breeding ground for formalist views and self-abasement before the decadent Western culture of the age on imperialism and caused great harm to the development of Russian and Soviet art."[111] To avoid that the Soviet artists, art students, and art lovers might be contaminated by the direct contact with such "dangerous" Western works, the museum was closed on March 20, 1948.[112] The collections were shared between the storage facilities of the Pushkin Museum in Moscow and The Hermitage in Leningrad. The building was used to shelter the presents received by the *Vozhd* from the whole world. The Western influences on Russian art became a taboo topic.

The Soviet satirical periodical *Krokodil* (The Alligator))—one of Stalin's favorite readings—published a caricature of the "rootless cosmopolitan" in March 1949. A traveling writer, with caricatured Jewish features, is described negatively as a "passportless drifter" for whom writing is a weapon: he wears a pen shaped like a knife on his belt, and he carries ink in a cartridge marked as poison, with the skull and crossbones symbol. He lugs a suitcase with the names of "subversive" Western writers, including André Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre), W. Somerset Maugham, André Gide. This cosmopolitan writer, with his mismatched European and American clothing and Scandinavian jumper, is considered a threat to the local community because he produces, as the image records, "slander against Russian art" and "slander against Soviet Culture." The image is subtitled by a quote from the nineteenth-century Russian literary critic Vissarion

[110] Konstantin Azadovskii, Boris Egorov, "From Anti-Westernism to Anti-Semitism", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Winter 2002. https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~hpcws/egorov.htm.

[111] Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998, p. 283.

[112] Maria Mileeva, "Utopia in Retreat: The Closure of the State Museum of Art in 1948" in Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori and Maria Mileeva eds., *Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond*, Leiden: Brill, 2013.

Belinsky: "I must admit that I find pathetic and unpleasant those detached skeptics, abstract little men, passportless drifters among humanity."

The same month, on March 15, 1949, an article in the theoretical and political review of the Central Committee of the CPSU *Bolshevik*, signed by an enigmatic F. Chernov, probably a pseudonym—unsigned articles or signed with a pseudonym were of utmost importance because they were considered to reflect the official position—denounced cosmopolitanism as the opposite of genuine Soviet values: "Cosmopolitanism is the negation of patriotism, its opposite. It advocates absolute apathy towards the fate of the Motherland. Cosmopolitanism denies the existence of any moral or civil obligations of people to their nation and Motherland."[113] Cosmopolitanism was also presented as being in direct opposition with the *narodnost* (peopleness) demand of socialist realism.

Almost immediately, following closely Stalin's increasing anti-Semitism, the anti-cosmopolitan campaign became more and more anti-Semitic itself. Cosmopolitan became the code word for Jews. If they were using a pen name that did not look Jewish, their real Jewish name followed in parentheses, to ensure they were identified as Jews. They began to be presented in the media as deprived of Soviet patriotism, essentially pro-Westerners and even as "an American fifth column." Resuscitating the old anti-Semitic *cliché* of the non-belonging Wandering Jew, they were depicted as "origin less," "vagrants," and "foreigners from the inside," Jews were described as the cosmopolitans *par excellence*.[114] Although Stalin seemed favorable to Israel and the USSR voted for her creation in 1948, the politics changed drastically when it was clear that the new state was in the American sphere of influence. Arrested Jews were then accused not only of spying for the United States or the British, as it was usually the case but more and more of spying also in favor of Israel. The old accusation of double allegiance was resuscitated and Zionism was defined as the specifically Jewish form of "bourgeois nationalism."

Usually, the beginning of the anti-Semitic campaign is associated with the infamous articles published on January 28, 1949, in *Pravda*, "Discovery of the Anti-Patriotic Activities of Rootless Cosmopolitans" and "On the Anti-Patriotic Activities of a Group of Theater Critics."

[113] F. Chernov, "Bourgeois Cosmopolitanism and Its Reactionary Role", *Bolshevik*, No. 5, March 15, 1949. https://arplan.org/tag/rootless-cosmopolitanism/.

[114] Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*, op. cit., p. 5.

However, Aleksandr Fadeev's speech "On Several Reasons for the Lag in Soviet Dramaturgy" at the Plenum of the Writer's Union board at the end of December 1948 associated already cosmopolitanism with Jewishness. The "group" branded in *Pravda* was in reality no group at all, the only links between its supposed "members," among them Aleksandr Borshchagorsky, Abram Gurvich, or Yuly Yuzovsky, were their shared activity domain and mainly their common Jewish ethnicity. Systematically, Jewish professors and researchers, particularly from the Moscow and the Leningrad universities and the Institute of World Literature were purged and lost their academic positions. Writing in Yiddish was attacked as "Jewish bourgeois nationalism" and "chauvinistic." Prominent Jewish writers, such as Perets Markish or David Bergelson, were arrested and tortured. Based on their "confessions" obtained under duress, a military court condemned 13 of 15 defendants described as "Zionist agents" to death for spying for the United States and the United Kingdom but also for Israel. They were executed on August 12, 1952, known as "the Night of Murdered Poets." Many were members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, a body created during WW2 to influence world Jewry to support the war effort. The president of the committee, the famous Yiddish actor Solomon (Shloime) Mikhoels was murdered in Minsk by Stalin's personal order, the assassination being disguised in a truck accident. Nonetheless, the summit of the anti-Semitic campaign reached its peak with the sinister Doctors' Plot, a scenario in which many celebrated Jewish doctors were arrested, tortured, and accused of imaginary crimes, such as mistreating Zhdanov or poisoning Gorky and his son. Happily, Stalin's death brought an end to that sinister project.

The fact that Ehrenburg, who had been also a member of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and a co-editor of the banned *Black Book*, a collection of first-hand testimonies about the annihilation of the Soviet Jewry during WW2[115] was spared is intriguing. A lot of rumors circulated about him as "the eternal survivor."[116] Nonetheless, Katerina Clark's and Evgeny Dobrenko's hypothesis that he was not harmed because his function in the infernal Stalin's plan was to be the alibi Jew, a convenient asset to be opposed against the official state anti-Semitism accusations is rather

[115] Ilya Ehrenburg, Vasily Grossman eds., *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, London: Routledge, 2003.

[116] Joshua Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties: The Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg*, Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999.

convincing[117] Born on January 27, 1891, in Kiev, Ilya Grigoryevich Ehrenburg passed away in Moscow on August 31, 1967. Convoluted and fractured, his life coincided with a convoluted and fractured century. He was friends with Bukharin, Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Modigliani, Pascin, Picasso, Hemingway, Koltsov, Pasternak, Babel, Grossman, Tsvetaeva, Tuwim, Neruda, Aragon, Elsa Triolet, Malraux, Anna Seghers, Meyerhold, and so many others. His aesthetic beliefs were uncompromisingly modernist and he despised "socialist realism." In his life, he made many compromises, but he never betrayed his friends. Never a Zionist, he was unswervingly opposed to anti-Semitism and never concealed his Jewish origin.

He left us several novels, among them the celebrated *The Thaw* and an extraordinary book of memoirs, probably his best and most enduring writing. When it was serialized in the journal *Novyi Mir*, the party hacks went mad. They could not forgive Ehrenburg for his blunt confession about the times of Stalinist terror: "We could not divulge a great many things, even to our loved ones. Only now and then, we shook our friends' hands with particular warmth--we were all participants in a great conspiracy of silence."[118]

To grasp the impact of the Ehrenburg's memoirs on the Soviet literary world, let us quote here a passage from Ariadne (Alya), Marina Tsvetaeva's daughter, addressed to Ehrenburg in May 1961, signaling, as Joshua Rubenstein says, "her rehabilitation into the recognized pantheon of Russian poets": "What difficult work this memoirs must be … when an entire generation of those times--that time-is only swaddled with conventional interpretations. … When your generosity, penetrating all the shells, reaches the unprotected essence of people, actions, events, landscapes, to the soul of everything and even to the readers'--this is a miracle"[119] It was the first work of literature to make direct references to the Doctors' Plot.

Launching one campaign after another allowed Zhdanov to keep Soviet culture in constant turmoil that rendered all positions unsafe and people involved more vulnerable. Almost simultaneously with his campaign against cosmopolitanism, Zhdanov launched another offensive

[117] Katerina Clark, Evgeny Dobrenko, p. 472.

[118] Rubenstein, p. 344.

[119] Rubenstein, p. 341.

targeted that time at formalism. However, it was not a true continuation of the old debate between the formalist theory of art and literature and Marxism but an attack on formalist leanings of the Soviet creators of the time, which were condemned as deviations from the socialist realist method. The anti-formalist campaign was also intimately connected with the anti-cosmopolitanism one, as formalism was presented as something Western, foreign to the Soviet realities, "omitting" to mention the huge importance of the Russian contribution to the formalist theory of art and literature. As socialist realism was focused on content and the formal aspect of a work of art was considered mainly from the point of view of its accessibility, any attempt to give more importance to form was branded as formalism. From this perspective, the worst was abstract art, which was described as lacking any content, therefore "meaningless," and presented as the expression of Western decadence. Paradoxically, a few years after, *The New York Times Magazine* titled, on the contrary, "Is Modern Art Communistic?"[120]

At that time, the anti-formalist campaign began in the musical field. After the three Resolutions of 1946 that dealt with literature, theater, and cinema, it was music's turn, as no major field of the "cultural front" could escape the tightening of the Party's control wanted by Stalin. Because of its specificity, music was the art that had the most complicated relationship with socialist realism. If it was relatively easier to define a necessary link between *narodnost* and music through folklore, it was much more difficult to connect the other socialist realist exigencies, namely *partiinost* and *ideinost*. Quite often, critics and censors checked the compliance to the dogma at the level of the title of the compositions, the verses of songs, or the *libretto* rather than in the musical structure of the works However, they systematically hunt for difficult accessibility and attempts at experimentalism. The anti-formalist attacks existed already before WW2, such as the infamous *Pravda* editorial "Muddle Instead of Music,"[121] directed at Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk*. Published shortly after Stalin left during the third act during its representation at the *Bolshoi*, expressing his disapproval of the opera, the article was written probably by Zhdanov himself.[122] It viciously attacked Shostakovitch for formalism

[120] *The New York Times Magazine*, December 14, 1952.

[121] *Pravda*, January 28, 1936, p. 3.

[122] Sheila Fitzpatrick, p. 187.

and experimentalism: "…listeners are flabbergasted by the intentionally dissonant, confused stream of sounds in the opera,"[123] which the author of the *Pravda* article called a "pornophony."

In 1948, Zhdanov's anti-formalist campaign began also with an attack against an opera, Vano Muradeli's *Velikaia Druzhba* (The Great Friendship). A Resolution of the CC of CPSU from 10 February declared that the opera was "a faulty, inartistic production, both in its music and plot." The music was described as "inexpressive and vapid…discordant and disharmonious, built entirely on dissonance and jarring sound combinations." From the standpoint of socialist realism, Muradeli's opera lacked both *dostupnost*, as the listener could not remember a single melody and was aggressed by "discordant sounds that are absolutely foreign to normal human hearing," and *narodnost*, because the composer use neither folk music as a source for his work nor he inspired himself from the tradition of classical opera, especially the Russian opera, which was needless to say, "the best in the world."[124] Moreover, the opera lacked also *partiinost* and *ideinost*, as the work "creates the incorrect impression that such Caucasian people as Georgians and Ossetians were at the time hostile to the Russian people. This is incorrect historically, because in that period in the North Caucasus it was the Ingushi and the Chechen who hindered the establishment of friendship among the peoples."[125] The point was extremely sensitive because Stalin was of Georgian and Ossetian descent and the Ingushi and the Chechens have been deported by the *Vozhd* as punishment for their collaboration with the Germans during WW2. The cause for Muradeli's failure was that he took the path of formalism, "which is a false path and fatal to the creative work of the Soviet composer."

Obviously, it could seem strange that a Resolution of the Central Committee was necessary to attack an opera when a musical critique could have been enough. However, this choice made clear the importance of the campaign for both Stalin and Zhdanov, and also that it was continuing the process of tightening the Party's control initiated by the Resolutions from 1946, After literature, cinema, and theater, it was then the time for music, The choice of the target was significant, as Muradeli was a prominent composer who received the Stalin Prize three years before. Attacking

[123] Sheila Fitzpatrick, p. 188.

[124] *Muradeli's Opera: The Great Friendship*. www.revolutionarydemocracy.org.

[125] Idem.

Muradeli was a signal to all that even established cultural personalities such as the Georgian composer are not spared and could lose their status if they step off the Party's line. Another reason for focusing on Muradeli could have been the composer's choice of the opera' main hero, the Georgian *Narkom* Sergo 0rdzhonikidze in whose suicide (1937) Stalin could have had a hand.[126]

One week later, on 17 February, Zhdanov summoned a General Assembly of the Soviet composers. In his speech, he repeated and detailed his critical remarks. Provocatively, he called on participants to clearly express their position and frankly and openly declare if they believed that the Central Committee was wrong in condemning Muradeli and formalism. Nevertheless, no one fell into that obvious trap. Instead of committing a public suicide, not only Muradeli but major composers such as Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, and Aram Khachaturian, all critically mentioned in Zhdanov's speech, humiliatingly recanted for their modernism. Muradeli admitted that his opera was "an anti-artistic composition, corrupt both from the musical and political standpoint." After a comprehensive list of his "errors," he concluded by: "I have before me a definite task to realize fully and unequivocally the seriousness of my creative errors and to correct these errors with ideological honesty in my future works."[127]

As Zhdanov mentioned *Lady Macbeth from Mtsensk* as one of the sources of musical formalism in the Soviet Union, Shostakovich cleverly began his speech by stating how much the Party's criticism of his opera and how these criticisms deeply changed the course of his art. Nevertheless, he regretted that the changes in his music could not "find a path to the heart of the Soviet people" because some "negative characteristics" of his musical thought were still present and made him "again deviate in the direction of formalism, and began to speak a language incomprehensible to the people." Therefore, he deplored that "between my subjective intentions and objective results there was an appalling gap,"

[126] Francis Maes, *A History of Soviet Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babyi Yar*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002, p. 309.

[127] Discussion at a General Assembly of Soviet Composers, www.soviethistory.msu.edu/1947-2/zhdanov/zhdanov-texts/discussion-at-a-general-assembly-of-soviet-composers.htm.

and concluded by agreeing all criticism: "I am deeply grateful for it and for all the criticisms contained in the Resolution."[128]

The other composer negatively mentioned by Zhdanov, the Armenian Aram Khachaturian, adopted the same tactics, stating that the Resolution "brings liberation to us" and that "I have only one desire, to correct by creative work my previous errors."[129] The reasons for these errors were his formalist interest in technique and his separation from his Armenian native element, "generated by his will to be a 'cosmopolitan.'"

The public penitence ceremony continued with the reading of a letter by Sergei Prokofiev, who could not attend the meeting because of health reasons. In the letter, Prokofiev wrote that the Resolution separated "the decayed tissue in the composer's creative production from the healthy. He continued by stating that it demonstrated that" the formalist movement is alien to the Soviet people. Using the language of the anti-cosmopolitanism campaign, Prokofiev situated the cause for the formalist "infection" in his music in (the) "contact with some Western ideas."[130]

How humiliating they could have been, the tactics of observing the rules of self-criticism of the Bolshevik ritual of contrition worked that time because all the four composers saved their head.

Even more violently than Zhdanov, Muradeli, Shostakovich. Khachaturian, and Prokofiev were ferociously attacked by a young composer, Tikhon Khrennikov (b. 1913). More than probably briefed by Zhdanov himself, Khrennikov praised the Resolution which "deals a decisive blow to modernist art as a whole." Following his ideological master, he emphasized that modernism in Russia is a foreign element, "the revelation of frank sycophancy before the Western music." Khrennikov deplored also Prokofiev's and Shostakovich's pernicious influence on the younger generation of composers, "the infatuation with decadent thematics, exoticism and mysticism became almost a routine phenomenon." After criticizing thoroughly the works of the composers negatively quoted by Zhdanov, especially the works of Shostakovich, Khrennikov concluded by stating that "Soviet composers must reject as useless and harmful garbage gal the relics of bourgeois formalism in musical art. They must understand the creation of high-quality in the domain of the opera, symphonic

[128] Idem.

[129] Idem.

[130] Idem.

music, song-writing, choral and dance music, is possible only by following the principles of socialist realism."[131]

The Bolshevik liturgy of "confessions" and self-criticism ended with the assembly's decision to send the inevitable letter to Stalin, in which the composers thanked the *Vozhd* "for the severe but profoundly just criticism of the present state of Soviet music" and for the "inestimable help, a testimony of the great power and prophetic vision of the Communist Party."[132]

Khrennikov's speech was the key—moment in his career. Such a degree of *partiinost* deserved a reward. Impressed, Zhdanov—some say Stalin himself—awarded him the job of Chairman of the Soviet Composers' Union, position that Khrennikov would keep for decades.

[131] Idem.

[132] Idem.


CHAPTER 3

# De-Stalinization

Joseph Stalin passed away on March 5, 1953. A collective leadership took his place, dominated by Prime Minister Malenkov, minister of state security Marshal Lavrenty Beria, and Central Committee secretary Nikita Khrushchev. With his CC Presidium colleagues' approval, Beria ordered the return of millions from the GULAG. The struggle at the top was fierce and confusing, but it was clear that the times of absolute control over minds and bodies were coming to a slow, yet inevitable end. In June 1953, Beria was arrested during a Presidium meeting in the Kremlin. The mastermind of this operation was Khrushchev who managed to persuade Malenkov and the other magnates, including the top military brass that Beria was conspiring to become the new autocrat. Furthermore, Khrushchev accused Beria of treason. The chief inquisitor suffered the fate of his countless victims. After a secret trial, in spite of his protestations of innocence, Beria was sentenced to death and executed in September 1953.

## The Thaw

*The Thaw* was a novella by the iconic writer Ilya Ehrenburg published in the spring issue of 1954 of the immensely popular literary monthly *Novyi Mir* (The New World). It signaled the beginning of political and cultural de-Stalinization. It was the first work of literature to make direct



R. Stern and V. Tismaneanu, *Communism and Culture*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82650-5_3

references to the Doctors' Plot. The novella did not obey any longer the strict socialist realism rules and the communist characters were no longer perfect. Its title gave the name to the whole period of Soviet and East European history and to the political-cultural process initiated after Stalin's death. It was a metaphorical suggestion that the Stalinist freeze was over. Like an iced river in spring, the totalitarian iceberg was melting down. The signal was unmistakable: gone were the times of complete regimentation, human sentiments could be expressed again, in literature, theater, film, fine arts, or music. In other words, a more relaxed, more permissive, less stifling atmosphere. Its very publication suggested the emergence of increasingly anti-Stalinist voices in the once fully regimented "cultural front."

The echoes of the Moscow Spring in the "peoples' democracies" translated in calls for democratization and openness. It was, to a great extent, the disillusionment of the former true believers which contributed to the breakdown of the mythocratic system.

In Poland, a former Stalinist poet, Adam Wazyk, published in 1955 his path-breaking incendiary *Poem for the Adults* in which he lamented the predicament of the working class in an allegedly "workers' state," he gave voice to the rampant malaise and the explosive discontent within the Polish society:

> On this earth we appeal on behalf of people
> who are exhausted from work,
> we appeal for locks that fit the door,
> for rooms with windows,
> for walls which do not rot,
> for contempt for papers,
> for a holy human time,
> for a safe home,
> for a simple distinction between words and deeds.
> We appeal for this on the earth for which we did not gamble with dice
> for which a million people died in battles,
> we appeal for bright truth and the corn of freedom

The celebrated "dictatorship of the proletariat" was in fact a bureaucratic dictatorship over the working class. The poem ended with an appeal to the Party to rediscover its original pledges. In fact, it became increasingly clear, especially after the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution, that communist parties cannot really embrace democracy. Disenchantment was

rampant among intellectuals; there were calls for revising tragic events in the recent past.

For the reformers, the Zhdanovist aesthetic canon, in fact, a straitjacket was almost forgotten. However, the denunciation of Stalin's cult of personality did not imply the abandonment of censorship and the Party's control of the cultural front. Khrushchev's de-Stalinization was fundamentally a conservative reform. According to Khrushchev's narrative, Stalinism and its "excesses" were described as a "deviation" from the communist goal, not as its accomplishment. The new slogan was: "If only Lenin would have lived more!" The *agitprop* tried to convince that all problems came from Stalin only! Khrushchev insisted that Stalin was just an unlucky parenthesis in the history of communism and that he, Khrushchev, is the true successor of the Leninist line. In this light, the basic tenets of the communist system were saved, and its structural problems were presented as the errors of one individual. One man could make errors and be fallible but the Party is infallible and omniscient. And the future is always bright! The Khrushchev period was characterized by a continuous struggle between reformers and conservatives. However, in Khrushchev's conception, reform could target Stalin and *Zhdanovchina* but he never allowed reform to question communism itself. That was heresy.

Nonetheless, even if the Zhdanovist understanding of the dogma made room for a more liberal interpretation, the canon of socialist realism died hard. After the *Secret Speech*, all references to Stalin or Zhdanov were generally omitted and socialist realism was presented as a direct continuation of the Leninist theses. As such, it was maintained as an official method of creation and taught in the art academies and literature institutes practically until *perestroika*.

Even in the aftermath of Stalin's death, *Novyi Mir*, the journal that supported reform, managed to publish unorthodox pieces, including writer Vladimir Pomerantsev's call for sincerity as an antidote to the prevailing hypocrisy, duplicity, and opportunism. In the December 1953 issue of *Novyi Mir*, Pomerantsev published a provocative essay that became famous: "On Sincerity in Literature." He maintained that the poor quality of the current Soviet literature was caused by the insincerity of his fellow writers, who do not believe their own writings: "Sincerity is lacking not only in works done to fit a mold, and the mold is not the worst form of insincerity. A work done to fit the mold strips a work of its effectiveness and leaves us indifferent, without, however, engendering

direct distrust of the literary word. This arises from a different type of insincerity which we call "varnishing reality". This was born not only of the hypocrisy of the critic--the writer himself is no less guilty. It has put down deep roots and has become varied in its methods…."[1] But the glory of *Novyi Mir* came with the editorship held by former Stalinist poet Aleksandr Tvardovsky for whom parting with the dictatorial past represented a moral obligation.

## Fadeev's Suicide

De-Stalinization proceeded fast and reached a climactic point in February 1956 when Khrushchev dealt a mortal blow to Stalin's cult. Shocked by the revelations coming from the Party's supreme authority, and attacked by his fellow writers for his collaboration with the secret police, the former head of the Writers' Union, celebrated Stalinist novelist Aleksandr Fadeev committed suicide on May 13, 1956. His suicide note kept secret for more than 30 years, read: "It is impossible for me to live any further since the art to which I have given my life has been destroyed by the self-confident, ignorant leadership of the Party and can no longer be corrected. The best cadres of literature--in number far more than the tsarist satraps could even dream of--have been physically exterminated or have died thanks to the criminal connivance of those in power. The best literary people died at an unnaturally young age; all the rest who were, even to the smallest degree, capable of producing true works of value died before reaching 40–50 years of age….After Lenin's death they brought us down to the level of children; they destroyed us; they threatened us ideologically and called this "the Party spirit".[2] In his diary, the writer Korney Chukovsky commented: "I feel sorry for you, dear Alexander Alexandrovich: one could sense a man of stature, a Russian brand of natural genius under all the layers--but, good lord, what layers there were! All the lies of the Stalinist era, all its idiotic atrocities, all the horrific bureaucracy, all its corruption and red tape found a willing accessory in him. An essentially decent human being, who loved literature 'to tears' had ended by steering the ship of literature into the most

[1] Vladimir Pomerantsev, "On Sincerity in Literature", *Novyi Mir*, December 1953, http://hstrial-beverett.homestead.com/piomerantsev.htm.

[2] http://www.sovlit.net/fadeeevsuicide/.

perilous, most shameful of waters and attempting to combine humaneness with the secret-police mentality, Hence the zigzags of his behavior, hence the tortured CONSCIENCE of his final years. … Conscientious, talented, and sensitive as he was, he was foundering in oozy, putrid mud and drowning his conscience in wine."[3] The official Fadeev's obituary mentioned only his alcoholism problem as the cause of the suicide without any reference to politics present in the farewell note.

## Breaking with the Big Lie

On February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev's *Secret Speech* ushered in a new era in the history of global communism. It was an earth-shattering event. One could say that Stalin was truly defunct. After his physical death, the *Vozhd* suffered a second death, this time a spiritual one. It shook decisively Stalin's historic status and revealed the criminal methods used by the political police. The text reached the West and came out in the spring.

The shockwaves were dramatic. Hopes grew exponentially in the USSR and in the "socialist camp." If embracing Marxism in its Bolshevik incarnation was a form of self-hypnotization, a voluntary enchantment, and a fervid political mystique (see in this respect writings by former communists like Kazimierz Brandys, Margarete Buber Neumann, Gyula Hay, Pierre Daix, Milovan Djilas, Leszek Kołakowski, Arthur Koestler, Lev Kopelev, Annie Kriegel, Imre Toth, Alexander Wat, Adam Wazyk, Belu Zilber), breaking with the Big Lie meant a psychological liberation. The dialectics of disenchantment included often something quite similar to an exorcism. As mentioned, the metaphor of the thaw, as proposed by Ehrenburg in the 1954 novella, suggested this mental break with the mythocratic cobweb. In his masterful *The Passing of an Illusion*,[4] Francois Furet showed the various ways and solutions anti-Stalinist intellectuals pursued in order to come to terms with a dishonest and tenebrous past.

In Hungary, Imre Nagy championed the New Course during this first stage of attempts to liberalization (1953–1955) Throughout the summer in Hungary, writers, philosophers, graphic artists, historians, actors, students, and journalists engaged in tumultuous discussions using

[3] Korney Chukovsky, *Diary*, 1901–1969, ed. Victor Erlich, trans. Michael Henry Heim, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 406.

[4] François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twenttieth Century*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

the platform of the Petöfi Circle. The Circle was named after the national poet and one of the leaders of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution Sándor Petöfi. In a sense, the circle wanted to renew the rich Hungarian tradition of intellectual debate circles from the beginning of the century, the most celebrated being Lukács' *Sontag-Kreis* (The Sunday Circle) and the Galileo Circle, which gathered the Free Thinkers. However, in contradistinction with the *Sontag-Kreis,* which had been an exclusive endeavor for a few exceptionally bright minds, the Petöfi Circle rejected elitism and was open to everyone.

The Circle became the hotbed of intense debates about Party history, freedom of the press and other explosive issues. Organized under the auspices of the Hungarian Communist Youth Union, the forum magnetized hundreds, even thousands of participants, especially from the youth. A regime-sponsored forum turned into an anti-regime agora. The patriarch of Western Marxism, philosopher Georg Lukács, participated in those debates and called for a return to the betrayed democratic promises of socialism.. Whatever the Stalinist Old Guard tried to do in order to foil the liberal offensive, turned out to be insufficient and counterproductive. Poets, journalists, and students refused to participate in the prolongation of the old chimeras. The search for truth was weaponized as a search for democracy, pluralism, and human dignity.

Calls for the end of censorship and the Party's surveillance of culture intensified. The wind of freedom was blowing in the whole region, threatening the entrenched, inept, cynical, and murderous bureaucratic tyrannies. There came the great hopes of the Polish October awakening and the Hungarian Revolution. In solidarity with the Polish miners, who were on strike, the Hungarian university students organized a street demonstration on October 23, 1956, which developed into a revolution. The demonstrators asked for the reinstatement of Imre Nagy, who had been deposed in 1955, and for the departure of the Soviet troops from Hungary. Symbolically, the crowd attacked Sándor Mikus's huge bronze Stalin statue erected in Budapest in 1951 for the *Vozhd's* seventieth birthday. The photograph of the giant boots without a body, the single element that could not be destroyed, became one of the iconic images of the Hungarian Revolution.[5]

[5] Isotta Poggi, "The Art of Fabricating Realities and Forgetting History" in Cristina Cuevas-Wolf and Isotta Poggi eds., *Promote, Tolerate, Ban: Art and Culture in Cold War Hungary*, Los Angeles: The Gettty Research Institute, 2018, p. 17.

The crushing of the Hungarian Revolution in early November by the Soviet tanks was a warning against the anti-totalitarian temptation. But Stalin was dead: He died first, biologically, on March 5, 1953. He passed away the second time, politically, in February 1956, unmasked by his successor as a paranoid sociopath. The genie was out of the bottle and repression could not arrest the quest for truth and freedom.

Similar trends developed, to a lesser extent, in Czechoslovakia, GDR, and Romania.

Less spectacular than in Hungary or in Poland, the intellectuals from Czechoslovakia began also to ask for the liberalization of culture. For instance, after Khrushchev's S*ecret Speech*, the Slovak writer Dominik Tatarka publicly declared that he refused the division of the world, a statement which was a direct rejection of the Zhdanov's doctrine. Supreme heresy, Tatarka also asserted that he never wanted "to construct a new type of human," thus discarding the building of the New Man, the sacrosanct purpose of the communist dogma. At the 2nd Congress of Czechoslovak Writers from the end of April 1956, poets Jaroslav Seifert and František Hrubin asked for the release of the arrested writers and for the independence of art from the ideology.[6] The debate began to spread but, after the intervention of the Soviet embassy, the Political Bureau of the Czech Communist Party decided to stop it.[7]

The Stalinist counter-offensive insisted on the counterproductive, indeed potentially counterrevolutionary consequences of Khrushchev's *Secret Speech*. This was the crux of Romania's "little Stalin" Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's gambit. He insisted on the obligation to weigh thoroughly the need for and the risks of any loosening of the Romanian Workers' Party monopoly on power. A few weeks after his return from Moscow, during a series of Politburo meetings, the unrepentant satrap spelled out the new line: All the gigantic errors and crimes of the mature Stalinist period were the responsibility of the "anti-Party faction" headed by the Muscovites Ana Pauker and Vasile Luca, purged in May 1952. He, Gheorghiu-Dej, had opposed his own deification by the Party propaganda and the contagious effect of the Thaw led to calls for a genuine break with

[6] Juraj Marusiak "Unspectacular De-Stalinization: The Case of Slovak Writers After 1956", *Hungarian Historical Review*, Vol. 5 No. 4, 2016, p. 838.

[7] Idem, p. 840.

the "bureaucratic-administrative" methods of Party surveillance of literature and arts. It was veteran communist, former French Resistance fighter and novelist Alexandru Jar who spoke in Dej's presence, at a gathering of the Party activists of the Stalin district in Bucharest, about the need to abandon the Stalinist lies and allow for freedom of discussion, of opinion, and expression. Jar's passionately myth-breaking speech gave voice to long repressed grievances among Romanian intellectuals, including some with impeccable left-wing credentials. A seasoned tactician, Dej unleashed the anti-Jar campaign in June 1956, sending a drastic warning to those who might have nourished anti-dogmatic ideas and expectations. Realizing that Dej manipulated him, the writer paid dearly his naive daringness. His books were instantly removed from public libraries and bookshops and he was barred from publishing for ten years.

While Poland and Hungary were in full de-Stalinization, Romania's ruler and his team managed to avoid any real, even modest softening of the Party dictatorship. On the contrary, during and after the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution, the *Securitate* (the political police) carried out the Party orders to arrest hundreds of rebellious students in Bucharest, Cluj, Timişoara, and other higher education centers. In October 1956, the revolutionaries in Budapest pulled down, beheaded, and spat upon Stalin's statue. It took another five years or so until the generalissimo's gigantic statue by Dumitru Demu was removed from the entrance of Bucharest's "Stalin Leisure and Culture Park." and the name of the boulevard leading to it changed from Stalin to Aviators. It was only in the same year, 1962, that Braşov, an important town from the Transylvania region, renamed the *Oraşul Stalin* (Stalin's Town) in 1950, could have back its ancient denomination. Retrospectively, these measures seem to be motivated by the attempt of de-Sovietization wanted by Gheorghiu-Dej rather than by a genuine de-Stalinization.

The leaders of the two largest communist parties in the West, the French and the Italian, Maurice Thorez and Palmiro Togliatti, were seasoned Stalinists. Both had spent the war years in the Soviet Union as political refugees, and both had been prominent members of the Comintern's Presidium. The major difference between them was their social background: Thorez proudly insisted on his proletarian origin whereas Togliatti was a Marxist intellectual. But they were committed Bolsheviks, entirely and unyieldingly embracing the Soviet vision of communism, including the aesthetic dogmas. Both parties went through ceaseless purges and participated in Josip Broz Tito's excommunication

in 1948, when the Yugoslav leader challenged Stalin's supremacy within world communism. Their reaction to Khrushchev's de-Stalinization was, however, different. Thorez regarded the attack on Stalin as a major mistake and the communist media denied the authenticity of the *Secret Speech* instead referring to it as the *Report attributed to comrade Khrushchev.* Important intellectuals refused the leadership's rigid positions and called for open discussions about the political errors and crimes of the Stalin era. Among them, there were philosopher Henri Lefebvre, historians Annie Kriegel and Francois Furet, sociologist Edgar Morin, and literary critic Claude Roy. Louis Aragon chose to stay close to Thorez and kept silent about the *Secret Speech*, the events in Poland and the Hungarian Revolution. In the field of creation, Aragon wrote that we cannot expect that the Party promotes "liberalism without principles."[8] More than that, only several months after, he published in the magazine *Europe* the infamous article "Un homme d'honneur" (A Man of Honor) in which he justified the entry of the Soviet tanks into Budapest.[9] Another celebrated member of the FCP, Tristan Tzara, had visited Budapest at the beginning of October 1956 and had been in contact with the Petöfi Cercle, wanted to publish an article favorable to the Hungarian reformers, which was rejected by *L'Humanité*. The party hierarchy ordered him to keep silent. Behaving as a disciplined party member, the former dadaist obeyed.[10]

Unlike Thorez, Togliatti called for a deep reckoning with the past aberrations. In a famous 1956 interview with the journal *Nuovi Argomenti*, he called for an analysis of the institutional and social causes of Stalin's distancing from the presumably "healthy core" of Leninism. The shockwaves of the *Secret Speech* within the communist intellectual establishment in Italy were therefore used by Togliatti to revamp his own image as an open-minded revolutionary leader. He annexed a heavily distorted version of the Western Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci to the refurbished Party ideology. The Party abandoned the tenets of socialist realism and encouraged artistic experiments. Nonetheless, when the leftist

[8] Quoted in Alain Huraut, *Aragon prisonier politique*, Paris: André Balland, 1970, p. 240.

[9] Pierre Jouqin, "L'engagement de Louis Aragon", *Nouvelles Fondations*, 2006/3–4 (n° 3–4), https://www.cairn.info/revue-nouvelles-fondations-2006-3-4.htm.

[10] Marius Hentea, *The Real Life and Celestial Adventures of Tristan Tzara*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014, pp. 179–181.

Italian aristocrat Carlo Ripa di Meana organized at the end of 1977 for the Venice *Biennale* the famous *Biennale del Dissenso* (The Biennale of Dissent), presenting "unofficial" art from the other part of the Iron Curtain, the ICP was very embarrassed. Deeply divided, especially after the angry protest of the Soviet ambassador Rizhov, who defined the show "a hostile gesture against the USSR,"[11] the ICP chose to follow Moscow and finally criticized the exhibition. On the contrary, the other Italian left party, Bettino Craxi's socialist enthusiastically supported the show, showing their independence from Moscow, which further embarrassed the communists.

## Mao: Reform or Trap?

Like the other communist countries, China was deeply affected by Khrushchev's *Secret Speech*.

Mao Zedong disliked and disapproved of Khrushchev's onslaught on Stalin's legacies of terror. De-Stalinization was for him and his associates a very dangerous path, but they realized the need for an adjustment to the new Soviet line. After all, Moscow was still the center of world communism and China benefited from Soviet economic assistance. The Polish October and the Hungarian Revolution (October–November 1956) convinced the Chinese communist potentates that liberalization could lead to a political and social debacle.

Reacting to *the* shock, Mao Zedong launched "A Hundred Flowers Bloom, a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend" campaign, asking for frankness in all fields. Some pretended that the idea had belonged to Liu Shaochi, Mao's old companion. Nonetheless, it was Lu Tig Yi, at the time head of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of CPC, who used the slogan for the first time in a speech delivered on May 26, 1956.[12] For anyone knowledgeable in Chinese history, the phrase "a hundred schools of thought contend" evoked the Zhou dynasty (1150–256 BC), a golden period of Chinese philosophy during which freedom

[11] Fabio Isopo "La Biennale del Dissenso: uno scontro a sinistra", https://www.unclosed.eu/rubriche/amnesia/amnea-artisti-memorie-cancellazioni/60-la-biennale-del-dissenso-uno-scontro-a-sinistra.html.

[12] Ram Prakash Sharma, "Mao's Hundred Flowers Policy", *The Indian Journal of Political Science,* Vol. 21 No 4, October–December 1960, p. 36.

of expression reigned. The campaign started in April 1956 and ended in May 1957.

Mao tested the current by allowing, an event encouraging self-styled search for freedom among Chinese *intelligentsia*. He promised tolerance, transparency, and pluralism. Officially, the campaign's goal was to strengthen the relation between the Party and the *intelligentsia*. For a while censorship was played down, freedom of speech allowed and criticism permitted. As a result, writers, doctors, artists, professors, students, scientists, members of the Party or not flooded the media and the leadership with critical messages. Every field, from economy to freedom of expression or from literature to the rejection of the Soviet influence was affected. The corruption and arrogance of Communist officials were particularly under fire. Writers began to produce work that no longer respected the rules of socialist realism and in which communists were also "negative characters."[13] Some dared to criticize, supreme heresy, the Party itself. This was too much and the campaign was stopped. This happened under close Party surveillance.

The debate among sinologists if Mao had been sincere or he initiated it as a trap, to lure enemies, adversaries, and all possible dissidents to come out in the open so they would be easier to identify is still continuing today. Knowing that Mao personally asked Khrushchev for military intervention in Hungary, we favor the second possibility: the campaign's major goal was unmasking those who had nourished Khrushchevite temptations. In fact, Mao had no intention to loosen the grip and allow for ideological pluralism.

In a later conversation with János Kádár, the new First Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party, Mao maintained that "originally the movement had produced good results, that constructive criticism and lively debates had mobilized the masses and intellectuals. …however Rightist elements were hidden in the masses."[14]

The poetic behest about the blooming flowers did not mean a renunciation by the Party elite to its pretense of infallibility. It was a tactical

[13] Sylvia Chan, "The Inage of a 'Capitalist Roader'-Some Dissident Short Stories in the Hundred Flowers Period", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs,* No. 2, July 1979, p. 78.

[14] Janos Rádvanyi, "The Hungarian Revolution and the Hundred Flowers Campaign", *The China Quarterly*, No. 43, July–September 1970, p. 127.

retreat, not a strategic break-up with the past. China did not experience a genuine Thaw and those intellectuals who believed the Party was interested in spiritual openness became targets for persecution as "rightist elements." Immediately after the Hundred Flowers campaign, they launched an Anti-Rightist campaign in which those who believed in Mao's promises and dared to criticize were identified for further repression. As a result, they lost their jobs and many were sent to "reeducation."

For Mao the cultural front was the main battlefield and any concession to "bourgeois ideology" needed to be nipped in the bud, so he cut short any possibility of liberalization. Some of the ideas of the Anti-Rightists campaign would be developed ten years after in a more radical form in the infamous Cultural Revolution.

## *The Cranes Are Flying*

Undoubtedly, the major work of the Soviet cinema in the immediate post-Stalin period was *The Cranes Are Flying*. Directed by the Georgian-born Mikhail Kalatozov and starring Tatiana Samoilova and. Aleksei Batalov, it was one of the great films of the twentieth century. The script was by Viktor Rozov. Released in 1957, it received the Palme d'Or in 1958 at the Cannes Film Festival. The critic of the *Film Quarterly* of those years, Mitchell Lifton, signaled it as a masterpiece: Kalatozov's work was not a "dreadful Stalinist happy-tractor" production. "In the skill of its direction, in the verve of its camerawork and editing, and in the unified virtuosity of its acting, deserves to be spoken of in the company of such films as *The Seventh Seal* and *Miss Julie*."[15]

It was also a huge public success both in the Soviet Union and abroad. Samoilova and Batalov made millions of people all over the world cry. For the Thaw's generation, it was their emblematic film, which abandoned[16] the Stalinist *clichés* and schematic characters in favor of a far more subtle approach. The cameraman Sergei Urusevsky's images were mesmerizing, haunting, truly path-breaking. He used extensively the hand-held camera and many extreme close-ups, which was different

[15] Mitchell Lifton, "The Cranes are Flying", *Film Quarterly*, T. 3, No. 3, 1960, p. 42.

[16] Maxim D. Shrayer, "Why Are the Cranes Still Flying?", *The Russian Review*, Vol. 56 No. 4, July 1997.

from the static scenes of the Soviet Stalinist cinema. This gave the film an extraordinary visual dynamic further enhanced by very fluid editing. When subjectivity returned, when memory came back, the cranes are flying. In the same way as Ehrenburg's *The Thaw, The Cranes Are Flying* contained no more slogans and told the tragic war love story firstly as human personal experience. It was a film about fate and death, topics long time banned in Soviet culture. Breaking with the Zhdanovist prudery, Kalatozov's work dared to give special attention to the sexual desires of Veronika, the main heroine, including the scene in which she was raped.[17]

## Pasternak's Nobel Prize

The Thaw was marked by several crucial intellectual tremors. Khrushchev's de-stalinization was showing its limits. At the same time as the *Secret Speech*, poet Boris Pasternak, who managed to survive relatively unscathed Stalin's terror, was secretly completing his masterpiece *Doctor Zhivago*. Pasternak dealt in his novel with deep moral, religious, and political questions. It was an unprecedented defiance of the official myths regarding the Bolshevik Revolution. The main character, Yuri Zhivago, was a physician and a poet caught in the revolutionary maelstrom and dismayed by the violences committed by all confronting sides.

After the book had been refused to be published in the Soviet Union, even by the reformers from *Novyi Mir*, Pasternak decided to publish it in the West, provoking one of the major scandals of the Khrushchev's era. He succeeded to contact foreign publishers. The manuscript reached the West via an Italian communist scholar of Russian literature. Another Italian, the publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, himself a communist, was interested to publish the book. However, in the meantime, the Soviet authorities changed their mind and asked the manuscript to be returned for "revisions." Feltrinelli rejected the Soviet demand. Pasternak also refused to yield and retire his manuscript. The book developed into an amazing world best-seller and was immediately translated in all major languages. A Russian edition was printed in The Netherlands by

[17] Condee Nancy "Veronika Fuses Out: Rape and Medium Specificity in the Cranes Are Flying", *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, August 2009. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249919210_Veronika_fuses_out_Rape_and_medium_specificity_in_The_Cranes_are_Flying.

Mouton—paid by the CIA[18]—to be smuggled in the Soviet Union, where it was circulated in a clandestine way. Marc Slonim consecrated it an one page article in *The New York Times Book Review* enthusiastically entitled "But Man's Free Spirit Still Abides:" "It is easy to predict that Boris Pasternak's book, one of the most significant of our time and a literary event of the highest order, will have a brilliant future. It also has had an extraordinary past."[19] The "brilliant future" predicted by Slonim came true very quickly as on October 24, 1958 Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, "for his important achievement both in contemporary lyrical poetry and in the field of the great Russian epic tradition."

Once published in the West, the novel was denounced by Stalinist nostalgics for its "rabid anti-Sovietism" and for "anti-Marxist statements." Infuriated that the "anti-Soviet" Pasternak had been preferred to the official Soviet proposal, the far more conventional Mikhail Sholokhov, the author of the sleepy conformist novel *And Quietly Flows the Don*, the Soviet leaders decided to commence a violent campaign against Pasternak, pressuring him not to accept the prize. The Politburo members were incensed. It was like a slap on the regime's face. *Pravda* denounced the novelist's "treason" and a lot of horrendous vilifying attacks followed. The style of the *Pravda* editorial, written by David Zaslavsky, recalled the old Zhdanovist methods: "If there were but a spark of Soviet decency left in Pasternak, if a writer's conscience and a feeling of responsibility to the people were alive in him, he too would refuse this "award," degrading to him as a writer. But the inflated self-esteem of an offended and embittered bystander has left in Pasternak's soul no trace of Soviet decency or patriotism. All of Pasternak's actions confirm that in our socialist country, absorbed in the flush of building a glorious communist society, he is a weed."[20] The head of KOMSOMOL, Vladimir Semichastny, later KGB Chairman, said that Pasternak was an "internal emigré, worse than a

[18] Paolo Mancuso, Inside the Zhivago's Storm, *The Editorial Adventures of Pasternak's Masterpiece*, Milan: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 2013. Peter Finn and Petra Couvée, *The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA and the Battle Over a Forbidden Book*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2014.

[19] Marc Slonim, "But Man's Free Spirit Still Abides", *The New York Times Book Review*, September 7, 1958.

[20] http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1956-2/literary-life-at-a-crossroads/literary-life-at-a-crossroads-texts/pravda-denounces-pasternak-and-the-nobel-award/.

pig."[21] The Writers' Union expelled him and there were voices who asked the government to exile him. The threat of expulsion triggered a strong international protest that made Khrushchev not to exile the writer.

Initially, Pasternak tried to resist the infamous attacks from *Pravda* and *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, and the terrible pressure from the Central Committee and the Writers' Union. However, when the Soviet authorities targeted his lover Olga Ivinskaya, Pasternak gave in and reluctantly declined the Prize.[22]

Deeply affected, he died on May 30, 1960. In 2008, the Nobel Committee gave the prize to his son.

The novel was published in the Soviet Union during the *glasnost* period and was praised as one of the classics of the Russian literature. Pasternak's demise carried a strong symbolism.

To quote historian Vladislav Zubok's apt analysis: "The death of a poet, who had belonged to the spiritual milieu of the old intelligentsia, was the moment at which another spiritual and civic community emerged in the popular mind. The young people who identified with that community had a vastly different social background and life experience than Pasternak had, and many of them did not share or even understand his spiritual world. At the same time, they too were striving for intellectual and artistic emancipation, as the dead poet had. And they viewed themselves as the descendants of the great moral and cultural tradition that Pasternak, his protagonist Yuri Zhivago, and his milieu embodied. Thus, they were Zhivago's children, in a spiritual sense."[23]

## The Manezh Affair

On December 1, 1962, CPSU First Secretary and Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Nikita Khrushchev, accompanied by chief ideologist secretary Mikhail Suslov and other Party Secretariat and Party Presidium members visited the "30 Years of the Moscow Artists' Union (MOSKh)" art exhibition in Moscow Central Exhibition Hall, called the Manezh.

[21] Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children. The Last Russian Intelligentsia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 18.

[22] "Boris Pasternak. The Nobel Prize. Son's Memoirs", pravdareport.com/society/4383-pasternak/.

[23] Zubok, p. 20.

His guide was Vladimir Serov, the first secretary of the Russian Federation Union of Artists. Their visit to the show had been triggered by a letter to the First Secretary signed by Serov and forty other academicians that protested the tentatives of liberalization on the cultural front, and especially in the visual arts. The signatories warned that the tendencies "infiltrated" from abroad "in order to undermine our ideology from within,"[24] and feared that socialist realism was losing its monopoly.

Khrushchev's allergy to modern art was known. In front of a painting by modernist Robert Falk, *Nude in an Armchair*, he declared: "As long as I am Chairman of the Council of Ministers, we are going to support a genuine art. We aren't giving a kopeck for pictures painted by jackasses. History can be our judge. For the time being history put us at the head of this state, and we have to answer for everything that goes on in art. Therefore we are going to maintain a strict policy in art."[25]

The Party boss loved the idyllic "socialist realist" pieces (paintings and sculptures), but went ballistic when he saw the abstract art exhibits: "My opinion is that of the people. I don't understand and they won't understand."[26] He lambasted their authors: "They are not artists, but pederasts!" Khrushchev even spat on Leonid Mechnikov's *Quarry* painting. Fifty years later, Mechnikov exhibited the same painting in a partial remake of the 1962 show with the place where Khrushchev spat circled. Among the works that were scolded were the paintings of the New Reality art group of Ely Belutin, a former student of the avant-garde artist Aristarkh Lentulov, who abandoned social realism for a more experimental approach. The works were installed in a special room on the second floor after their first exhibition in another location had been closed without explanation one month before. Their re-installment in Manezh was a daring move of the reformers against the conservatives. Himself a conservative, Serov wanted to infuriate Khrushchev and mentioned continuously the "exorbitant" sums of money paid by the state for the works. The First Secretary criticized every work in the room repeating the classical: "My grandson draws better!" Learning that Belutin was teaching at the Moscow Polygraphical Institute, he exclaimed: "How can such

[24] Zubok, p. 209.

[25] Quoted in David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 591.

[26] Susan E. Reid, "In the Name of the People. The Manège Affair Revisited", *Kritika: Exploration in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 6, No. 4, Fall 2005, p. 674.

a person teach? People like him should be cleared out of the teaching profession. They shouldn't be allowed to teach in the universities. Go abroad if you want; and if you don't want to, we'll send you anyway. I can't even talk about this without getting angry. I'm a patriot."[27] As a result, Belutin was fired from his teaching job because his creation was against Soviet art. The First Secretary insulted the other artists in the show, threatening them with immediate expulsion from the Soviet Union.

In the commemorative exhibition on the first floor, Khrushchev's anger was provoked by another work of Robert Falk, a still life.[28] Apparently, nothing in the picture, a still life representing some potatoes, could justify the First Secretary's reaction. However, although Khrushchev mentioned his supposed artistic incompetence—"I will probably be told that I did not reach the point where I can understand such works—the usual argument of our opponents in culture"—he immediately sensed the painting's subversive potential. Unable to be aware of Falk's painterly filiation from Cezanne, Khrushchev was nevertheless immediately aware of its fundamental difference from the usual socialist realist works. Still life as an artistic genre was the poor relation of socialist realism because it did not have a high propaganda potential. Obviously, Falk's *Potatoes* lacked *partiinost*, *ideinost*, and *narodnost*, the latter because of its link with Western modernism.

Khrushchev vehemently chastised sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, calling him a "degenerate" for his deformation of the human figures. Years later, he atoned for his tantrum and expressed the wish to have a sculpture by him as his funeral monument. Neizvestny accepted the commission and the statue was installed on Khrushchev's tomb in the Novodevich cemetery in Moscow.

The same day after the visit, Falk's painting as well works by other avant-garde artists such as Tatlin or Aleksandr Drevin was retired from the exhibition and the second floor New Reality show was closed for a second time. Khrushchev's visit of the Manezh exhibition became the "Manezh affair," which followed the usual communist ritual: a special meeting of the Soviet Academy of Fine Arts condemning the "formalist"

[27] http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1961-2/khrushchev-on-the-arts/khrushchev-on-the-arts-texts/khrushchev-on-modern-art/.

[28] Susan E. Reid, "Still Life and the Vanity of Socialist Realism: Robert Falk's *Potatoes* 1955", *The Russian Review*, Vol. 76 No. 3, July 20.

tendencies,[29] a critical article in *Pravda*, reprimands, self-criticisms, and the tightening of the Party's control over the cultural front. Khrushchev ordered the modernist artists to be purged from their administrative positions. The crackdown on reformers continued. In a meeting with the Soviet intelligentsia on December 17 1962, the First Secretary attacked again the young artistic elites, and on a second meeting in March 1963, he yelled at the audience that "the Thaw is over," "…if Stalin is dead, they think everything is allowed," and threatened with arrests.[30] As a result, socialist realism, although on perfusion, would survive another twenty years.

## The Bulldozers Exhibition

As we have seen before, Khrushchev's reform was a conservative one, which tried to keep liberalization to a minimum. The replacement of Khrushchev with Leonid Brezhnev in 1984, which inaugurated the "stagnation period," emphasized this policy. Nevertheless, new developments opened a breech in the Party-state control system. The creative unions' authority was strictly enforced and socialist realism was still the official method of creation but some alternative possibilities emerged. For instance, it became more and more possible for someone to live as an artist avoiding the rigid rules of *vystavkom*, the exhibition committee, which controlled the access to the official exhibitions.

One of the consequences of the Thaw had been the de facto abandonment of the Zhdanov doctrine in favor of a new one, that of "peaceful coexistence," The change had been announced by Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of CPSU in 1956. In conformity with the new doctrine, the two blocs defined by Zhdanov did not have to necessarily fight each other and could coexist peacefully. The shift multiplied significantly the number of foreigners who came to Moscow: diplomats, press correspondents, businessmen. Some of these foreigners became some of the main buyers of contemporary Russian art produced by artists who, not being members of the Artists' Union, did not have an official artist's status. They were called non-conformists because they refused to integrate into the system.

[29] Caute, p. 593.

[30] Zubok, pp. 210–2014.

The foreigners' interest was joined by that of some Russian art collectors, and even of some members of *nomenklatura*. These private sales, which were not exactly legal but not illegal either, generated the emergence of a fragile independent art market that allowed artists to situate themselves outside the Artists' Union. As such, they did not envy the official artists' many privileges but not being members made that the Union had no formal authority upon them. In this way, they could avoid being held prisoners of the procrustean socialist realist requirements and create freely.

Susan Emily Reid pointed out to another possible factor, namely the massive building at the beginning of 1960 of standard individual apartments, called *khrushcheviki*. From a doctrinal point of view, favoring individual units rather than some sort of common housing was heresy but the urgency to find a solution to the loathed *kommunalnaia kvartira* prevailed. Criticized for their small size and basic comfort, the *khrushcheviki* were the home of the Soviet middle class, who wanted to personalize their interiors. This created an unprecedented demand for art works the official circuits could not supply, so they had to turn to private sales. In this way, some unofficial art entered the Soviet domestic space, as the private sales were difficult or even impossible to censor.

However, if the private space was porous to some alternative art, the access to Soviet public space was barred. The Soviet authorities had sensed the subversive power of the non-conformists' art and the danger for the structure of the Party-state As the poet and art collector Aleksandr (Sasha) Gleser stated: "But if modernist art is represented as a seditious phenomenon needed to be eradicated, this is not on the account of subject matter or themes, but because of something that is regarded as a far greater crime. The crux of the matter is that USSR is a 'religious' state. Its sole and monstrously intolerant religion is Marxism-Leninism, and this religion finds expression in literature and art as socialist realism. Repudiation of the socialist-realist dogmas is promptly seen as a disagreement with the guiding ideology, and this was inadmissible."[31] The very existence of a niche in which free expression was the rule endangered the absolute authority of the Party-state. Any transgression of socialist realism it was seen as a major challenge to the CPSU policy. Not one "formalist" work could enter the official exhibition system. Therefore, getting access

[31] Gleser, op. cit.

to the public space was the non-conformist artists' main goal. In January 1967, a dozen non-conformist artists exhibited together at the *Druzhba* (The Friendship) Club in Moscow, which lasted two hours before being closed by the KGB. Nevertheless, around two thousand people succeeded to visit in such a short time.

Among the artists present in the *Druzhba* show there was Oscar Rabin, who had defied the Soviet *aparatchiki* with an unauthorized show at Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1965. In his attack against the show, V. Olshevsky, the critic of *Sovietskaia kultura,* not only described Rabin's painting as "scribblings on canvas"[32] but accused him of "distortion of the Soviet reality."[33] So, from the very beginning, non-conformist art was considered not only as an aesthetic problem but mainly as a political problem. By their very existence, the non-conformist artists challenged the monopoly of the Party-state in one of the most sensitive fields, namely the cultural front.

At the beginning of 1970, Rabin was the head of an independent group of artists including Lydia Masterkova, Vitaly Komar, and Aleksandr Melamid. The group was located at Lianozovo, in the outskirts of Moscow, where Rabin lived. At that time, Rabin painted in an expressionist manner still-lives and landscapes, the two genres that socialist realism kept in rather low esteem. Although the artist—still in the Soviet Union at the time—denied any political intention, his *Still-life with Fish* (1968) was obviously "subversive:" the smelly smoked fish was wrapped in a torn and heavily stained copy of *Pravda* (The Truth). To desacralize in such a daring way the official daily of the CC CPSU implied a lot of courage. In other still-lives with the CPSU daily, Rabin changed the title into *Nepravda* (Not true). This type of work and his successful exhibitions abroad made Rabin the informal leader of the Soviet non-conformists.

After many unsuccessful attempts to organize another collective non-conformist show, Rabin had the idea of a *plein-air* exhibition. The place had to be carefully chosen to avoid being accused of "disturbing the public order," an offense that could send them to prison. So, streets, squares, parks, and gardens were not eligible. Finally, Rabin found a piece of wasteland near Beliaievo. Two weeks before, they sent a letter to the

[32] Quoted in Caute, p. 599.

[33] Gleser, op. cit.

Moscow Soviet warning them of the project. Among the other participants, there were Nadezhda Elskaia, Masterkova, Komar, Melamid, the photographer Stichov, and Rabin's son Aleksandr, an artist too.

When the artists gathered at Beliaievo on September 15 1974 to install the show, the empty wasteland was very unusually full of people. Officially, the Moscow Soviet decided out of the blue to transform the wasteland into a green space, and called for a *subbotnik* (volunteer work on Saturday). Of course, no one believed the official version and the "coincidence." In reality, the workers and gardeners were police and KGB men in plain clothes. Although no Soviet law was infringed, the so-called "volunteers" attacked savagely the exhibition. The supposedly "spontaneously indignant workers" came in fact prepared with bulldozers to crush the works and water hoses to disperse the crowd. The legend says that Rabin clenched his hands on the upper part of one bulldozer's blade and had to be forcibly removed by the police. This episode gave the name of the show: *The Bulldozers Exhibittion*. Almost useless to say, no other *subbotnik* was called and not one tree planted on the wasteland. As Rabin recalled, a lot of material "spontaneously" brought to Beliaievo had been let to rust there.[34]

Due to the presence of many diplomats, including several ambassadors, of press correspondents, and other foreigners, the Western media gave an extended cover to this Soviet state cultural vandalism proof. This impressed the Kremlin, which was negotiating with the United States the most favorite nation clause. The several artists condemned for "hooliganism" were released. To improve the country's image, two weeks later, on September 29, they authorized an exhibition of unofficial art to open for four hours in the Izmailovsky Park. Known later as *The Four Hours of Freedom* show, the exhibition was a mini Soviet *Salon des Refusés*, presenting works by more than 70 artists who were regularly rejected by the official *vystavkom*. During such a short period of time, it received more than ten thousand visitors.

Unfortunately, the Izmailovsky show was just a token to improve the U.S.S.R.'s international image and was not followed by a real liberalization policy. On the contrary, the non-conformists were harassed and persecuted in all possible ways: "anonymous" calls at night, constant insults, threats that they would be prosecuted for anti-Soviet activities,

[34] Oskar Rabine, *L'Artiste et les bulldozers: être peintre en U.R.S.S.*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1981, p. 197.

summoned regularly at the police station and KGB for interrogatories, conscripted for military service, put in psychiatric asylums, forced to sign statements they would cease painting abstract works. One of the most feared persecutions was to be accused of vagrancy. A Soviet law said that work was compulsory in the USSR. The real objective of the law was not to fight vagrancy but to have a handy legal point to make pressure on dissidents. The Party-state being practically the unique employer, it as easy to fire someone and after, just a half day of unemployment, to accuse him of vagrancy. As non-members of the Artists' Union, the non-conformists did not enjoy the official artist's status, so the law considered them as "jobless" parasites even if they were established artists. This put them in a very vulnerable situation. The same type of legislation was applied in some satellite countries, for example, Romania, which used it also again dissenters. In Hungary too, the article 266 of the IV Law of the Penal Code from 1978 punished with fines and prison terms the "dangerous shirkers." This article could be easily used to persecute creators who tried to oppose censorship.

Those who enjoyed international reputation were sometimes given spectacular treatment. In 1978, Rabin was permitted to travel to France. Unusually, short time after, his wife and son could join him in Paris. Once there, in the same way as Solzhenitsyn, Mstislav Rostropovich, and Aleksandr Zinoviev, he was deprived of his Soviet nationality, another proof of the Party-state's incapacity to accept alterity.

## The Solzhenitsyn Effect

The Solzhenitsyn effect, associated with the publication in the West of his non-fiction monument titled *The GULAG Archipelago,* a most devastating indictment of Sovietism, engendered a mutation in the global perception of communism and contributed to the inexorable delegitimization of totalitarianism. The Soviet myth was dealt a mortal blow. Communist "humanism" turned out to be similar to the Nazi one. The Bolshevik "conscience" was not different from the Fascist one.

No one has demonstrated more persuasively than Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn the duplicitous, schizophrenic nature of communism, its absolute moral falsity. His urge for individuals to live within the truth, echoed by Jan Patocka and Vaclav Havel, founders of *Charter 77*, was accompanied by his endeavor to expose the terrorist underpinnings of Bolshevism, whatever its incarnations (Stalinism, Trotskyism, Maoism,

Castro-Guevarism, etc.). For Solzhenitsyn, the roots of Bolshevik anti-humanism were linked to its proud embrace of a programmatic, militant atheism. It was, as French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy put it, "barbarism with a human face." Far from being an extenuating circumstance, the humanist pretense was in fact an aggravating one.

Thanks to Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn, the word GULAG has entered the current vocabulary as synonymous with the communist concentration camp universe. Romanian thinker intellectual Monica Lovinescu, once said that if a deluge were to come and she had to choose three books to rescue in order to speak about the totalitarian catastrophes as the hallmark of a century of shame and terror, these would be Solzhenitsyn's *GULAG Archipelago*, Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, and Orwell's *1984*. She was right.

Solzhenitsyn was the indomitable chronicler of a century full of genocidal exterminations, impregnated with exacerbated cruelty and infamy. Like Vasily Grossman, the author of the unforgettable novel *Life and Fate*, he explained that totalitarianism would have been impossible in the absence of the monstrously inebriating ideological ingredient: "Thanks to ideology, the twentieth century was fated to experience evildoing on a scale calculated in the millions. This cannot be denied or passed over or suppressed. How, then, do we dare insist that evildoers do not exist? And who was it that destroyed these millions? Without evildoers there would have been no Archipelago."

It was Solzhenitsyn who opened the eyes of millions in the USSR and abroad to the dismal fate of the *zeks* (concentration camp prisoners). Like Primo Levi who wrote about Auschwitz, Solzhenitsyn documented in immortal prose the struggle for survival under the most atrocious circumstances. Immensely courageous, he challenged the secret police harassment and, in spite of countless obstacles, kept writing. When intimidation and slander turned out to have no effect, the Soviet potentates decided to expel him. In exile, he continued his struggle against oppression and lies. He irritated many in the West with strong criticism of what he decried as rampant mercantilism and moral decay. His onslaught on the Western scholarship of Russia and the USSR was ill-informed and unfair. Much of his behavior had something disturbingly Messianic. Yet, his commitment to freedom remained unwavering and his writings belonged to the best tradition of Russian literature. In fact, with all his missteps, including the final accolades to Putin and Putinism, he was one of the

great moral consciences of the twentieth century, the epitome of the *zek*'s fate and conscience.

He was a giant of Russian and world literature. Max Hayward, Alain Besançon, Claude Lefort, Andre Glucksmann, Monica Lovinescu, Robert Conquest, Pierre Daix, Leo Labedz, Norman Podhoretz, Leonard Shapiro, Efim Etkind, Michael Scammell, Daniel Mahoney and many other praised his writings. The Nobel Prize, disgraced by being granted to the Soviet apologist Mikhail Sholokhov, recovered its honor when offered to Solzhenitsyn. His books, including *The Cancer Ward* (1968), *The First Circle*, *The Oak and the Calf, The GULAG Archipelago*, and the novel on the Russian Revolutions of 1917 *The Red Wheel*, belong to an enduring thesaurus of dignity.

Unfortunately, by the end of his life, he wrote a book on Russian-Jewish relations which lent itself to charges of anti-Semitism. Our main objection is that Solzhenitsyn engaged in historical analysis without a deep knowledge of the appropriate scholarly field and indulged in speculations based on selective and not always reliable sources. He never regarded Bolshevism as an ethnic, specifically Jewish political project, but some of his writings allowed for malevolent and malicious interpretations. He may not have been anti-Semitic, probably was not, yet anti-Semites used his book for their own vicious goals.

A philosopher of dissident action, Solzhenitsyn demystified communism as the dictatorship of lies. For him, like for Anna Akhmatova, Nikolai Berdiayev and Lev Shestov, Bolshevism (an offspring of Marxism), represented a neo-barbaric atheism. In his 1967 letter addressed to the Soviet Writers' Union, at a moment when he had been turned into a non-person, with no right to publish anything, he asked his former colleagues to give up ideological chimeras and live within the truth. Those words were moral dynamite. Soviet writers ignored him, but critical intellectuals in Czechoslovakia heard him and decided to follow his advice. Writers like Vaclav Havel, Ludvik Vaculik, and Pavel Kohout spelled out their solidarity with Solzhenitsyn. The dissident concept of liberty originated, to a great extent, in his thinking about human honor. Whereas Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov had many disagreements regarding the role of liberalism and pluralism in Russian history, they shared the same unflinching commitment to truth as a non-negotiable value.

Solzhenitsyn's novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* published in 1963 with Nikita Khrushchev's approval, changed the moral landscape, and the ethical compass of literature in the Soviet Bloc. It introduced a

new moral matrix, a new grammar of historical knowledge; it made ignorance of totalitarian evil impossible. It was the first time that the theme of the camps emerged in officially printed prose. Moreover, the main character was a simple Soviet man, not a Bolshevik luminary persecuted by Stalin.

In the West, the effect was also shocking. We would mention the symptomatic case of the writer Pierre Daix, editor of the communist weekly *Les Lettres Françaises* (the director was the notorious, though immensely gifted, poet Louis Aragon, an ex-Surrealist converted to Stalinism). In 1949, Daix accused Soviet defector Viktor Kravchenko of defamation and lies about the GULAG. It was one of the most publicized trials of that era, a major defeat for the communist propaganda. In 1964, the former zealot Daix wrote the preface to Solzhenitsyn's *One Day*. In 1968, Les *Lettres Françaises* took the side of the Prague Spring, Daix broke with the French Communist Party and became himself an intellectual dissident.

Whatever his human errors, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn remained faithful to the memory of the dead. It took an iron will, an incredible amount of intransigence, a genuine sense of moral urgency, to fight the totalitarian colossus. No other writer did as much as Solzhenitsyn in exposing totalitarian despotism. He was the prosecution's supreme witness.

## Thaw and Freeze in Romania

After the short-lived liberalization which followed the death of the Stalinist dictator Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej on March 19, 1965, his successor, Nicolae Ceaușescu changed course dramatically in 1971. Instead of pursuing a self-styled version of Titoism, Ceaușescu engaged in an intense struggle for re-Stalinization. In August 1968, alone in the Warsaw Pact, he condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Three years later, he espoused a highly personalized version of bureaucratic dictatorship. The catalyst for this about-face was his visit, as head of a Party and state delegation to the People's Republic of China and North Korea. The Romanian satrap and his wife Elena, on her way to becoming the Number Two in the emerging experiment in dynastic communism, were enraptured with the mass pageants of adulation for Mao Zedong and Kim Ilsung. The so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution unleashed by Mao in 1966, was bound to ensure that art, literature, social sciences, in one word the superstructure, would function as instruments for a quasi-religious adoration of the Supreme Leader. Critical thinking, experimental

art, modernism in general, were denounced as "counter-revolutionary." Thus, once back in Bucharest, Ceaușescu penned what became known as the *July 1971 Theses*, a collection of hackneyed Zhdanovite calls for an uncompromising rejection of "cosmopolitanism" and a reaffirmation of the Party's right to guide, supervise, and strictly control the "Cultural Front" (For this concept, see Sheila Fitzpatrick). The old obsession with creating the New Man resurfaced as part of this effort to construct "the many-sided developed socialist society." The new society was increasingly erratic, whimsical, and bordering on the absurd. One example among many: on a stadium packed by many thousands of people forcibly brought there to watch, one actor on horseback impersonating Michael the Brave, a Romanian prince who died in 1601, saluting saber in hand the communist dictator. The grotesqueness of the scene was emphasized by the *Securitate* (the secret police) use of pre-recorded tapes with slogans such as "Ceaușescu and the people!" to simulate—and stimulate—the audience's enthusiasm. This and similar events were aimed at positioning Ceaușescu among the national historic figures as the grand defensor of the Romanian homeland.

To achieve mass regimentation and enthusiastic subservience, the Ceaușescu regime used mobilizing pageants such as the "National Festival 'Cântarea României'" (The National Festival '*A Song to Romania*') and "The *Flacăra* Cenacle of Revolutionary Youth" (The *Flame* Cenacle of Revolutionary Youth) led by the entranced minstrel of dynastic communism, poet and propagandist Adrian Păunescu. Both were original Romanian experiments in manufacturing fake participation. The former was designed as an alternative to "elitism," and eulogized the "creative potential of the masses." The latter was a partially successful attempt at enlarging the regime's youth basis by encouraging a pseudo rock and folk counterculture. Far from challenging the dictatorship, the *Flacăra* gatherings were platforms for ostentatious cultic rituals. Păunescu's mediocre versifications, often accompanied by guitar music, were recited ecstatically. The Leader's cult generated and favored this bizarre sub-cult of Ceaușescu's chief sycophant. Needless to say, Păunescu made sure to extoll the two other members of the Romanian communist Holy Trinity: Ceaușescu's wife Elena and their youngest son Nicu. The cultic syntax was rudimentary, monotonous, simplistic, and therefore extremely accessible. Endlessly repeated slogans were accompanied by nationalist folk ballads eulogizing mythical heroic figures and medieval princes presumably Ceaușescu's forerunners. The result was a nauseatingly kitsch mixture

of Fascism and Stalinism based on self-aggrandizement, histrionics, and nationalist hysteria.

Ceaușescu's autocracy was based on a North Korean-style cult of personality. Still, there were intellectuals and workers who opposed the regime's idiosyncratic aberrations: Novelist Paul Goma, fighter for free trade unions Vasile Paraschiv, militant for human rights Doina Cornea. In fine arts, experiments continued. Among the most daring, the conceptual works of Wanda Mihuleac and Ion Grigorescu. In literature, especially in poetry, the Party failed to restore monolithic uniformity. University students organized literary public discussion circles. One of these was *Cenaclul de luni* (The Monday Cenacle) at the University of Bucharest Faculty of Letters where the writers of "the blue jeans generation" asserted themselves. Among them, Mircea Cărtărescu (b. 1956), now an internationally celebrate author.[35]

### *Glasnost*

Soviet boss Leonid Brezhnev was a dull bureaucrat. He ruled the communist Party and the USSR between October 1964, when he was one of the organizers of the anti-Khrushchev coup, and November 1982. In spite of his unimpressive performance as a political general during World War II, he used his political leverage to construct a ludicrous personality cult. Unlike the impulsive Khrushchev, who interfered often abusively in arts and culture, Brezhnev yielded full power in this ultra-sensitive realm to the ideological czar, the Stalinist leftover Mikhail Suslov. Austere and narrow-minded, Suslov resented any attempts at further de-Stalinization. At the same time, under his guidance, nationalist writers (Valentin Rasputin, Yuri Bondarev, Vadim Kozhinov) and painters (Ilya Glazunov) thrived. Without explicitly repudiating and abandoning the Bolshevik mythology, the resurgent Russian nationalism included nostalgic lamentations of the disappearing rural values and an exaltation of the Russian traditions ostensibly threatened by the soulless urban civilization.[36]

Underlying these narratives were anxieties about the disappearance of Russian identity, the threat of cosmopolitan (read Jewish) decadent,

[35] See Mircea Cărtărescu, *Nostalgia*, trans. Julian Semilian, London: Penguin Classics, 2020.

[36] Yitzhak Brudny, *Reinventing Russia: Russsian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953–1951*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1998.

perverting, corrupting takeover of Russia's spiritual world. The "Russian party" within the intelligentsia benefited from top-level support. The head of the Central Committee party propaganda department, Aleksandr Yakovlev (1923–2005) voiced the liberal intelligentsia's concerns in an essay titled "Against Anti-Historicism" published in the main cultural journal *Literaturnaia Gazeta* in November 1972. The nationalists protested and Yakovlev was sent into diplomatic exile as Soviet ambassador to Canada. It was there that he met the CC secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. The two disaffected apparatchiks engaged in conversations about the dire political, economic, and oral situation in their homeland. Gorbachev became party leader (Central Committee general secretary) in March 1985. Soon thereafter he arranged for Yakovlev to get back to Moscow and lead an influential think tank. Yakovlev's career moved up in high speed, he became a Politburo and CC Secretariat member, and, by 1987, he was widely and rightly perceived as a major influence on Gorbachev's strategies of renewal: perestroika, i.e., systemic restructuring, and glasnost, i.e. openness, frankness, the end of the official lies about the past and the present.


CHAPTER 4

# Censorship

## Censorship and Self-Censorship

Together with the secret police, censorship is the second central pillar of the Party-state surveillance system. It was an essential institution, abolished only after the fall of communism. Michael Scammell rightly defined it, censorship's role was "the extension of physical power into the realm of the mind and the spirit."[1] If the secret police was in charge of the physical confinement of the population by the general interdiction to travel abroad or by putting real or imaginary dissenters behind the barbed wire of the GULAG, censorship was responsible for the psychological confinement through its control of the information flow the population was authorized to receive. Therefore, censorship fully participated in the *agitprop*'s ambition to shape people's minds.

Officially, it did not exist, as the USSR Constitution and all the constitutions of the other communist countries granted all civil liberties; therefore, censorship could not have legal existence. With one exception, the Military Censorship of the General Staff of the Soviet Army,[2] which

[1] Quoted in Flemming Rose, "Censorship and Self–Censorship in the 21st Century", Index on Censorship, 15 May 2017.

[2] Leonid Vladimirov, "Glavlit: How the Soviet Censor Worked", https://doi.org/10.117/0730642207200103-404.



R. Stern and V. Tismaneanu, *Communism and Culture*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82650-5_4

had authority on military matters, the institution was never called "censorship." Its name was purposely vague: GLAVLIT (Main Directorate for Literature and Publishing) in the Soviet Union, FUTI, (The Federal Office for Press and Information) in Czechoslovakia, The National Press Publication, Radio, Film, and Television in China, The Department of Revolutionary Orientation in Cuba, *Direcția Generală a Presei și Tipăriturilor* (The General Press and Prints Directorate) in Romania, or *Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk* (The Main Office of Control of the Press, Publications, and Performances) in Poland. In the Polish case, the use of the euphemism is significant: the press was not *censored* in communist Poland, just *controlled*...In the GLAVLIT's jargon, a work was never "censored" but just "read."[3] The official title of censors in Romania was not "censor" but *lector* (reader).[4] The public use of the word "censorship" was forbidden. As its actual function had no legal existence, the subject was taboo for the researchers from communist countries. Only after the fall of communism in 1990, when censorship was already dead, they could begin to perform an autopsy on its body.

Often but not always, censorship was formally attached to the ministry of culture but in practice it reported directly to the *agitprop* department of the Central Committee. Obviously, both censorship and the *agitprop* collaborated closely with the KGB and the local political police in the satellite countries. Sensitive matters were decided by the *agitprop* department of the Central Committee, and in some cases by the communist leader himself. Stalin liked to personally censor films and Khrushchev had to decide to publish or not Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

Although lacking clear legal status, censorship's power was discretionary: no text, even for the most insignificant leaflet, could go to print, no programs could be broadcasted on radio and on TV, no theater show, no film, no piece of music, classical or other, could be played in public, no ballet performed, no record could be sold, no exhibition could open without first obtaining the censor's stamp. There was no exception for circus shows. The layout of all publications and stage designs were censored too. The classic example is the copy of *Literaturnaia Gazeta*

[3] Vladimirov, op. cit.

[4] Liviu Maliţa, Literatura eretică: texte cenzurate politic între dfre 1949 şi 1977, Bucureşti: Cartea românească, 2016, p. 274.

(The Literary Gazette) of June 1960 in which the one-column Pasternak's obituary was placed on the page at the same level as the headline about another poet that read: "A Very Great Poet." One cannot say if this had been done on purpose by the magazine editors to mark Pasternak's passing away in spite of the censorship's attempt to minimize the event or it had been just a coincidence but the chief censor of the magazine was given a "severe reprimand"[5] for lack of vigilance. Even the death notices had to be approved.

Works that hung in museums had to be examined and were authorized only if they complied with the official view of the art history of the moment. Zhdanov was dead but his vision of modern Russian art history that denied the importance of the avant-garde and established a direct link between the critical realism of the nineteenth century and socialist realism prevailed a long time after his death. Consequently, "formalist" avant-garde art could not be exhibited. This was valid not just for the Soviet Union but also for the rest of the communist world. For instance, in 1968, then Soviet Ministry of Culture Ekaterina Furtseva refused to loan works for Troels Andersen's *Vladimir Tatlin* exhibition at Stockholm's Moderna Museum (1968) "since extensive work on the systematization and restoration of this artist's work is at present in progress in the Soviet Union."[6] One may wonder how meticulous the restoration was because it lasted practically as long as the Soviet Union itself. If some of Tatlin's works could be seen at the famous Centre Pompidou's *Paris-Moscou* (1979) exhibition, the most daring had to wait. Only after the *perestroika,* celebrated non-objective works of art of the Russian avant-garde such as the Tatlin's non-objective *Counter-reliefs* (1915–1916), a long time considered lost and known only in photographs, came again to light from the Hermitage Museum's storage in which they had been hidden by the Soviet authorities. Their location was a well-protected state secret.

Since free speech and freedom of the press were guaranteed by their respective constitutions, the communist countries could not have specific laws against those who dared to confront the censorship. Nevertheless, the transgressors could be severely punished using other legal qualifications that could vary from "disturbing the public order," "slander," "fake news" or "vagrancy" to far more serious accusations such as "anti-Soviet"

[5] Vladimirov, op. cit.

[6] Troels Andersen, *Vladimir Tatlin,* Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1968, p. 92.

or "anti-communist activities." The last denomination was so broad and indefinite that could include almost everything. More pernicious, those who spoke or wrote criticizing the communist system were put in psychiatric asylums. This had two major advantages: Firstly, it avoided a trial. Secondly, it was much more threatening. A trial implied a sentence that could be harsh but limited to a certain fixed number of years. If someone was declared insane by a KGB doctor, he or she had to stay in an asylum until the same doctor said they were cured, and that could mean life. In Leonid Brezhnev's times, some known creators, such as Rabin, the cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich, Aleksandr Zinoviev, or Solzhenitsyn were punished by being deprived of Soviet citizenship for "unpatriotic activities."

Both free speech and freedom of the press were among the main claims in the program of the Russian Social-Democratic Party. Even when Lenin, in a celebrated article from 1905, had asked that party members must produce only Party literature, he admitted that, once outside the Party, "Everyone is free to write and say whatever he likes, without any restrictions."[7] However, once in power, he immediately imposed restrictions on people who dared to think differently. Only days after the Bolshevik *coup*, the SOVNARKOM issued on November 9 1917 the decree *On Press* that largely suppressed the bourgeois press: "Everyone knows that the bourgeois press is one of the most powerful weapons of the bourgeoisie. Especially at the crucial moment when the new power, the power of workers and peasants, is only affirming itself, it was impossible to leave this weapon wholly in the hands of the enemy, for in such moments it is no less dangerous than bombs and machine-guns. That is why temporary extraordinary measures were taken to stem the torrent of filth and slander in which the yellow and green press would be only too glad to drown the recent victory of the people."[8] According to the decree, a publication could be proscribed "temporarily or permanently," only if: [they]

(1) "call for open resistance or insubordination to the Workers' and Peasants' Government.

[7] V.I. Lenin, "Party Organisation and Party Literature", https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/nov/13.htm

[8] *On Press,* https://www.soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/organs-of-the-press/organs-of-the-press-texts/decree-on-the-press.

(2) instigate actions of an obviously criminal, i.e. criminally punishable, nature.
(3) sow sedition through demonstrably slanderous distortion of facts."

As a result, more than 120 periodicals were suppressed and many publishing houses were closed.[9]

The decree insisted that these "extraordinary measures" are "of a temporary nature and will be repealed by special decree as soon as normal conditions of social life set in."[10] As the special decree to abolish censorship had never been issued during seventy years of communism, one may conclude that all along this period under the Bolshevik rule the normal conditions of social life were never met. As a practical consequence of the decree, the presses and all available paper supplies were seized and placed under the authority of SOVNARKOM.

On July 27, 1921, Gavriil Miasnikov,[11] a Bolshevik who was a member of The Worker's Opposition, which resisted the "democratic centralism" imposed by Lenin, published "Vexed Questions," an article in which he criticized Lenin's politics and policies. Among other points, Miasnikov asked why censorship, supposed to function only temporarily, had been maintained and claimed "freedom of the press, from the monarchists to the anarchists, inclusively." Significantly for the importance he gave to the subject, on August 5, 1921, Lenin answered with a relatively long personal letter in which he attacked "dialectically" the very concept: "…'what sort of freedom of the press? What for? For which class?" Stating that "we don't believe in 'absolutes'" and that "we laugh at "pure democracy," the Bolshevik leader contested the existence of real freedom of the press in the capitalist world: "All over the world, wherever there are capitalists, freedom of the press means freedom to buy up newspapers, to buy writers, to bribe, buy and fake 'public opinion' for the benefit of the bourgeoisie." As long as the international bourgeoisie was stronger, to give freedom of the press to everyone would mean "facilitating the

[9] Nadezhda Ryzhak, "Censorship in the USSR and the Russian State Library." https://fr.scribd.com/doc/102076624/Nadezhda-Ryzhak-Censorship-in-the-USSR-and-the-Russian-State-Library.

[10] *On Press,* op. cit.

[11] Paul Avrich, "Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin: G.T. Miasnikov and the Workers Group", *Russian Review*, Vol. 43, no. 1, January 1984.

enemy's task...helping the class enemy," and cynically concluded: "We do not wish to commit suicide, and therefore, we will not do this."[12]

Indeed, they did not.

In spite of being anti-constitutional, most important censorship's decisions were part of the Soviet public life. As we have seen before, the censored item was sometimes given more publicity than the accepted ones.[13] Attempts to transgress censorship were not kept secret. For instance, Pasternak's publication abroad of *Doctor Zhivago* or Solzhenitsyn doing the same with his famous *The GULAG Archipelago* was given extensive media attention. Both perpetrators were called "traitors" in the Soviet press. It goes without saying that this publicity, which included "spontaneous" "indignant" critical reactions of "workers" or fellow writers acted as a deterrent for those who might be tempted to defy censorship.

It would be a great error to consider communist censorship only as a repressive institution; it had a prescribing function as well. The censors liked to see themselves more as people with pedagogical responsibilities who were actually helping the artists and writers to get their work known and their books published.[14]

In his *Conversations with Lev Shestov*, the poet Benjamin Fondane quoted the Russian thinker's comparison between the ancient Czar's censorship and the communist one: "There is a great difference between Stalin and the Tsarist regime, to the latter's advantage. Of course there was censorship then—it was known that certain things could not be said, but they would never have dreamed of forcing people to write this or that, to *think* in such and such way. At least we had the "freedom" not to say what we did not want to say."[15]

It was not necessary to be overtly critical toward the regime to raise the interest of communist censor; a too-long absence from the literary and artistic field was enough. Babel's "genre of silence" or writing for the drawer were not tolerated. Silence itself was suspect; it was considered

[12] V.I. Lenin, "A Letter to G.T. Myasnikov," August 5 1921, www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/aug/05.htm

[13] Mikhail Iampolski, "Censorship as the Triumph of Life" in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko.

[14] Malița, op. cit., p. 274.

[15] Benjamin Fondane, Conversations with Lev Shestov, March 26 1938, http://shestov.phonoarchive.org/fon/fondane_3.html.

an act of resistance. Political neutrality was not an option. The writer and the artist were expected to publicly declare their unshakable loyalty to the Party-state. Most of them, but not all, had complied, both in the Soviet Union and in the socialist countries, in which the Sovietization process imposed the same rules. In late socialism, "a new aesthetic culture has emerged in which censors and artists alike are entangled in a mutual embrace."[16] The blunt opposition between artists and censors was replaced by a much more subtle relation.

More than that: the very existence of censorship generated large-scale self-censorship. This, rather than blocking the population's access to seditious content or just unbiased information, was the genuine success of communist censorship. They achieved mass voluntary submission. If there were almost always several artists and writers who could not bear the alienation and chose dissent, the majority accommodated themselves with censorship. To minimize the risk, authors avoided creating anything that could be considered subversive in their works. That included every aspect of the work, from the choice of the subject to the style. The "state writer"[17] was so adapted to the system that he was totally able to censor himself and produce mainly work geared to the social command. Therefore, self-censorship was in fact the first level of willing collaboration with the communist regime. In this way, censorship contributed considerably to the elaboration of the New Man.

In a sense, self-censorship was more efficient than censorship. Due to self-censorship, the control advanced from the level of pre-publication to the more intimate level of pre-creation. For some, it was less oppressive than censorship because it was "voluntary." For the same, accepting to use self-censorship was resilient. But more than that, for those who practiced it as a rule, it was almost impossible to admit that publicly. In an article that became celebrated, the Serbian writer Danilo Kiš explained why: "The fight against censorship is open and dangerous, therefore heroic, while the battle against self-censorship is anonymous, lonely and unwitnessed, and it makes its subject feel humiliated."[18] For these reasons, the

[16] Haraszti, p. 5.

[17] Evgeny Dobrenko, *The State–Writer,* op. cit.

[18] Danilo Kiš, "Censorship/self–censorship", *Index for Censorship*, Vol. 15, No. 1, January 1986, p. 44.

comprehensive study of self-censorship is far less advanced than that of censorship.

However, one may agree that extensive use of self-censorship could not avoid negatively influencing the creative process. That was the opinion of Solzhenitsyn who, in one of his most famous texts, the open letter to the Fourth Soviet Writers' Union in 1967, blamed censorship and self-censorship for the loss of status of Russian literature: "Our literature has lost its leading role it played at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, and it has lost the brilliance of experimentation that distinguished it in the 1920s. To the entire world, the literary life of our country appears immeasurably more colorless, trivial, and inferior than it actually is—[or] than it would be if it were not confined and hemmed in."[19] Only several months after his expulsion from the USSR, Solzhenitsyn declared with an almost incredible honesty that all his previous works written in the USSR, with the exception of *The GULAG Archipelago*, were "softened down:" "Westerners should know that any work by a Soviet writer has been self-censored and that they should take that into account when assessing Soviet writing."[20]

This kind of confession was very scarce. Generally, fellow writers subjected to the communist censorship preferred to tell victimizing stories of interdiction but also stories in which they succeeded to outwit the censors. Yet, more often than not, these stories situated themselves somewhere between naivety and cynicism. Among all communist countries, it was in the German Democratic Republic that self-censorship was the most important, what the literary critic Richard A. Zipser liked to call "scissors in the head." The rules of the game, however, were not established by the creators. Many writers poured considerably creative energy into the game of outwitting the censors, and in the process, they probably succeeded to outwitting only themselves."[21]

In his classic *Persecution and the Art of Writing*,[22] the philosopher Leo Strauss argued that censorship generated a peculiar type of writing

[19] Quoted in J.G. Garrard, "Art for Man's Sake: Alexander Solzhenitsyn", *Books Abroad*, Vol. 41, No. 1, Winter 1973, p. 49.

[20] Gary Kern, "Solženicyn's Self–Censorship: the Canonical Text of Odin Den' Ivana Denisoviča", The *Slavic and East European Journal, Vol*. 20 No. 4, Winter 1976, p. 421.

[21] Richard A. Zipfer, *Literary Censorship in the GDR—Memories of Life in East Germany: Snapshots (richardzipser.com)*.

[22] Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing, Glencoe*: Free Press, 1952, p. 25.

in which all important meaning was presented exclusively "between the lines." Strauss called that type of writing "exoteric". Different from esoteric writing, which shared secret knowledge among the initiated only, the exoteric one addressed its elf "not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only." Nonetheless, on a second plan, the exoteric writing contained also other meanings that could be rightfully interpreted by knowledgeable people. In this way, by cultivating ambiguity, the skillful writer could disseminate desired messages in spite of censorship, which had even a positive role in this process by stimulating creativity. Very probably ignoring Strauss's work, Andrzej Wajda reached the same conclusion about censorship's possible positive role in stimulating the artist's creativity: "The crucial problem of political cinema is not to accept or reject interference by the censor but to create work that makes the censor's methods inoperable! Only what stays within the range of the censor's imagination can be censored. Create something really original and censors will throw away all their scissors and mumbo jumbo."[23]

The same critical view of the communist dogmas and the current state of society is to be found in the work of the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. A telling example of Strauss theory of exoteric writing, their science fiction novels had more than one level of writ99ing: "under the veneer of conventional sf plots, setting, and themes, yet run counter to them, constituting another layer of meaning that demands a particular reading protocol, which is not automatically available to all interpretative communities."[24] Apparently situated in different worlds, their stories contained many broad hints to the state of Soviet society. However, when they called one character of their novel *Hard to be a God*, who was minister of the Crown Guard of the fictional kingdom of Arkanar, Don Rebia, a sympathetic editor considered that to realize the name was an anagram of Beria would be too easy for the perceptive readers and asked that it should be renamed Don Reba instead.[25]

[23] [23]Quoted in Karolina Ziolo–Pużuc, "Andrzej Wajda's Man of Marble and the Struggle with Censorship", eSharp 2009, https://www.academia.edu/41221977/Andrzej_Wajdas_Man_of_Marble_and_the_struggle_with_censorship.

[24] Elana Gomel, "The Poetics of Censorship: Allegory as Form and Ideology in the Novels of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky", Science–Fiction Studies, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1995, p. 88.

[25] The authors thank Ariel Levchenko for sharing this information with us.

One primordial difference between the former Czar's censorship and the communist one was their relationship with time. If the Czarist censorship acted only in the present, communist censorship concerned itself with the past too. Its objective was to supply a version of the past that was compatible with the Party's policy of the day. It was a vital mission because as Winston Smith, George Orwell's hero from *1984* declared in a famous passage: "Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present, controls the past… The mutability of the past is the central tenet of Ingsoc.

Past events, it is argued, have no objective existence, but survive only in written records and in human memories. The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon. And since the Party is in full control of all records, and in equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it."[26]

To do this, it was indispensable to limit as much as possible the access to independent sources of information. As early as 1920, Krupskaia, at the time number two of NARKOMPROS, signed a circular entitled *Guide to the removal of anti-artistic and counter-revolutionary literature from libraries serving the mass reader.* A veritable Bolshevik *index-expurgatorius*, Krupskaia's guide asked for the ban of thousands of books from the Russian public libraries. They had to be transformed into Bolshevik propaganda units, so they had to be purged of any contrary influences. The criteria for banning were varied: the Bible, the Coran, and all other religious books, books of Russian *émigrés* writers such as Ivan Bunin or Zinaida Gippius, books of authors who were forbidden to sign, such as Akhmatova, books that criticized Marxism, Lenin or/and the Revolution, books of non-Marxist philosophers, such as Plato, which could contaminate the readers with alternative worldviews, any books by authors who were considered "reactionary" or the collections of the suppressed dailies. Even children's fairy tales were not spared. Krupskaia expressly asked that fairy stories promoting "the wrong kind of emotional and ideological influence" be removed from public libraries.[27]

Many books were burned, which may have inspired Nazis, who would perfect the ritual a dozen years later by making it public. Others were

[26] George Orwell, *1984*, 1949.

[27] Quoted in Marina Lewycka, "Inside the Rainbow: How the Soviets Tried to Reinvent Fairy tales", *The Financial Times,* September 27 2013, https://www.ft.com/content/fdaa6fc4-2523-11e3-9dcc-00.

located in a *spetskhran*[28] (special sector), a separate section of the library that was off-limits for the ordinary reader. To be able to read there, one had to have a special permit and to justify one's research interest. One of the most difficult items to access were the old collections of the communist Parties' dailies, which could contradict the ever-changing versions of the history of the respective Parties. After WW2, the same happened to the libraries of satellite countries.

Whatever the version of the past that the Party preferred at a certain moment, they were all assembled from the point of view of *partiinost*. Censorship's role was not just to clean the available past of anything that could hinder the Party's interests. The use of photography was of utmost importance because of the common belief that the photographic image was a "natural" reflection of "reality," thus an absolutely "objective" medium that conveys indisputable "proofs." Air brush and montage virtuosos had to supply doctored "true" historical images, which were expected to constitute an endless iconographic reservoir of manipulated and manipulable images. That affected the very notion of "reality," which was available custom-made.

Although Stalin had never had a really close relationship with Lenin, they produced a faked photograph showing them side by side, which became iconic and was largely used by the *agitprop*. Special attention was given to people who fell out of favor. If the secret police's function was to eliminate them from life, censorship had to finish the job and eliminate them also from history. Following his exclusion from the Party, Trotsky was systematically removed from every historical photograph that "documented" the Revolution. In a famous photograph,[29] Yezhov, who replaced Yagoda as *Narkom* of the NKVD, walked near Stalin and Voroshilov along the river Moskva. Shortly after, Yezhov would be arrested, condemned as "the enemy of the people," and shot. Consequently, he was conveniently erased from the "historical" photograph. This practice continued after Stalin's death. Yezhov's successor as head of NKVD, Beria, had the same fate after his fall and execution decided by Khrushchev at the end of 1953. The subscribers to the Great *Soviet Encyclopedia* were asked by the publisher to replace his notice—pages 21-24 and a large-format photograph—with new pages with notices on Friedrich

[28] Nadezhda Ryzhak, op. cit.

[29] Reproduced in David King, op. cit., p. 163.

Wilhelm von Bergholz and bishop George Berkeley (in an expanded version), on the Danish-Russian explorer Vitus Bering from the times of Peter the Great, the Bering Sea, and a photograph of the Bering Strait. All these new notices had a very limited interest for the Soviet reader; their role was just to fill up the typographic space left after the removal of Beria's notice and to avoid the complete repagination of the volume.

Introducing a fluid past that could be modified according to the *agitprop*'s wish, the communist censorship attacked the very notion of truth, which no longer had an absolute value. In this view, truth was always relative. It was not even necessary that "truth" should be at least truthful. It was no longer necessary that it should be at least plausible. The "truth" was what the Party decided was true at a certain moment, nothing less, nothing more. Mendacity did not have to camouflage itself behind a curtain of apparent veracity. Honesty and morals were also no longer absolutes. Substituting faith for reason, the New Man's loyalty was not to the truth, which could be only relative but to the Party, which was always infallible even when it contradicted itself.

Being an established artist or writer did not mean one was no longer subject to censorship. Fadeev was president of the Soviet Writers' Union and nevertheless had to re-write a large part of his *The Young Guard* novel, as we have seen in a previous chapter. The modifications were not true historically but were imposed by ideology, which maintained the leading role of the communist Party as an axiom for every situation. In a totalitarian state, when confronted with ideology, history always loses the game. The second corrected version was published in 1951 and the first one was gradually retired from libraries.

### *Maya Plisetskaya, Censored*

Maya Plisetskaya, the *prima ballerina assoluta* of the *Bolshoi* Theater was neither spared by censorship. On April 20, 1967, she starred in the premiere of the ballet *Carmen-Suite*. The music was her husband's, the composer Rodion Shchedrin, on themes of the celebrated Bizet's opera. The official choreographer was the Cuban Alberto Alonso but Plisetskaya contribute to much of the choreography herself. After just one evening, the production was banned by the Soviet Ministry of Culture on charges of "eroticism" and abandon of classic ballet figures in favor of "borrowed techniques." Although censorship ordered the press to

play down the event, the scandal was huge. Of course, banning performances happened before but now the ministry banned a performance of the Bolshoi Theater, the highest-reputed Soviet stage and of Maya Plisetskaya, a pure product of the Bolshoi ballet school, whose talent was revered not only in the Soviet Union but in the whole world. People's Artist, and holder of the Lenin Prize, she was the rivalless queen of the Russian classical ballet, especially after Rudolf Nureyev's defection in 1961. The scandal was huge and it affected not only the dance world but the Soviet cultural elites. Bolshoi's premiere was included as a major performance of 1967, the year they celebrated the half-centennial anniversary of the October Revolution. Of course, it was expected that the guardians of the classical ballet temple that was Bolshoi could not but object to the daringness and modernity of the *Carmen-Suite* production. Classical music purists were shocked by the boldness with which the composer Schedrin re-visited Bizet's score, introducing flamenco-like legs work and clapping hands as supplementary rhythmic elements. Nostalgics of the snow-white diaphanous tutus regretted their replacement with modern costumes. The prude censors from Glavrepertkom and the Ministry of Culture were horrified by the very high sensuality of the performance. Outraged, Minister of Culture Furtseva was quoted having said that Plisetskaya had "turned a heroine of the Spanish people into a whore."[30]

However, one would miss the main point if the polemics would be reduced to a choreographic querelle des Anciens et des Modernes or to a puritan affair of prudery. As Anna Kalashnikova convincingly argued in her thesis dedicated to the subject,[31] the main reasons for the ban were not limited to the aesthetic domain. The ban was not an overreaction of the Ministry of Culture to a simple artistic provocation but much more. Even though the Zhdanov doctrine had been replaced by Khrushchev with the peaceful coexistence, the competition between the two systems was not at all abandoned. For those who lived the zhdanovchina, the accusation of "borrowed techniques" reminded them of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign. "Borrowed techniques" was the code name for kowtowing to the West, especially the United States, which

[30] [30]Simon Morrison, *Confidential: Secrets of the Russian Ballet from the Rule of the Tsars till Today*, Kindle Edition, 2016, p. 371.

[31] Anna Kalashnikova *The Carmen–Suite Maya Plisetskaya Challenging Soviet Culture and Policy,* MA Thesis, University of Texas, 2014.

was a serious political offense. In the Soviet system of the arts, classical ballet occupied a special place. Officially, it was a domain for which the Soviet supremacy was undisputed. The Bolshoi evening, almost always presenting Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake,* was a must in the program of important visitors, as the compulsory ride in the Moscow metro. Plisetskaya was an important asset in the Soviet prestige showcase. The absolute perfection of the Russian ballet school as opposed to the "coarseness" of American dance companies. According to communist propaganda, the American was by definition someone *nekulturnyi*, uncivilized and with unbridled sexuality. The claim of eroticism and even pornography implied that Plisetskaya's performance looked like an American production. In comparison with the refinement of the Russian tradition, American ballet had to be decadent, like the capitalist system. To dare present on the sacred Bolshoi stage a production with American influence was letting the snake into the garden. Therefore, the modernity of the *Carmen-Suite* was also a direct challenge to Soviet policy. The ban led to a direct confrontation between Plisetskaya and the Minister of Culture Furtseva, who was pressured to take action: "Furtseva was so miserable…She could not allow this work, as she would be deposed from her position if she did. She banned it, while not being against it. You see, she was miserable," Plisetskaya would write in her memoirs.[32] To have the *Carmen-Suite* back in the restricted *Bolshoi* repertory, she had to threaten with her resignation. Such a move from someone who was the most illustrious Soviet cultural ambassador would have provoked an international scandal. The ban was lifted but Plisetskaya had to accept to cut the most controversial part of the ballet, the "Love Adagio."

## The "Unknown" Girl from Minsk

Censorship's criteria were versatile following th*e partiinost* demands of the moment. For instance, during Zhdanov 1949 anti-cosmopolitan campaign, GLAVLIT ordered the Soviet press to systematically add the Jewish birth names *near the* Russian chosen names of those targeted to emphasize their ethnic "foreign" origin. At the same time, as Stalin's policy was to deny the specific suffering of the Jewish population during WW2 and included the Jewish victims in the general figure of Soviet

[32] Quoted in Kalashnikova, op. cit., p. 53.

casualties, GLAVLIT complied and, on the contrary, the Jewish origin of the victims had to be played down. The telling *Black Book of Soviet Jewry* by Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, which was about to be printed in Russian after an edition in Yiddish was "retired" from printing. This policy continued well after Stalin's death. Consequently, the major work dedicated to the USSR Jewish victims during WW2, Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, had a lot of difficulties with censorship. It was unacceptable that the novel protagonist, the nuclear physicist Viktor Shtrum, "to be anything but a purebred Russian."[33] Even more, Grossman dared to pair the nazist anti-Semitism with the Stalinist one. This and other critiques of the Soviet regime made the KGB confiscate the manuscript.[34] Considered by Mikhail Suslov, "a book incomparably more dangerous to us than *Doctor Zhivago*,"[35] *Life and Fate* was published in the Soviet Union in 1988, thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost,* but even then in an abridged version. The complete version came out in Russian only in 2014.

Another notorious case of downplaying the Jewish identity is the photograph of "the heroine from Minsk." One Lithuanian collaborator took eight photographs of the public execution on October 26, 1941, of three Belarus partisans, two men, and a teenage girl. If the identity of the men was established immediately after the end of WW2 and they were honored as heroes, the identity of the girl was officially "unknown," and the caption of the photograph, largely used in the Soviet propaganda, mentioned "unknown heroine from Minsk." In reality, the name of the "unknown" heroine was perfectly known: the 17 years old Masha Bruskina but the problem was she was Jewish. To identify her, it would have been implicitly to recognize the Jewish contribution to the resistance. What was more, the obvious courage with which she behaved during the hanging contradicted flagrantly the anti-Semitic *clichés* of Jewish cowardice. What they claim was that the first execution of a Soviet partisan in the WW2 was that of a Jewess? Unacceptable. Therefore, mentioning her identity was banned and she remained "the girl without

[33] Robert Chandler, "How the Soviet Literary Establishment Censored Vasily Grossman", *The New Yorker* June 19, 2019.

[34] For Grossman, see Alexandra Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

[35] Wiliam Taubman, "The Soviet Union's Jewish Tolstoy—Censored in Life, Now Revived", *The New York Times,*June 25, 2019.

a name" for more than sixty years. Only in 2009, a plate with her name was put on the gate of the yeast factory from which she was hanged,[36]

Nevertheless, censorship's usual work was by far banaler. In practice, censors used a repertory of what was forbidden to be published. Known unofficially as the *Talmud*,[37] the thick comprehensive volume listed things as various as any critique of the Soviet regime, of communism, of Marxism, of the founding fathers—Marx, Engels, and especially Lenin— a list of names fallen into disgrace and a list of books that cannot be quoted, any personal critiques of members of *nomenklatura*, any favorable mention of dissenters and defectors, the names of KGB personnel except the name of its president which was public, any positive mention of religion, of homosexuality, any explicit sexual connotations or material that could be interpreted as pornography and any too favorable presentation of the West. Following the process of Sovietization, similar repertories were given to the communist censors of the satellite countries.

In 1977, Polish censor Tomasz Strzyżewski defected to Sweden bringing with him a stolen top-secret censorship black book. Among the interdictions: any discussion of the Soviet presence in Poland, any discussion of salaries, any polemics with *Tribuna Ludu* (The People's Tribune), the official Polish communist daily, any statistics concerning traffic accidents, fires, drownings, epidemics, or the rise of alcoholism but also a curious ban of data about the general coffee consumption in Poland.[38]

## Marx, Groucho, and Dali's Telegram

As we have seen before, communist censorship was expected also to be prescriptive. Hence its function was to guard the Marxist–Leninist orthodoxy of the cultural production, one of the criteria was the references from the classics. Quoting at least several times Marx and/or Lenin was a must for the theoretical texts. After reading the Romanian writer Nicolae

[36] For Bruskina, see Bill Keller, "Echoes of '41 in Minsk: Was the Heroine Jewish?" *The New York Times,* September 15 1987 and Nechama Tec & Daniel Weiss, "The Heroine from Minsk: Eight Photographs of an Execution", *History of Photography*, Vol. 23, Issue 4, 1999.

[37] Vladimirov, op. cit.

[38] Magdalena Mateja, "The Censorship – Key Element in Mass Communication System in Totalitarian Countries (Poland's Case)", https://www.academia.edu/7152410/Censorship_in_communist_regime_country_Case_Pol.

Balotă's book on *The Literature of the Absurd*, the censor asked for a change in the title, which was not combative enough, as the literature of the absurd could only be presented in a critical light. The censor's second demand was to increase the number of references to the Marxist classics. With the new title of *The Struggle with the Absurd* and with three references to Marx in the index, the book was approved. Nonetheless, had the censor checked, better, two references were to Marx, Karl but the third one was to Marx...brothers instead.[39]

However, the biggest blunder of the Romanian communist censorship was undoubtedly the publication of the telegram, evidently sent tongue-in-cheek by Salvador Dali, congratulating Nicolae Ceaușescu on "the introducing of the presidential scepter" when at the beginning of April 1974, the dictator became President of Romania. It is impossible to assess if indeed no one realized Dali's irony or even that a "presidential scepter" was an oxymoron because the object is an attribute that is reserved for the Royals, together with the crown. If there were people who understood, they wisely kept it to themselves realizing how dangerous it would have been to publicly talk about. Anyhow, Dali's telegram was printed by *Scânteia*, (The Spark), the official RCP's daily. Needless to say, the issue became instantly a collection item.

[39] Nicolae Balotă, *Lupta cu absurdul*, Bucureşti: Editura Univers, 1971, p. 39.

CHAPTER 5

# Counterculture

## Stilyagi

In spite of the huge pressure exerted by the *agitprop*, censorship, and the secret police to promote one single unified socialist culture, they never completely accomplished that impossible task. The Soviet culture was certainly not monolithic, its aesthetic and ideological unity was never been realized in practice, although it was supposed to be the offspring of a unique creative method of socialist realism. After WW2, a series of countercultural trends appeared in the Soviet Union; they were not well-structured movements but loose groups held together by their musical and fashion preferences.

Chronologically, the first significant counterculture that developed in the Soviet Union from the end of 1940s to the beginning of the 1960s was the *stilyagi*, sometimes translated as "hipsters," by analogy with the American trend.

The pejorative term, coined by a satirist from *Krokodil*, means literally "style hunters." Eventually, the *stilyagi* adopted the name. The *stilyagi* were young people who wanted to be stylish, "to dress with style." They dreamt about America but, as Aleksei Yurchak brilliantly demonstrated, they fantasized about an "Imaginary America"[1] they mainly "knew" only through the few Hollywood films that could pass the Soviet censorship.

[1] Yurchak, pp. 158–162.



R. Stern and V. Tismaneanu, *Communism and Culture*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82650-5_5

They tried to imitate what they believed it was American fashion but their access to genuine American clothing they craved was very limited. In practice, their wardrobe could come from two sources: the vast amount of used Western clothing looted by the Red Army at the end of the WW2, available as the second hand on the black market, and the awkward home-made copies of what they believed it had an American "look." The Leningrad *stilyagy* used regularly the phrase "See you later, Alligator" and even nicknamed the city main boulevard *Nevskii Prospec* "Broad" after the New York Broadway.[2] The Mosc*ow stilyagi* used the same nickname for the Gorky Street, one of the main arteries of the city. To emphasize their admiration for the USA, some refused to be identified as *stilyagi* and ask to be called *statenicks* instead.

Their clothes were shocking; they wore "long draped jackets in loud checks in yellow or green, the painted "American" tie, patched pockets, padded shoulders, turns-back cuffs, peg-top trousers, and…yellow or light tan shoes…".[3]

At the time when jazz was officially banned, the *stilyagi* listened to and danced on that "decadent" music instead of the "civilized" waltz or the folk dances that the KOMSOMOL tried to impose in the Soviet youth clubs.[4] Their favorite tune was *Chattanooga Choo*-Choo, the Glen Miller's band standard. Except jazz, they liked boogie-woogie and fox-trot. The dissident writer Vasily Aksyonov recalled that, when he was a student in Moscow at the beginning of the 1950s, jazz was "America's secret weapon Number One." Together with American movies, jazz represented "one of the few windows to the outside world from our stinking Stalinist lair."[5] They also disseminated that music using pirated Western records; because vinyl was not available, the records were pressed on used X-Ray plates called *roentgenizdat*. The result was poor quality, they had grooves only on one side, which worn out after several months. The illegal records were marketed on the black market at a fraction of the price of an original vinyl but still expensive for the average Soviet income.

[2] James van Geldern, Stily*a*ga, http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1954-2/stilyaga/.

[3] Edward Crankshaw, *Russia Without Stalin: The Emerging Pattern*, New York: The Viking Pres, 1956, p. 97.

[4] S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

[5] Vassily Aksyonov, "Aksyonov in America: Hating (and Loving) the USA", *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 5, Winter 1987, p. 168.

Later on, the rock fans would use the same technique and nicknamed the records "rock-on-bones" or "rock-on-ribs."[6]

Despite an unconvincing attempt to deny that they were "a rebellion against the regime"[7] and consider the phenomenon as a mere form of dandyism, the *stilyagi* clearly distanced themselves from the norms of the Soviet society. We disagree with the historian Mark Edele's statement that *stilyagi* "were decidedly apolitical"[8] It is true; they were not organized and did not have distinct political claims. However, under a totalitarian regime, distinctness was in itself a political claim. In the Stalinist society, declaring their apparent lack of interest in politics was also a political act. The *stilyagi*'s search for individuality through sartorial identity directly opposed the collective element that was so essential for the New Man. Their pseudo-American dress style clashed with the grayness of the Soviet street. Nonetheless, the *stilyagi*'s americanolatry, which developed at the time of the Cold War, when the anti-cosmopolitanism campaign was still fresh, when the Zhdanov Doctrine specifically designated the USA as the enemy, challenged the official politics and policies. Their musical preferences were not politically neutral either. "Under the then existing regime, jazz became a kind of an opposing worldview, and its spreading among young people was synonymous with the dissemination of freethinking."[9] For the first time, a group of people dared to defy the Party-state by openly adopting values and life style directly opposed to those of the Soviet society. Of course, the *stilyagi* did not represent an immediate danger for the USSR but their political impact was more important than their small numbers. They did not generate a real breach into the system but produced some cracks that would enlarge. Rightfully, Aksyonov called them "the first dissidents."[10]

Being a *stilyaga* under Stalinism was quite risky. Their displayed individualism and americanophily could not be tolerated. The KOMSOMOL secretary A.N. Shelepin indignantly declared: "To our shame people still

[6] Yurchak, p. 181.

[7] Yulia Karpova, *The Stilyagi: Soviet Youth (Sub)Culture) of the 1950s and its Fashion*, MA Thesis, Budapest: Cetral European University, 2009.

[8] Mark Edele, "Strange Young Men in Stalin's Moscow: The Birth and Life of the Stiliagi 1945–1953" *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Bd. 50, H. 1, 2002, p. 58.

[9] Stanislav Davydov, "Youth Subcultures in the Soviet Union in the 1950–1980s", *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, Vol. 37.

[10] Aksyonov, p. 169.

exist among Soviet youth, who are infected by the vices of the past, spongers, who live an idle, parasitic life. On the central streets of Moscow, Leningrad, Tbilisi, Erevan, and several other cities loiter young men with Tarzan haircuts, dressed up like parrots, so-called *stilyagi*. They do not work anywhere, they do not study [but] spend their nights in restaurants [and] pester girls. What kind of people are they?".[11]

Verbally and sometimes even physically abused in the street by the ordinary Soviet people, who considered their behavior deviant, the *stilyagi* were regularly criticized as "decadent bourgeois" in *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, the KOMSOMOL newspaper and often targeted by *Krokodil*. In one cartoon, monkeys in a cage in a zoo were making fun of a couple of conspicuously dressed *stilyagi* that came to visit.[12] Speaking about them, the *Pravda* editor and Foreign Affairs Minister, Dmitri Shepilov mentioned "wild cave–man orgies" and an "explosion of basic instincts and sexual urges."[13] The usual sanction for *stilyagi* was to expel them from the university. This sanction was far harsher than its Western similar punishment; as all universities were state-controlled, the expelled *stilyaga* could not simply transfer to another university. Therefore, expulsion could mean no more higher education for life. The police could arrest them under various pretexts, the most common being "parasitism" and/or "hooliganism." Sometimes, it gave them forced haircuts. At the beginning of the 1970s, the same techniques would be used, happily just for a short time, in Ceaușescu's Romania. In several occasions, the Bucharest police rounded up boys with long hair and girls wearing mini-skirts who walked on the city's main boulevards; armed with scissors, the policemen cut the boys' long hair. The same scissors were used to cut the girls' mini-skirts, shaming them publicly by revealing their underwear.

The *stilyagi* were not unique in the Soviet bloc; other youth groups centered around fashion and/or music emerged in some satellite countries, such as *pasek* in Czechoslovakia, *jampec* in Hungary, and *malagambiști* in Romania; the latter were named after the jazz musician Sergiu Malagamba, who had launched that fashion trend at the beginning of the 1940s. The trend was repressed both by the fascist dictator Marshal Ion Antonescu and by the communist regime.

[11] Quoted in Mark Edele, p. 37.

[12] Reproduced in Yurchak, p. 173.

[13] Coates, p. 457.

## Rockers and Hippies

Jazz was officially rehabilitated in the Soviet Union in 1957. The former jazz bands that had to change their name in "light music band" or "entertainment band" could call themselves jazz bands again. Many disbanded bands began to play anew. Jazz was broadcasted on the radio and jazz records were once more sold in shops. Because of its public acceptance, jazz lost its "subversive" aura that made it a rallying element for the *stilyagi*. Around 1960, they gradually disappeared, being replaced by a new countercultural wave, namely the rockers and the hippies. The new "subversive" music was twisted and, by far more successful, rock'n-roll. In spite of the music patrols sent by the KOMSOMOL to monitor the Soviet youth's leisure, a number of young people stubbornly preferred these "decadent" dances to those prescribed by the Soviet moral code. According to it, "dancing apart" was considered "uncultured." The official press described rockers as asocial persons with a violent behavior and uncontrolled sexual manners. The KOMSOMOL called them "parasites" and contrasted them with the "healthy" youth that was building communism. Despite the official opposition, rock music became very popular among young people. They could listen to the rock sound broadcasted in the musical programs of Radio Liberty and Free Europe using Soviet short-waves radios. Curiously, the radios were largely available, although the programs were jammed. New obtainable technology, such as tape and audiocassette recorders, allowed to store and disseminates the music. Unofficial rock groups had been formed. The illegal recordings were sold on the black market. People who did that could be prosecuted. In spite of this, they never succeeded to eradicate rock music, which would develop into a strong open rock scene in the 1980s under *perestroika*.[14]

Some of the rockers were also bikers, who tried to resemble their American models, which was not easy under Soviet conditions. Dreaming of Harley-Davidsons, they had to satisfy themselves with the locally produced bikes such as Tula and Ural or the Czech CZ they called "chesed." As it was almost impossible to get genuine leather bike jackets, they replaced them with clumsy home-made fake leather imitations of the American originals.

[14] Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia*, London: Omnibus Press, 1987.

Inspired by the American trend, groups of hippies emerged not only in Moscow and Leningrad but also in medium cities such as Lviv,[15] or Riga. One hippie group calling itself *Systema* (The System)) was active in Moscow and the Baltic republics, especially in Estonia.[16] Trying to behave like their American counterparts, the hippies wore home-made knitted cloth but also imitations of American blue jeans, had long hair, and listened to the Beatles. They were pacifists and adopted the slogan. "Let's Make Love, Not War". However, this does not mean they were apolitical. In fact, if "Soviet" is used in a broader sense than the purely geographic, the phrase "Soviet hippie" is a perfect oxymoron because the hippies' lifestyle was absolutely contrary to the Soviet norms. They protested against the Vietnam War, which was the official Soviet politics but they opposed any war and refused to be drafted in the Soviet army. The hippies deeply disliked the authoritarian character of the Soviet society and the collective ideal of the New Man. Even more, they openly rejected any contribution to the building of communism. Therefore, the Soviet authorities hated them. The official press described them as antisocial elements, who were basically lazy and also filthy. When the police gave them forced haircuts, they emphasized they found lice in their cut hair. Notwithstanding the common KOMSOMOL and KGB effort, they could never liquidate the hippies' movement.

## *Tamizdat* and *Samizdat*

As we have seen in one previous chapter, even in the darkest times of the *ezhovshchina* and *zhdanovshchina*, there had been resistance. There were always some alternative ways to create and circulate forbidden content. During the Stalinist times, when it was extremely dangerous to possess texts that criticized the regime, they subsisted in an immaterial form, as Mandelstam's *Epigram* or Akhmatova's *Recviem*. After the Thaw and especially after the 20th Congress of the CPSU and the launch of Khrushchev's doctrine of peaceful coexistence, the circulation of alternative information became easier. There were people who dared to read,

[15] Wiliam Jay Risch, "Soviet 'Flower Children' and the Youth Counter-culture in the 1970s Lviv", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 40 No. 3, July 2005.

[16] "The Soviet Hippies: A Look at Counterculture behind the Iron Curtain", an interview with Terje Toomistu, *Jacobin*, 11.17. 2017, The Soviet Hippies (jacobinmag.com).

possess and exchange forbidden content in a material form, although that would have been incriminating evidence in case of a KGB house search.

There were two categories of this material, the *tamizdat*, that is "published abroad" and *samizdat*, which is "self-publishing." The names were coined ironically after *Gosizdat*, the state publishing house.

*Tamizdat* was a Russian tradition, which existed well before the Revolution. To avoid the Czar's censorship, books were printed abroad and then illegally sent to Russia. The phenomenon greatly developed after the Revolution. The exiled writers and journalists published banned books and newspapers that were hostile to the new regime, which were smuggled in the USSR. However, the number of books published abroad that circulated in the Soviet Union increased even more as the number of foreigners who smuggled them in when visiting raised a lot under Khrushchev. Important texts of Russian literature such as Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago*, Akhmatova's poetry, or Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* had been available as *tamizdat*. Sometimes, the *tamizdat* books were copied as typescripts, so they were transformed into *samizdat*.

It seems that it was the poet Nikolai Glazkov who used the term *samsebiaizdat* (I myself published) for his poetry collections he typed and bound himself beginning from 1952.[17] As the access to press was strictly controlled by the KGB, they had to use alternative, very inefficient reproducing techniques, such as photography or, more rarely, the mimeograph; the main technology that was used for *samizdat* was the typewriter and carbon paper. The dissident Vladimir Bukovsky wanted "to erect a monument to the typewriter" for its role in the underground publishing. For Bukovsky, *samizdat* was essentially an individual endeavor: "I write it myself, I edit it myself, I censor it myself, I publish it myself, I distribute it myself, I sit in jail for it myself"[18] However, in practice *samizdat* was functioning almost always as an informal network, The author could type the texts himself or he could use a typist or more, if the text was a long one. Then the author distributed the copies to some trusted friends. Yet if one or several typists or friends liked the text, they could make their own copies and distribute it to their trusted friends who, in turn, could do the same. So, the *samizdat* had an "independent" existence. "What was

[17] Ann Komaromi, "The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 63, No. 3, Autumn 2004, p. 598.

[18] Vladimir Bukovsky, *How to Build a Castle: My Life* as a Dissenter, Kindle Edition.

important was that these copies were alive, they were living a life of their own," stated Irina Tsurkova. a clandestine typist that was arrested by the KGB for anti-Soviet propaganda.[19] Often the text was slightly modified by the disseminators; that created many variants. That generated a peculiar relationship of authorship in which the author did not have complete control either on his text or on its distribution, which had often a tentacular development. There were cases in which the authors did not give their consent or were even opposed that their text had been circulated in such a form. Others, such as the poet Joseph Brodsky, complained about the many errors he found in his *samizdat* texts he could not correct.

Not all *samizdat* had a direct political content; the texts were very varied, including books officially printed that were scarce. Nevertheless, the fact that it was mainly uncensored material made it unacceptable because it violated one essential element of the totalitarian state, namely censorship. Probably the most famous was the *Chronicle of Current Events*, a bulletin that monitored the human rights situation in the USSR; they published the list of arrests by the KGB of the protesters and the minutes of their trials.

Some others were literary texts such as Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog*, an acid satire of the Soviet pretense to transform humans into the New Men, the unabridged version of Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, the wonderful fable of the Devil's visit into the Soviet Moscow, and Gulag histories, but also Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* or G.C. Chesterton's detective stories.

Possession and distribution of *samizdat* were severely repressed. Fear of repression and the small number of copies that could have been produced with ineffective reproduction techniques made that the *samizdat* publications touched directly only a small percentage of the Soviet population, which was estimated by the sociologists Boris Dubin and Lev Gudkov at 2–5%.[20] Nevertheless, the political impact of *samizdat* was by far greater than that. As many important texts were broadcasted at Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe, the actual number of people who were aware of *samizdat* content had surely been greater. Moreover, the "forbidden" character of *samizdat* created a loose community of authors

[19] Josephine von Zitzewitz, *The Culture of Samizdat: Literature and Underground Networks in the Late Soviet Union*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 16.

[20] Valentina Parisi, "Preface" in Valentina Parisi ed., *Samizdat. Between Practices and Representations*, Budapest: CEU, 2015, p. 8, n4.

and readers that were willing to take the risk and who were ready to resist. This community had been the nucleus of the civil society to come. Yet, it would be misleading to speak about *samizdat* as a structured opposition with common political claims. *Samizdat* was central to the dissenters' activity but it cannot be limited to it. It was by far more than a mere tool of political dissent.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, much critical attention has been given to the unicity of *samizdat* as a medium and the specificity of the reader's response, as well as its material quality. As a consequence of its production and circulation, every *samizdat* copy became a unique piece with a unique circulation history that left unique traces of previous readers on the support. That singularity made the few samples of *samizdat* that survived communism a much desired prey for bibliophiles. Art collectors developed also an interest for *samizdat* as some authors never intended their books to be printed; their *samizdat* production was composed of handmade experimental items they "authenticated" by their signature not as a simply signed edition but as a work of art.

Under the Soviet influence, a *samizdat* production emerged in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. As censorship and customs inspection were less strict in Poland, smuggling in *tamizdat* was much easier than in the Soviet Union. One favorite was the monthly magazine *Kultura* published by the Paris- based Literary Institute founded by Jerzy Giedroyc in 1946.[21] The Institute published also hundreds of books that, for various reasons, could not be printed in Poland.

Different from the Soviet Union, the Polish *samizdat* used more modern techniques of reproducing texts, operated in changing locations by mobile printing teams. Having as readers a mix of the human rights fighters, KOR and later Solidarity trade unionists, and members of the civil society, they succeeded to develop a flourishing market. The production of illegal press and books reached "a truly industrial level."[22] At the beginning of the 1980s, *Tygognik Mazowsze, a* Solidarity weekly, printed 80,000 copies, breaking the monopoly of the official press. After the introduction of the Martial Law by general Jaruzelski in 1981, they published even *Maly Konspirator,* a short guide for clandestine tion

[21] Lubor Jilek, "L'observatoire du mensuel Kultura, entre Londres et Maisons-Laffitte", *Relations internationales*, No. 148, 4, 2011.

[22] Eugeniusz Smolar, "The Circle of Hope: samizdat, tamizdat and radio", *Eurozine*, 21 June 2019, /www.eurozine.com/circle-hope-samizdat-tamizdat-radio/

members and sympathizers were supposed to support the underground press. However, the Polish underground publishing cannot avoid tensions between the cultural/political and economic factors.[23]

These successes inspired dissenters from other satellite countries. In 1980, the Hungarians Gábor Demsszky and László Rajk jr.[24] went to Poland to study the functioning of the underground press. To Returning Budapest, Rajk opened in 1981 in his private apartment the famous "Rajk *Butik.*" Open each Tuesday evening, the boutique sold and distributed all sorts of *samizdat* and rapidly began a main meeting spot for the underground movement. Rajk organized poetry readings, books presentations, sensible subjects' debates, and other events, which were very successful. Every manifestation of the Rajk's boutique was regularly announced by Radio Free Europe.[25]

Educated as an architect, Rajk, blacklisted, could not freely exercise his profession. Instead, he designed covers for *samizdat* literature, from which many were published by AB Független Kiado, an independent publishing house. Among the books he designed, there were foreign classics, such as Orwell's famous 1984 and *Animal Farm* and some essential dissent books, such as Haraszti's *The Velvet Prison*. The later, whose original title in Hungarian was *The Aesthetics of Censorship* had on the cover a very brawny figure with a black face devoid of human traits, who was flattening a brain with a pasta roller, transforming it into a red star.[26]

Rajk designed also a cover for another iconic cover of the Hungarian *samizdat*, György Dalos' 1985, an unauthorized sequel to Orwell's classic dystopia. In an A3 unusual format, the book had on the cover several coins with the profile of Big Brother. In the interior the gloomy illustrations in an Expressionist style, the black illustrations conveyed the feeling of a gloomy future

[23] Weslik, op. cit.

[24] After the fall of communism, Demszky became mayor of Budapest. Rajk jr. was the son of László Ra jk, Minister of Interior and Minister of Foreign Affairs in Máttyás Rákosi government. Arrested on fake charges,he was tortured and "confessed" his imaginary crimes in a show-trial, Condemned to death as a Titoist spy, he was hanged in 1949.

[25] Katalin Cseh-Varga, "Innovative Forms of Hungarian Sanizdat. An Analysis of Oral Practices", *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung*, Vol. 65, H1, 2,222,016, pp. 102–103.

[26] Isotta Poggi, "The Art of Fabricating Realities and Forgetting History" in Cristina Cuevas-Wolf and Isotttta Poggi, *Promote, Tolerate, Ban: Art and Culture in Cold War Hungary*, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2018.

Exasperated by the success of the *butik*, the Hungarian authorities forced Rajk to close it in 1983,

Among some other talents, Rajk was an excellent writer. The most famous books were *The Flight into Lichtenstein is Dangerous* and *Key Position*. In the latter one, the artist expressed what Edit Sasvári called the "lavatory- philosophy." According to Rajk, in a totalitarian political and cultural environment, the space of the toilet is a privileged one, in which one could be truly oneself: "The WC offers both meditation and concealment - it is a closed field. The WC is a stronghold, which must be occupied and then protected. One must fight for it. The WC is a one-person throne, where we alone are lords of our own thoughts. The WC is the speck in the eye of power. It is the crash test of patience. (Particularly if it is an outhouse boasting its own infrastructure, quite independent of the public sewage system). The WC is the symbol of self-identification and self-knowledge, comparable to a mirror. The one thing which can be seen only in a mirror is the self."[27]

## Political Jokes

There are many kinds of jokes but political jokes told during communism are special. Arguably, they are one of the most specific forms of the counterculture. Their orality, punch, and condensed form favored their impact among other uncensored contents that existed in a material form such as *tamizdat* and *samizdat*. The KGB was startled when their joke experts calculated that a new joke needed only several hours to spread in the whole Moscow. With, it seems, the only exception of Albania,[28] politicaljokes were present in all the Eastern Bloc; many jokes were transnational, they circulated frequently from one country to another, sometimes locally adapted. They shared the common experience of living under the communist rule but also the fallacy of a common ideology, the Marxism–Leninism. Their circulation needs yet to be thoroughly studied.

The anti-communist political jokes are an extinct species; after the fall of communism, the anti-communist political jokes practically disappeared everywhere. People who lived under communism missed them; they were

[27] http://rajk.info/en/edit-sasvari-key-position.html

[28] Caroline Hamilton, Will Noonan, Michelle Kelly and Elaine Mines ed. "The Absence of Albanian Jokes about Socialism, or Why Some Dicta Firsttorships are Not Funny" in *The Politics and Aesthetics of Refus*al, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007.

an important element in their lives. Telling and/or listening to political jokes were, if not actual acts of resistance, at least some moments of freedom. For those who lived such moments, they were unforgettable. "They changed something in people. They gave them courage. It was a way of standing up—of saying: no, we don't agree with this…"[29] Nevertheless the debate between those who jokes a true protest act, which contributed to the fall of communism and those who maintain that, on the contrary, jokes helped calm down the population, therefore contributed to maintain the system is not ready to finish. However, declassified CIA documents show that Langley considered an important element for the analysis of the Soviet state of mind and monitored them very carefully.[30]

Even former high communist officials enjoyed, at least privately, political jokes. Nostalgically, Jerzy Urban, who was the Polish communist government spokesman, declared: "I think jokes were threatened by freedom of speech. In the communist era you said a sentence with a Russian accent and the audience was screaming with laughter, or used facial expressions and that was fun."[31] Does that mean that communist political jokes need a totalitarian context in order to function?

The origin of the communist political jokes remains a mystery. Nobody knows where they came from. Many more or less crazy theories tried to explain their origin, the craziest being that of a distinguished Romanian art historian that was convinced that the jokes' source was an ultra-secret department of the political police in charge with letting the steam out of the population. Much more close to earth, current research considers the political jokes a folklore creation; nonetheless, one may doubt it was only that because of the very high degree of sophistication of some jokelore. We would rather say the jokes' authors shared a common element with folklore, namely anonymity. Their reasons for anonymity were obvious. A Polish joke told that "the Party newspaper advertised on its first page a Great Competition of Political Jokes: First Prize Ten Years in Prison!" This celebrated joke had variants in which the First Prize had been increased to Fifteen Years or Twenty Years of imprisonment. There were

[29] Ben Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle: A Cultural History of Communism*, New York: Pegasus Books, 2009, p. 5.

[30] https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/01/27/nothing-in-the-shops-but-jokes-aplenty-cia-declassifies-archive-of-soviet-folk-humor-a56962.

[31] Quoted in Mateja, op.cit.

even jokes about telling political jokes. One from Stalin's time: "Q.: Who built the Belomorkanal? A.: On the right side, those who told political jokes. On thee left side, those who listened to them."

and one more modern:

> In a prison from a communist country the prisoners discussed the reasons they were in. 'I'm a burglar' said one. 'I found my wife with her lover in bed and I knifed them both.' said another. 'And you?' 'I? Because I was lazy!' 'Don't give us b-----it! Even the communists do not put people in prison just because they were lazy. 'Yes, because I was lazy! I'm a maths teacher and in one morning I exchanged some political jokes with my colleague the geography teacher. I was lazy to report him immediately, I wanted to do it after lunch, and that gave him time to report on me!

Communists were very serious about jokes. Stalin was very much aware of jokes subversive potential; "Satirical jokes about Party leaders may blunt revolutionary vigilance if they are treated in a conciliatory manner. Behind an anecdote, there may lurk a Menshevik, Trotskyte, class enemy.[32]

Under communism, telling and/or listening to political jokes was a criminal offense. Of course, there was no legislation prohibiting telling or listening to jokes. The joke-tellers were indicted for anti-Soviet or anti-communist activities and heavily sentenced. They were an important category of inmates in the communist prisons, According to Roy Medvedev, at Stalin's death there were 200.000 joke-tellers in Gulag.

Even when one was not sent to prison, cracking a joke could change someone's life. For having parodied the celebrated Marx's statement "Religion is opium for the people" into "Optimism is opium for the people," Ludvik Jahn, the hero of Milan Kundera's amazing novel The Joke, was excluded from the Party and expelled from the university.

Jokes covered the whole spectrum of life under communism; Among the most popular were those about shortages:

> In a communist shop, someone asked 'Do you have cheese?' "No, comrade! Here we don't have meat. They don't have cheese on the other side of the street!

[32] Quoted in Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 153.

or

> In a communist butcher shop, an old lady asked: "Do you have steak?' 'No!' 'Do you have brisket?' 'No!' 'Do you have ham?' 'No!' 'Do you have lamb chops?' 'No!' Maybe you have some sausages?' 'No, we don't!' Embittered, the old lady left the shop empty-handed. Then a butcher said to another: 'You have seen what an impressive memory she has!'.

The absurdity and the artificiality of the communist economic life:

> "Comrades, I had an extraordinary deal at COMECON (The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance). I sold a dog for 500.000 rubles!' 'Indeed, did they give 500.000 rubles for a dog? "Well, not exactly! They gave me two cats worth 250.000 rubles each instead!"

or

> Comrades! We proudly announce the results of the socialist contest at our gloves factory: The left-hand glove department won. They produced 160% more than the department for the right-hand gloves! Congratulations, comrades!.

One of the most well-known categories of jokes that circulated in all the Eastern Bloc was that of Radio Erevan, The jokes began in the same way with the same famous formula: "One listener asks…" The questions seemed innocent but the speaker's answer was provocative. The contrast between the apparent innocence of the listener's question and the unexpected speaker's answer produced irresistible laughter. Two examples: "Q.: 'What will happen if Sahara becomes communist? A.: 'They will immediately begin to import sand!" and, probably the best: "Q.: A listener asks if it is possible to build socialism in Switzerland? A.: 'Of course it's possible but it will be such a pity!'".

Some other jokes targeted the incompetence and corruption of the communist leaders. "One day, Brezhnev's mother visited him in Kremlin. 'How do you like my apartment? The decoration in pure golf!' The mother did not answer. 'How did you like my armored car?' The mother did not answer. 'How did you like my helicopter?' The mother did not answer. 'Why do you keep silent, mother?' asked Brezhnev. 'It's because I'm scared!' 'Why are you scared of?' 'Leonia, what if the Bolsheviks will come again to power and take everything from you?'".

There were an impressive number of Brezhnev jokes but probably the champion at that category was the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, undoubtedly the most hated among the leaders of the satellite countries.[33] Uneducated, unable to finish at least his shoemaker apprenticeship and make real shoes but just slippers, Ceaușescu managed to raise to the summit, the 'not even a shoemaker' "earned" his MA in Economics in a single afternoon. "One day, Leana (his wife) asked one of the maids: 'Where are the slippers that were near the secretary general's bed?' 'I threw them out. They were a ruin!' 'How awful! They were the secretary general's diploma work!'".

Inspired by Stalin Mao and Kim, Ceaușescu instituted an unprecedented cult of personality. "One early morning, he got out on the terrace of his preferred villa at 30 km from Bucharest and said: 'Good morning, sun!' A thundering voice answered: 'Good morning, comrade secretary¨ Startled, Ceaușescu asked Leana to come and see how the sun itself greeted him. The fifteen members of the Executive Political Committee were summoned for an emergency meeting at 11 am to witness the sun greeting the secretary general. It was decided then to call all the four hundred members of the Central Committee at 4 pm to watch. When they were all gathered, Ceaușescu said again 'Good morning, sun!' The thundering voice answered: 'F—k yourself, douchebag, I'm in the West now.

The more devastating political jokes did not hesitate to question the fundamentals of the communist ideology, "Q.: 'What is the difference between capitalism and socialism?' 'A.: 'In capitalism, man exploits man. In socialism is exactly the opposite!'" or "'Q.: 'What is the definition of the class struggle?' 'A.: 'It is the struggle of those who spent little time in the classroom against those who spent a lot!".

The comprehensive study of political jokes helps immensely in understanding the totalitarian mechanisms of coercion, co-opting, manufacturing obedience, conformity, submission, mass enthusiasm, personality cults, political violence, ideological fervor, institutionalized terror, and fear that characterized life under communism. No evocation of these terrible years will ever be complete without the joke that follows, a true gem that makes us understand the period better than many history

[33] Gabriela Glăvan, "The Life and Times of Ceaușescu Jokes", *Metacrtic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2019, https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2019.7.09.

books: "At the party meeting, all party members must speak. When it was Moritz's turn, he said: 'I agree with the opinion of comrade A, I agree with the opinion of comrade B, I agree with the opinion of comrade C.…' The secretary of the party organization said: 'Very good, comrade Moritz, you agree with the opinion of the comrades but what is your own opinion?' 'Of course, I have my own opinion but I don't agree with it!'".

## The Bards

At the beginning of 1960, a new technical invention was available on the Soviet market, the tape-recorder. The most looked for was the Czech model Tesla, an expensive item whose price was higher than the average salary. This invention made possible a specific form of counterculture. Called *magnitizdat*, from *magnitofon*, the Russian word for tape-recorder, it was the sound equivalent of the written *samizdat*. The recordings were by far easier to produce than the rock-on-bones. The tape-recorder effectively broke the monopoly of the vinyl discs Melodia and allowed the emergence of a special genre, *avtorskaia pesnia*, literally author's song; the nearest in the Western culture it would be what the French call *la chanson française*. "The central figure in *avtorskaia pesnia* is the author-performer, or bard, who composes and performs both lyrics and melody."[34] The new recording support assured an easy and relatively cheap circulation, independent of the regular circuits and from the eye of the censor.

Without a formal musical education, the bards were poor singers and guitarists. However, the listeners adored their syncretic production. Contrasting sharply with the solemnity of the official, mostly choral, Stalinist music, *avtorskaia pesnia* was intimist, more suitable to a private apartment than on a real stage. Among the most known bards, only Vladimir Vysotsky, a former actor, was a real stage performer and even he declared that "his songs were for his close friends."[35]

The importance of lyrics was tremendous. The texts, usually of good to very good poetic level, were also strikingly different from the pompousness of the usual Soviet song, *massovaia pesnia* (mass song) and also from

[34] Rachel Platonov, "Bad Singing: 'Avtorskaia pesnia' and the Aesthetics of Metacommunication", *Ulbandus Review*, Vol. 9, 2005, p. 87.

[35] Platonov, p. 105.

the vacuity and artificiality of the "light" entertainment music. Speaking of the lyrics of Bulat Okudzhava, one of the most famous bards, Vladimir Bukovsky asserted: "There wasn't a single false note of official patriotism in those songs but so much sincerity so much of our yearning and pain, that the authorities could not tolerate it."[36] There were no *partiinost* or *ideinost* in his work but a feeling of truthfulness that would have satisfy Pomerantsev's call for sincerity in writing. Okudzhava's texts did not attack directly the Soviet system. However, they were perceived as being subversive because they were so different. The absence of *ideinost* in his lyrics was so fresh, so novel, that the apolitical content of his verse had been perceived as politically subversive:

> Our own victories we were making and carrying them not in vain
> We acquired everything—and sturdy pier and the light…
> And all the same, it's a pity: sometimes the pedestals stand
> taller than our victories

As it was essentially distinct from socialist realism, his poetry was criticized as "naïve, anti-patriotic, pessimistic, and pacifistic."[37] Often targeted by *agitprop*, Okudzhava could not be broadcast on Radio Moscow until 1970. At that time, he enjoyed a tremendous reputation in the Soviet Union and Poland, where he was celebrated, then after in Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, and Hungary.

If Okudzhava's lyrics could very well be read as pure poetry, Vladimir Vysotsky"s work would lose a lot if one reads just the lyrics. The songs must be listened to; they are the most performative of the bards' creation. His raucous voice was unique. His lyrics were full of s la ng and thieves' jargon that shocked *kulturnyi* (cultured) ears, which were unaccustomed to hearing such profanities. Although banned by the censorship, his songs were extremely popular due to *magnitizdat*Aleksandr Galich's lyrics were much more provocative than those of Okudzhava. "I was a successful playwright, a successful scriptwriter, a successful Soviet lackey. And I understood that I couldn't do it anymore. That I needed, at last, to speak

[36] Bukovsky, op. cit.

[37] Danijela Lugaric Vukas, "Living vnye: The Example of Bulat Okudzhava's and Vladimir Vysotskii's avtorskaia pesnia", *Euxeinos*, Vol. 8, No. 25–26, 2018, p. 22.

with my full voice, to speak the truth."[38] From all the bards, Galich was the most radical. In his poem/song about Stalin (1972), he did not hesitate to call him Satan and "a bitch."[39] His criticism was not limited at the Stalinist period but targeted the communist system as such. Commenting Khrushchev's *Secret Report*, Galich wrote that: "again we believed! Again we, like sheep, joyfully bleated and rushed onto the green grass—which turned out to be a stinking swamp!"[40] His writings and music were censored and in 1971 he was expelled both from the Writers' Union and the Cinematographers' Union. In spite of the repression, his songs were extremely popular. Bukovsky wrote that the first question asked to a new inmate in Gulag was if he knew new Galich songs. The *zeks'* (abbreviation for "inmate") admiration for the bard was immense. "For us, Galich was nothing less than a Homer. Every song of his was an odyssey."[41]

[38] Quoted in Amy Garey, "Aleksandr Galich: Performance and the Politics of the Everyday", *Limina Journal for Historical and Critical Studies*, Vol. 17, 2011, p. 2.

[39] Karen Ryan, "The Devil You Know: Postmodern Reconsideration of Stalin", *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2003, pp. *91–92.*

[40] Amy Garey, op. cit., p. 3.

[41] Bukovsky, op. cit.

CHAPTER 6

# Picasso, the Most Celebrated Communist After Stalin and Mao Zedong

In 1940, Picasso returned from Royan to Paris, Why Picasso took the decision to stay in Paris under the Nazi Occupation is still one of the great non-elucidated mysteries of modern art. Many Picasso specialists avoided the question or gave embarrassed and unconvincing explanations. An anarchist sympathizer in his youth, Picasso accepted to be appointed Director of the famous Prado Museum by the Spanish republican government. Commissioned to create a monumental work for the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1937, Picasso painted *Guernica*, inspired by the savage bombardment of the city by the Nazi Condor Legion short time before. One of the artist's masterpieces, the work was acclaimed as the strongest artistic denunciation of the Nazi barbary. The same year, Picasso created another political work, a series of satirical etchings entitled *Dream and Lie of Franco*, ridiculing the *caudillo*. But Picasso was much more than just an artist with a leftist position, for many people in the world it was he who incarnated modern art. The Nazis included him in the infamous exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art). With such artistic and political credentials, Picasso was a very obvious target for the Gestapo. Why did he choose to stay, when he could have easily left for the United States? The American journalist Varian Fry, from The Emergency Rescue Committee, who helped many big names of the modernist movement to escape from the occupied France and find shelter in the United States, would have been delighted to have Picasso



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as top of his famous list. However, Picasso was not interested. He spent the war years working in his new studio rue Grands-Augustins. Curiously, the Nazis did not harm him although it would have been so easy and so tempting to grab him and send him to Buchenwald or worse. Except for some minor harassment, Picasso was relatively free, he was never arrested. He was forbidden to exhibit because he was listed as a degenerate artist but he was free to sell works in auctions or directly from his studio. Private galleries could buy and sell his work.

How could one explain he enjoyed such a status otherwise that he was protected? The name that was suggested more often was that of Arno Breker, the *Führer*'s preferred sculptor, and a friend of Jean Cocteau, who was also a friend of Picasso. Breker himself gave contradictory statements about. After giving details about an *in extremis* personal intervention to Gestapo chief SS *Gruppenführer* Heinrich Müller to save Picasso from an imminent arrest,[1] he denied having protected the artist. There was also suggested that protection could have come from Goebbels himself, worried about the international scandal which an arrest of Picasso would have inevitably triggered. The artist's behavior during the Occupation years was quite ambiguous. In spite of the crude exaggerations of hagiographers such as Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, who claimed in an interview that Picasso had been "not only courageous but resistant,"[2] the artist never engaged in overt Resistance actions as some of his friends did. Christian Zervos, the author of Picasso's *catalogue raisonné* and a friend of the artist, wrote to Alfred G. Barr, the first director of MoMA, asking him not to indulge in "nonexistent heroics," rejecting his statement that the artist had been a hero.[3]

While he had never been a collaborator, Picasso was extremely cautious. At the beginning of 1944, when it was clear that Germany lost the war, he accepted to create the frontispiece for Robert Desnos' collection of subversive poems *Contrée*. However, when he heard that Desnos had been arrested by the Gestapo, he immediately attempted to withdraw it and he maintained it only because of Desnos' wife YoKi's supplications. Moreover, Picasso refused to intervene in favor of his old friend

[1] "The Case Picasso, Hitler and Arno Breker", www.meaus.com/picasso.htm.

[2] Fabien Simode, "Laurence Bertrand Dorléac: 'Picasso a été non seulement courageux mais résistant'", *L'Oeil*, May 21, 2019.

[3] Frederic Spotts, *The Shameful Peace: How French Artists and Intellectuals Survived the Nazi Occupation*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 165.

Max Jacob, who died in the infamous transit camp Drancy but went to the burial of the Jewish artist Chaïm Soutine. At the same time, many German officers visited his studio and even the artist sold paintings to them.

Immediately after the liberation of Paris, when some of these facts could have brought him before a *Commité d'épuration*, Picasso took the card of the FCP, becoming instantly "the most celebrated communist after Stalin and Mao-Zedong." As a member of the FCP, Picasso became practically untouchable. Triumphantly, *L'Humanité* titled: "THE GREATEST AMONG TODAY LIVING PAINTERS, PICASSO adhered to the Party of the French Resistance"; it seems that Picasso tried to convince Braque to adhere to the FCP together with him but his efforts were unsuccessful.

Although clever, Picasso's move was shocking for the journalist Jean Galtier-Boissière who wrote angrily in his diary questioning the image of Picasso the communist composed by the PCF *agitprop*.

According to Galtier-Boisssiére,[4] Picasso's anti-Franco activity was limited at accepting the position of director of Prado without ever being present in Madrid to do the job, that the Gestapo was not responsible for the painter's absence in the Salons, where Picasso did not show for twenty years, and that it did not prevent Picasso to pile up daily in his favorite restaurant Le Catalan for 1000 francs per person.

As for Picasso the resistant, one should remind him of the not so glorious episode of the retired frontispice, a broad hint to Desnos' *Contrée*.

"The truth—wrote Galtier-Boissière—that all the artists know is that Picasso was panicked to lose his huge fortune. When he became communist, he took insurance … But the multimillionaire Picasso became a collectivist is a good subject of laugh in Montmartre or Montparnasse."[5]

To defend himself against the accusation of opportunism and reinforce his image, Picasso built a narrative in which his decision to become communist was presented as the result of a logical development of his career. Three weeks after he joined the FCP, Picasso wrote in a text for

[4] Jean Galtier-Boissière, *Mon journal depuis la Libération*, Paris: Libretto, 2016, entry for October 5, 1944, pp. 28–29.

[5] Galtier-Boissière, p. 29.

the New York leftist magazine *New Masses* that: "My joining the Communist Party was a logical step in my life, my work and gives them their meaning." Adapting quickly to the style of his new comrades, Picasso finished his text in a *Pravda*-lyrics mood: "I have become a Communist because our party strives more than any other to know and to build the world, to make more clearer thinkers, more free and more happy. I have become a Communist because the Communist were the bravest in France, in the Soviet Union…I have never felt more free, more complete then since I joined … The French Communist Party is a fatherland for me … I am again among my brothers."[6] If he read the text, Zhdanov must have been delighted, the French Communist Party, not the country France, was the new fatherland of Picasso. According to the Zhdanov's doctrine he was working at, the members of the communist parties were expected to side with the Soviet bloc, not with their own countries. Picasso's text would be also published in French in *L'Humanité*.[7] In the French version, Picasso emphasized even more the idea: "I joined the communist Party without any hesitation, for in the end I have been with it forever."

The FCPs protective shield functioned well. The not very glorious episodes of Picasso's behavior during the Occupation were "forgotten" and it was Picasso who was the president of the *Commité Directeur* of the *Front national des Arts*, the organization that was responsible for purging the artists who compromised themselves during the Occupation. His choice of staying in Paris was then presented by the communist propaganda as a proof of his heroism and was opposed to the choice to leave of other artists, who so-called "deserted."

To further improve his new communist status, Picasso changed his discourse and accepted the idea that all art is political. In an interview with Simone Téry pour *Les Lettres Françaises* entitled "Picasso n'est pas officier de l'armée française" (Picasso Is Not an Officer in the French Army)—a reference to the rejection by the Vichy government of his demand for naturalization of 1940, the artist declared in a style that Zhdanov would have liked: "What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who, if he is a painter, has only eyes, if he's a musician has only ears, if he's a poet has

[6] Pablo Picasso, "Why I Become a Communist", *New Masses*, Vol. LIII, No. 4, October 24, 1944, p. 5.

[7] Pablo Picasso, "Pourquoi j'ai adhéré au Parti communiste", *L'Humanité*, October 29, 1944.

a lyre in each chamber of his heart, or even, if he's a boxer, just muscles? On the contrary, he is at the same time a political being, constantly alert to the heart-rending, stirring or pleasant events of the world, taking his own complexion from them. How would it be possible to dissociate yourself from other men; by virtue of what ivory nonchalance should you distance yourself from the life which they so abundantly bring before you? No, painting is not made to decorate apartments. It is an instrument for offensive and defensive war against the enemy."[8]

In a lot of books and articles on Picasso one could read the story of the German officer who, after seeing a postal card reproducing *Guernica*, asked "It is you who did this?" "No,—answered Picasso—it's you!" Beyond the French tradition of the *bon mot*, the story evoked Picasso's courage. However, no one of those who told the story had been able to quote its source; so the most probable hypothesis is that the author of the story must have been Picasso himself. No witnesses. Nevertheless, in our opinion, the story is simply too good to be true. Under the Occupation, it would have been impossible for anyone to provoke a German officer in such a way and not to suffer immediate consequences. Or many asserted that Picasso was very concerned about his safety and it was not renowned for his bravery. So, there is a high probability that the scene never happened in reality.

The protection offered by the PCF had a price to pay. Shocked by Picasso's joining the party, his old friend André Breton, who severed his ties with communism at the beginning of the Great Terror, refused to shake his hand, when he returned to France in 1947. More, Breton would not include Picasso in the International Surrealist Exhibition at the Maeght Gallery in 1947. In a letter to the poet Benjamin Péret from August 14, 1946, the surrealist pope wrote that he would not see Picasso again because he joined the communists.[9]

For a decade, Picasso had a strange schizoid position in the communist movement. On the one hand he was Comrade Picasso, one of the most prestigious assets of the *agitprop*. Together with Aragon and Nobel Prize Laureate Frédéric Joliot-Curie, Picasso was the most precious of

[8] Simone Téry, "Picasso n'est pas officier de l'armée française", *Les Lettres Françaises*, mars 24, 1945, p. 5.

[9] Coates, p. 578.

the Three Musketeers, as this very select group was affectionately nicknamed.[10] The *New Yorker* correspondent to Paris Janet Flanner wrote: "The party used Picasso as it might have used an exotic golden pheasant, displayed him on its scarlet-hung platforms at its worker's meetings in the Velodrome d'Hiver … He was, without question, the biggest, most impressive and most illustrious propaganda feather in the cap of any communist party in Europe."[11] Picasso become communist influenced a lot the modernist *intelligentsia* of the future satellite countries to collaborate with the new regimes.[12] The example of Picasso was the pledge that communism was not compulsory only socialist realism and that freedom of creation could nevertheless possibly exist. For some left-wing critics, Picasso's art was a new synthesis between modernism and realism they called "intensified realism."[13] They imagined that this synthesis could fill the gap between the official Soviet style socialist realism and modernism. Accused of "hiding behind the name Picasso," they were promptly rebuked and told that "the formalist 'dislocation' of Picasso means nothing more than the obvious waste of talent."[14]

Picasso was more and more involved in the Soviet-controlled peace movement. He participated in the first congress of Intellectuals for Defense of Peace in Wroclaw, August 22–25, 1948, and the following. In Wroclaw, he could hear Zhdanov calling in his infamous speech Jean-Paul Sartre "a typist jackal, a hyena with a fountain pen," Picasso removed his earphones.[15] His own intervention, which he finished with a demand

[10] Gertje B. Utley, *Picasso: The Communist Years*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 8.

[11] Janet Flanner, *Men and Monuments*, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1957, p. 198.

[12] Piotr Bernatowicz, "Picasso Behind the Iron Curtain: From the History of the Post-war Reception of Pablo Picasso in East-Central Europe" in Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski, *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchanges in Communist Europe*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016, p. 151.

[13] Bernatowicz, pp. 152–154.

[14] Bernatowicz, p. 159.

[15] Dominique Dessanti, *Les Staliniens; une expérience politique 1944–56*, Paris: Marabout, 1975, p.172.

for a resolution in favor of his friend Pablo Neruda, was saluted with a standing ovation.[16]

When visiting Picasso's studio, Aragon saw a wonderful blackish lithograph Picasso made after a pigeon, a present of Matisse. In his childhood, Picasso drew a lot of pigeons, the bird was a recurrent theme in his creation. Immediately, Aragon sensed the connections that could be exploited between Picasso's image and the traditional symbolism of peace. A true political seismograph, the director of *Les Lettres Françaises* realized the formidable propaganda potential of the lithograph and used it for the poster for the Paris congress in 1949. Matisse's pigeon became *The Peace Dove*, the iconic image of the peace movement. Later, Picasso simplified the work rendering it more graphic and replaced the lithograph with a line drawing. In some versions, Picasso added some color. The *Peace Dove* was a huge success: the FCP use it not only for peace posters but reproduced it on almost everything; many people around the world know the image but ignore who was its author.

On the other hand, in the Soviet Union and the satellite countries he remained Picasso the decadent, the formalist, whose art has to be rejected. One of the most aggressive attacks was that of the Soviet art critic Vladimir Kemenov, who declared that the characteristic of the "imperialist bourgeois art" is its "anti-humanism." After criticizing Cézanne, Matisse, Braque, and Henry Moore, Kemenov chose Picasso for the most villain role: "his works are a maladive apology for capitalistic aesthetics that provokes the indignation of the simple people, if not the bourgeoisie. His pathology has created repugnant monstrosities. In his *Guernica*, he portrayed not Spaniards Republicans but monsters. He treads the path of cosmopolitanism, of empty geometric forms. His every canvas deforms man, his body, and his face."[17] At that time, Kemenov was the president of the VOKS, so one may consider that this was the official position of the Soviet government.

This dichotomy between Picasso the communist militant and anti-fascist fighter for peace and Picasso the decadent formalist was a highly debated problem for many ordinary members of communist parties over the world. In France, these tensions exploded in the famous scandal of

[16] Pierre Daix, "Le Congrès de la lucidité", *Les Lettres françaises*, Vol. 8, No. 223, September 2, 1948, p. 2.

[17] Quoted in Flanner, op. cit., p. 199.

Picasso's Stalin portrait. When Aragon learned about Stalin's death, he immediately commissioned Picasso a portrait of Stalin. It was the second time Aragon gave such a commission but the first time, for the seventieth anniversary of the *Vozhd*, Picasso drew a hand holding a glass and wrote *Staline, à ta samté* (Stalin, to your health).[18] For the second commission, Picasso drew an actual portrait but an unexpected one, a young Stalin, very different from the big-size photograph of a middle-aged Stalin reproduced on the first page of *L'Humanité* under the huge title *Mourning for all peoples*. Picasso's *Stalin* looked more as Stalin the banks robber for the party than as the usual image of father of people. *The* scandal had been immediate. Partly orchestrated by Auguste Lecoeur, secretary of the FCP who, together with Jacques Duclos replaced Maurice Thorez, for the time the secretary-general was in the Soviet Union for medical treatment, a very violent campaign accused Picasso of lese-Stalin. Dozens and dozens of letters from workers arrived at *Les Lettres françaises* and *L'Humanité*, which considered the drawing "despicable" and "ridicule" and attacked Picasso with proletarian wrath for disrespect and even for "insulting" Stalin. Under the leadership of Lecoeur, the secretariat of the PCF published a formal rebuke: "The Secretariat of the French Communist Party categorically repudiates the publication in *Les Lettres françaises* of 12 March of the portrait of great Stalin by Comrade Picasso. Without doubting the sentiments of the great artist Picasso, whose attachment to the working class cause is known by all, all the Secretariat of the French Communist Party regrets that Comrade Aragon, member of the Central Committee and director of *Les Lettres françaises*, who in fact fights for the development of a realist art, permitted this publication."[19]

Among the protest letters, a long text by André Fougeron, the FCP painter, who expressed his "sadness" that a great artist was unable to realize a drawing and suggested that it would have been better to reproduce a photograph or to have used a Soviet artist instead. Aragon was forced to publish his self-criticism in which he admitted the portrait was not "faithful to reality" and was a betrayal of worker's love for Stalin.

[18] Sarah Wilson, *Picasso/Marx and Socialist Realism in France*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013, pp. 136–137. For details, see also Annette Wiewiorka, "Picasso and Stalin" in *Picasso: Peace and Freedom*, Liverpool: Tate Publishing, 2010.

[19] Wilson, p. 194.

Elsa Triolet, Aragon's wife, was so affected by the scandal that threatened to commit suicide.[20] The international press reported the polemics. *The New York Times* titled "Picasso Rebuked by Reds." The most vicious was undoubtedly *Daily Mail*, which reproduced the drawing with the legend *Woman with a moustache*, a broad hint to the celebrated Marcel Duchamp's work, because they said that Stalin's smile in Picasso's drawing resembled that of Mona Lisa.[21]

Differently from Aragon, Picasso never recanted with the exception of a sarcastic answer to an interview, "When one sends a funeral wreath, the family customarily does not criticize your choice of flowers," Picasso wisely chose not to respond publicly to the accusations.

For André Breton, the Stalin portrait scandal gave him some "good time" and the opportunity to point out the differences between Picasso's art and the tenets of Soviet aesthetics, which was one more way to question the artist's decision to become a communist: "Everyone knows that Picasso's work, from the beginning till today has been the frantic negation of the so-called socialist realism. The only interest of the 'scandal' of this portrait is to reveal to anyone the incompatibility between art and the instructions of the police brigade that has the pretense of governing it."[22]

Many years after, Picasso's decision to join the FCP still inspired Dali, who famously said. "Picasso is Spanish. Me too. Picasso is a genius. Me too. Picasso is a communist. Me neither."

Without being willing, Picasso found himself implicated in the power struggle at the top of the FCP. The emergency return of Maurice Thorez from the Soviet Union calmed down the crisis and put an end to Lecoeur's ascension in the party. Sometime after, Lecoeur would be purged for *ouvrierisme* (workerism). However, the Stalin portrait affair would be quoted many times in the tense and intense discussions about the relation between the social engagement of the artist and the artistic language he had to use, which would develop after the *Vozhd*'s death in all the Eastern Bloc.[23]

[20] Dessanti, p. 167.

[21] Coates, p. 583.

[22] André Breton, *Paris-Presse*, March 23, 1953.

[23] Eleonory Gilburg, "Picasso in Thaw Culture", *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, Vol. 47, No. 1–2, January–June 2006.


CHAPTER 7

# Mao's Cultural Revolution

The 20th CPSU Congress in February 1956 provoked Mao's ire and stirred anxious emotions among the Chinese communist elite. Khrushchev's self-limited yet real de-Stalinization was Mao's nightmare. The Soviet Thaw was, in his evaluation, a bourgeois restoration, the abandon of the genuine Leninist heritage. The origins of the Sino-Soviet divorce were therefore political and, to a decisive extent, ideological. If Khrushchev was the arch-renegade, who wanted to restore capitalism, Mao could be portrayed and worshiped as a crusader combating the revisionist infidels.

The so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution started in May 1966, ten years after Khrushchev's anti-Stalin bombshell, and it was completely stopped only by Mao Zedong's death in 1976.[1] It was neither proletarian nor cultural. However, it was definitely anti-intellectual. The terrible upheaval had been called "cultural revolution" because the turmoil began with the purge of the cultural world.[2] The target was the *intelligentsia* as a whole, suspected of bourgeois leanings, that is independent thinking. So, a better name would have been "cultural **in**volution."

[1] For a detailed account, see Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.

[2] François Fejtö, "La pensée de Mao et la révolution culturelle", *Esprit*, No. 414, June 1972, p. 950.



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The hunt for the depositaries of knowledge was open. Students were encouraged to humiliate their professors; workers were incited to criticize their engineers, peasants to contradict their agronomists, low-rank civil servants to contest their hierarchy. Mao's son-in-law Yao Wenyuan stated: "The working class' intellectual level is higher than that of the intellectuals."[3]

The move was unprecedented in Chinese history in which knowledge had always been appreciated and the *sensei* (master) venerated as a spiritual father. The traditional Chinese meritocracy had to be abandoned because it creates social differences. Only in a society in which differences incompetence would not count, it would be possible to implement actual equality. Flattering the "masses," Mao wanted to make clear that no knowledge could be opposed to ideology, which for him meant his own will. Meritocracy had to be replaced by total allegiance to his thinking. He wanted absolute power. There would be only one supreme *sensei*, HIM.

In fact it was a mass political explosion triggered and coordinated by Chairman Mao and his clique, including Madame Mao (Chang Chen), Marshal Lin Biao, and secret police chief and veteran ideologue, Kang Shen, in their struggle to emasculate all Mao's former critics at the top, among whom the most prominent were the mayor and leader of the Beijing party organization, Peng Chen, the party's general secretary Deng Xiaoping, and president of the Chinese People's Republic, Liu Shaochi, who was Mao long-time comrade.. It allowed Mao Zedong and his close associates to organize the complete reshuffle of the party elite, huge purges, and a renewal of the utopian impetus allegedly abandoned by those whom Mao branded as "bourgeois liberals."

In post-Mao China, the memory of the Great Helmsman and his genocidal exploits has been carefully administered The archives, luckily, have outlived the decisions issued by the Ministry of Truth. It is now clear who Mao relied upon and how the ostensibly "from below" uprising was conducted by Mao and the army top brass. In other words, it was a military rebellion against the sacrosanct communist Party "leading role." It was, in a way, Red Bonapartism, with the Supreme Leader running the show.

The resolution which unleashed the storm lambasted the "counter-revolutionary" repertoire at the Beijing Opera. Mao's closest associate

[3] Qoted in Fejtö, op. cit. p. 952.

Lin Biao introduced the *Little Red Book*, a collection of quotations from the "Great Helmsman's" writings. Tens of millions of copies reached the increasingly active Red Guards; these formed a quasi-anarchic youth movement dedicated to carry out the God-like Leader's orders. Political somnambulism mixed with adolescent rebellion and millenarian delusions. The Red Guards were true believers; entranced zealots convinced that all the old culture was not only worthless but truly dangerous.

On May 7 1966, Mao wrote the *7 May Directive*, which signaled the beginning of the upheaval. On May 28, the Cultural Revolution Group was established and replaced the party's Politburo as the center of power. The whole propaganda machine was set in high gear to create the image of a heroic, invincible, and infallible Leader. To demonstrate his exceptional physical prowess, on July 16 1966: Mao swam in the Yangtze and the pictures of the exploit became iconic in China and abroad among the pro-Mao circlers. On August 1, Mao wrote a letter in support of the Red Guards. On August 18 1966, Mao was acclaimed by over a million Red Guards in Tiananmen Square. The events accelerate; the struggle at the top coincides with the purges in schools, universities, practically in all institutions. Mao's cult reached its pinnacle in adulatory celebrations and persecution pedagogical rituals against those *regarded* as enemies. No one was safe; "High-ranking officials were subjected to public denunciations, ritual humiliations, and severe physical abuse."[4] No one knows the exact number of victims.[5]

Calls for rejuvenation were accompanied by huge urges. In spite of the apparent anarchy, Mao enjoyed absolute power. He and his coterie were the strategists of that explosion. Being "old" became a political sin. Being young allowed spectacular advances on the social ladder. This was perhaps one of the reasons so many Western intellectuals and students fell in love with the rudimentary Marxism of the *Red Book*. In May 1968, Paris students were chanting: "Marx, Mao, Marcuse." The latter was the most radical of the Frankfurt School theorists and a vocal supporter of anti-capitalist revolt.[6]

[4] "Mao and the Cultural Revolution in China", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Spring 2008, p. 97.

[5] Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History*, London: Bloomsbury Press, 2017.

[6] Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Everyone tried to satisfy the Leader's insatiable appetite for glory. The Great Helmsman was dreaming to replace Stalin as the charismatic leader of world peoples and to make Beijing the new center of the international revolutionary movement. His new revolution had to stop the Soviet "revisionism." Mao's agenda included three elements: First, to consolidate his unquestionable supremacy within the party elite; Two, to smash any efforts at economic and political liberalization and maintain the Leninist ethos alive; Third, to get rid of all bourgeois influences, destroy the remnants of "capitalist culture," in all spheres of the "superstructure." The ultimate goal was to fulfill the anthropologic revolution, using the mass revolutionary "practice" (a term Mao cherished). The New Man will therefore create a New Culture, absolutely opposed to the obsolete and decaying bourgeois values and ideas.

*Triumph of the Will*, Mao-style: With its exaltation of human will and contempt for moderation, Maoism carried Marxist utopianism to an extreme. For ten years, Red China suffered the effects of Mao's obsession with revolutionary purity. Such purity meant permanent purges. The Cultural Revolution meant an onslaught on all established tenets, denounced as decrepit, and an invitation to a complete repudiation of the abhorred "bourgeois culture" and its vestiges. Its admirers were pilloried as right-wing "deviators." For Mao and the Maoist zealots, society must be continuously mobilized, forced out of any relaxation and torpor: "One must create a revolutionary war situation. … Precisely, truth is born due to [quarrels] – blade against blade." As historian Julia Lovell noticed: "Mao's love of rebellion fed also into his passionate belief in voluntarism: that as long as you believed you could do something, you could accomplish it–regardless of material obstacles."[7] The New Man defined the New Culture and the New Culture determined the New Man. This was Mao's dialectics of rebellion that so many Western leftists rushed into embracing. Mao's irresponsible behests were music to the years of the Paris-educated Khmer Rouge fanatics. Mass murder is justified when the issue is the salvation of the mythologized revolution.

*Quotations from Chairman Mao-Zedong*, colloquially known as "Mao's *Little Red Book*," features over 200 quotations from Mao Zedong, embodying key tenets of Mao Zedong Thought. The text itself was not a project of Mao's personally. Marshal Lin Biao, Mao's heir to the Party

[7] Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History*, New York: Vintage Books, 2019, p. 56.

throne, was responsible for the creation and publication of the *Little Red Book*. Lin Biao played a key role in developing the cult of Mao, and prior to compiling Mao's quotes into the *Little Red Book*, Lin Biao had "incorporated the study of Maoist texts to daily drill and encouraged the emulation of moral exemplars" within the Chinese military. Lin Biao then streamlined the military's study of Mao via the *Little Red Book*, publishing it for the military in 1964. The book was to be issued, "to every soldier in the whole army, just as we issue weapons." Once the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, the *Little Red Book* was published for the general public as well. The book's mass publication in China ideologically armed the public with Mao Zedong Thought, inspiring China's youth to rebel and restore Mao to the political spotlight after the catastrophic failures of the Great Leap Forward.

Lin Biao's introduction to the *Little Red Book* likened Mao Zedong Thought to a "spiritual atom bomb of infinite power." As such, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* would not only be an ideological weapon in the arsenal of Chinese youth fighting for the Cultural Revolution, but the fallout of that atomic bomb would cause reverberations in the Western leftist movements of the 1960s. Mao's doctrine of "People's War" was integral to the *Little Red Book*, and it stressed that the most important component of any war or revolutionary movement is not money or guns, but the people themselves.[8] The *Little Red Book* and Mao Zedong Thought also stressed the importance and justification of rebellion. Mao said'It was right to rebel'; that 'young people, full of vigor and vitality, are … like the sun at eight or nine in the morning … The world belongs to you'[9] (Lovell 638–639). These two lessons, that anyone is able to successfully rebel and that people should rebel, inspired revolutionary movements across the world.

The Cultural Revolution and the *Little Red Book* occurred at a particular epoch in Western history that made Mao Zedong Thought ripe for cooption by Western revolutionaries. The counterculture movements of Western Europe and the United States, as well as the US Civil Rights Movement, demonstrated the ire that Westerners had toward existing

[8] Alexander C. Cook, *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 9.

[9] Julia Lovell, "The Cultural Revolution and Its Legacies in International Perspective", *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 227, September 2016, pp. 638–639. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000722.

paradigms of capitalism, bureaucracy, racism, and imperialism, and the Cultural Revolution and the lessons of Mao Zedong Thought from the *Little Red Book* validated these attitudes. As a scholar of modern China Julia Lovell noted, "Within Europe, Cultural Revolution Maoism galvanized student protest, nurtured feminist and gay rights activism, and legitimized urban guerrilla terrorism. In the United States, meanwhile, it bolstered a broad program of anti-racist civil rights campaigns and narrow Marxist-Leninist party-building" Furthermore, the Sino-Soviet Split, and Mao's rhetoric aligning China with the Third World, likely made Mao Zedong Thought a more appealing alternative to Soviet Marxist–Leninism for those in the West who were disillusioned with the Soviet system.

Marshal Lin Biao died in a suspicious plane crash on September 13, 1971 while trying to flee China after being labeled a traitor to the Party. Biao's death came as a shock to many, such as Chinese author Yu Ruxin, who said, "We treated Mao as a godlike figure. Sept. 13 shattered that."[10] Despite this disillusionment, Mao Zedong Thought and the *Little Red Book* would continue to be a vehicle for expressing and justifying Western counterculture revolutionary movements and discontentment with society, with more violent and organized Western revolutionary movements, such as the West German RAF and the Italian Red Brigades, relying on the *Little Red Book* as a guide going into the 1970s.[11]

[10] Chris Buckley, "Rescuing China's Muzzled Past. One Footnote at a Time", *The New York Times*, July 25, 2021.

[11] Lowell, op. cit, p. 644.

CHAPTER 8

# The Che Image

Ernesto Rafael Guevara de la Serna (1928–1967), known as "El Che" or simply as "Che," was an Argentine revolutionary militant and an influential communist thinker, one of the most celebrated revolutionary of the twentieth century. He joined Fidel Castro's guerrilla uprising and became one of the top Cuban leaders after the takeover in January 1959. As a member of the top elite, *Comandante* Guevara was entrusted with extremely significant positions: Minister of Industry in charge of the country's adoption of the Soviet-style command economy model and supervisor of the newly formed secret police. For Guevara, the revolution was a permanent effort, a ceaseless effort to change the world and redefine one's own identity. He was enamored with the myth of the New Man and championed his own version of revolutionary humanism. In Guevara's fervid imagination, the guerrillero was endowed with almost saintly attributes: Selflessness, generosity, boundless courage, sacrificial commitment to the communist cause.

Unlike other Marxist-Leninists, Guevara did not embrace Lenin's theory of the "vanguard party" and located the ultimate locus of power in the "foco guerrillero," a nucleus of heroic combatants whose struggle was supposed to awaken the revolutionary potential of the otherwise dormant masses. Disillusioned with what deplored as the bureaucratization of Cuban socialism, Che left Cuba in 1965 in a search for new revolutionary adventures. He ended up in the Bolivian Andes, together



R. Stern and V. Tismaneanu, *Communism and Culture*,
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with a small band of dedicated followers. In his last letter to his children, Che wrote: "Grow up as good revolutionaries. Study hard so that you will have command of the techniques that permit the domination of nature. Remember that the revolution is what is most important and that one of us, alone, is worth nothing. Above all, always remain capable of feeling deeply whatever injustice is committed against anyone in any part of the world. This is the finest quality of a revolutionary."[1]

Tortured and mutilated, Che passed away on October 7, 1967, almost fifty years after the Bolshevik takeover and the birth of Lenin's state. He was enshrined in the global revolutionary pantheon as a martyr of the faith, a beacon of light in somber times, an embodiment of absolute purity. One could say that Che dead rendered even more services to the revolution than when he was living. Fidel used the same method as Stalin's instrumentalization of the cult of Lenin. Che became the supreme model for the future generations. All Cuban students had to begin their school day by singing: "We will be like Che!" The *Comandante* became the embodiment of all totalitarian regimes dream, the creation of the New Man. The Castro regime and its intellectual worshippers sacralized the Guevara myth into a revolutionary icon. What could be more telling for a revolutionary to be than the example of a man who was able to abandon a comfortable position to fight for the revolution and died as a martyr? Che was then the new world revolutionary Hero for a large part of the Left. Che was the communist Robin Hood of the century. Songs, paintings, movies, theater plays enhanced the hagiographic processions. *La vida y la muerte del Comandante* Guevara (The Life and Death of *Comandante* Che Guevara) were used to impose a pedagogy of complete submission to the revolutionary postulates. Ironically, in the summer of 2021, while we were completing this book, thousands of Cubans replaced Guevara's battle cry *Patria o Muerte* (Fatherland or Death) with banners quoting an underground dissident rap song: *Patry y Vida* (Fatherland and Life). In the meantime, the truth about Guevara's role in the Cuban secret police contributed to the growing disenchantment with his cultic treatment. Detailed accounts described a sanguinary person, who liked to participate to mock and, unfortunately, many real executions, who killed and tortured with his own hand and who was responsible for the infamous Cuban "reeducation" camps, the first being Guanahacabibes at the

[1] Quoted in "In Memoriam and Struggle: Che Guevara", *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Autumn 1987, p. 419.

beginning of 1960. Guevara was the chief of the *Comisión Depuradora*, a special military court that sentenced many to death after summary trials.[2]

Che Guevara was photographed many times and by many well-known photographers but there is an image of Che that was a capital element for the genesis of the myth, This image has a life of its own that is not limited to the life of the *Comandante* himself. Arguably, it is the most reproduced photograph in the world. Many people could identify Che Guevara but much more are familiar with the image without being able to recognize Che.

The author of the image was the Cuban photographer Alberto Korda (name at birth: Alberto Diaz Gutierez).

It is interesting that one of the most celebrated portraits in the world, surely more celebrated than Mona Lisa, was not at all conceived as a portrait at all but it became a portrait only *post factum*.

On March 4 1960, there was the sabotage of the French ship *La Coubre*. The ship had come from Antwerp with a load of Belgian weapons and 76 tons of ammunition. Nobody knows precisely the toll of victims but the estimation mentioned more than a hundred dead and hundreds of wounded. It seems the authors were counter-revolutionaries combined with the CIA, although the agency never admitted it was their operation. It seems also that Che Guevara, who was a doctor, gave personally medical attention to the injured.

On March 6, the victims were given a state funeral. All the Cuban revolutionary elite were there: the *lider maximo*, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Minister of Industry and President of the Central Bank, Osvaldo Dorticos, the President of the Republic, and Castro's brother Raúl were present. There were also Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who were visiting Cuba.[3] In what had been possibly his shortest speech, only two hours, Castro gave the funeral oration. The legend says it was there were famous Cuban revolution slogans *Patria o Muerte* and *Venceremos* (We will defeat them) were used for the first time,

Working for the newspaper *La Revolución*, Korda photographed the leadership trying to have Castro and Sartre together. The Che photograph was not published. Years after, Feltrinelli was visiting Korda in La

[2] Alvaro Vargas Llosa, *The Che Guevara Myth and the Future of Liberty*, Kindle Edition, Oakland, CA: The Independent Institute, 2005.

[3] William Rowlandson, *Sartre in Cuba—Cuba in Sartre*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Havana and could see his contact sheets. Captivated by Che's image, the Italian publisher asked Korda to re-frame extracting Guevara's face from the picture and make a separate print. This is how a cropped reportage photograph became the most famous portrait in the world.

When Guevara's death had been announced, Feltrinelli used the photograph to produce a poster he printed in a million copies. The image was also reproduced on the cover of the volume of Guevara's texts,

In Cuba, the image was used for Che Guevara's memorial service, when transformed into a giant poster on the front of the Ministry of the Interior in Plaza de la Revolución. It was thee that the photograph got an official legend: *Guerrillero heroico*. Expressing his wish that the future generations should be like Che, Castro officially inaugurated the beginning of the cult. A revolutionary died, a revolutionary martyr was born. Sartre declared that Che "was the most complete human being of the century."

Many Western Leftists found a new icon to worship at. The image was everywhere. It contributed to the prestige and celebrity of Che Guevara at least as much as his revolutionary activities. His untimely death also; the handsome photogenic guerrillero became the modern romantic hero. Anyhow, in 1968 the Che Image was so renowned that Andy Warhol included it in his famous silkscreen series, together with J.F. Kennedy, Mao Zedong, Marylyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley.

According to Korda, he never touched any royalties for the photograph. Others maintained he had been paid two hundred dollars. Anyhow, this was nothing in comparison with the many millions won by Feltrinelli, who was the great profiteer. His keen eye saw immediately the potential of the image, which he perfectly marketed. Nevertheless, in 1972 he was found dead in an explosion near an electric pylon. Emphasizing Feltrinelli's deeper and deeper involvement in the extreme left terrorist activities, the official version was that he died in a "terrorist work accident" in an unsuccessful attempt to blow the pylon. In other versions, his suspicious death was attributed to a vast range from the KGB to the Italian fascists.

What was the cause of the image's success? Of course, the sociopolitical context, the second part of the 1960s, when the anti-Vietnam war, protest, the human rights movement, the radical students from 1968, and other revolutionary movements were booming. Some cynics could say Che died at the right moment. The success was particularly impressive in the Third World, in which Che was extremely popular after his famous Algiers speech that criticized the lack of solidarity of the Eastern

Bloc toward the emergent countries. In the 1970s and the 1980s, Che's image was emblematic for the Columbian FARC, the Mexican Zapatistas, the Peruvian *Sendero Luminoso* (The Shining Path), different Palestinian terror groups, the Corsican Liberation Front, the Italian *Brigade Rosse*, and the German *rote Armee Fraktion*.

A second reason for the image's success was the porosity of the iconography. With his long hair, beard, and beret like a black hallo around his head, Che Guevara resembled Christ. In many Cuban houses, the Che photograph was put near the image of Christ. Especially when compared with Freddy Aborta's images of Che's body on a table, Korda's image shows a transcendent Che who, like Christ, defeated death "Che is not dead, Che is alive!"[4]

Significantly, the fall of communism did not sensibly diminish the image success story. It is still a familiar presence at the *souvenirs* stands all over the world; one could see it on mugs, on scarves, on boxes, on panties, on briefs, on posters, on badges, on wallets, on purses, on key chains, on caps and, of course, on tee-shirts. Semantically, however, the image is now completely modified. For the huge majority of the buyers, the image completely lost its revolutionary content. If in the 1980s Elena Bonner could see the persistence of Che Guevara's image as proof that the attraction for totalitarian regimes, nowadays buying a C*he* Guevara tee-shirt is usually no longer an ideological option. Many of the bearers, naturally outside Cuba, ignore not only Che's story but even his name. They are not aware they wear on their chests the image of the Cuban equivalent of Himmler. The revolutionary Che became a capitalist commodity.

[4] Verusrhka Alvizuri, "Chevolución, Chesucristo: historia de un icono en dos clichés", *Caravelle*, Vol. 98, 2012, https://journals.openedition.org/caravelle/1202#tocto1n4. https://doi.org/10.4000/caravelle.1202.

CHAPTER 9

# Epilog: What Remains? Of Dreams, Passions, and Ashes

Communism has his relics. The celebrated Marxist philosopher, literary theorist, and cultural critic Georg Lukács, born in April of 1885, died fifty years ago on June 4, 1971. His first political job, in 1919, was People's Commissar for Culture in the Hungarian Soviet Republic. His last—in November of 1956, during the Hungarian Revolution—was Minister of Culture in the second Imre Nagy government. His destiny was emblematic.

As college students in Romania, the authors of this book had heard a lot about the Hungarian philosopher's fascinating intellectual trajectory. We both benefited from long discussions with literary historian and philosopher Nicolae Tertulian (1929–2019), one of the foremost international Lukács scholars.

We were enthralled by ideas like reification and alienation. We understood why Grigory Znoviev—flaming Bolshevik, Lenin's close friend, and the first chairman of the Third International, the Comintern—had denounced it as seditious, and why the French-Greek Heideggerian Marxist philosopher Kostas Axelos, in his preface to the volume, called it "le livre maudit du marxisme," the "accursed book of Marxism." (Lukács was in good company in being indicted by Zinoviev, who dismissed Karl Korsch, the German revolutionary intellectual and author of the path-breaking 1970 *Marxismus und Philosophie*, as a "Marxist professor.")



R. Stern and V. Tismaneanu, *Communism and Culture*,
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Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Lucien Goldmann were fascinated by Lukács' daring philosophical challenge to an increasingly stultified Soviet Marxism. Years later, in his memoir *The Autobiography* of *Federico Sánchez* (1977), Jorge Semprún told of the haunting moments in Buchenwald when he recalled passages from Lukács' early essay; he knew it *by heart*. He compared Lukács ex plorations of dialectics to the Russian émigré philosopher Alexandre Kojève's illuminating and immensely influential lectures on Hegel at the Collège de France in 1939. (Kojève died on June 4, 1968, three years to the day before Lukács passed.)

The mature Lukács, in contrast, was upset, even outraged, by the efforts to resurrect his early masterpiece. He thought that concepts like bureaucratic alienation, subjectivity, strategy, and tactics needed to be historically grounded. In an interview years later with an Italian journal, he insisted that in the politically decisive struggle between Stalin and Trotsky, history vindicated Stalin, despite the barbaric methods he used against real and imagined opposition.

There were two generations of Lukács disciples in Hungary: First were those in the Budapest School of Critical Marxism, led by Ágnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér. Then came the "Lukács Kindergarten," including the political philosophers György Bence and János Kis. The former disciples moved away from Marxism and were a strong intellectual influence on the then-young dissident lawyer Viktor Orbán, who became a highly regarded liberal thinker, a leader of the Democratic Opposition, and, eventually, chairman of the Free Democrats. Bence died in 2006, Heller in 2019. Kis still teaches political philosophy at the Central European University in Vienna. Orbán is the xenophobic, authoritarian prime minister of Hungary who forced the effective closure of the Lukács Archives in Budapest. The Central European University has largely moved to Austria.

Reading *History and Class Conscience* was a shared formative experience for a wide range of thinkers. Why were we so interested in Lukács? Maybe it was because of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* (1924), in which the Jesuit Leo Naphta was inspired by Lukács, the Jewish-Hungarian intellectual who became one of the world's top Mann experts. Yet the later Lukács jettisoned most of his early pathos and remained an unrepentant Bolshevik until his death.

He described his peers in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, the thinkers whose Institute for Social Research was shut down in Germany by the Nazis, as inhabitants of the Grand Hotel Abyss, something like the Grand Budapest Hotel in the Wes Anderson film. The Hotel Abyss,

wrote Lukács, was "equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity." But the Frankfurt critical theorists did not renounce independent thinking in favor of an unswerving, morally blind partisanship. Unlike the Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch and the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, they never wrote paeans to Stalin's USSR.

Our interpretation of Lukács is close to that of Leszek Kołakowski, who was unsparing in his criticism of Lukács' lifelong dialectical fervor. When old Lukács wrote that the worst form of socialism was preferable to the best kind of capitalism, Kołakowski responded, "The advantages of Albanian socialism over Swedish capitalism are self-evident." The sarcasm was justified.

At a conference in Romania in 1991, one of us (VT) asked Heller how she explained Lukács' enduring, unwavering Bolshevism. She answered that when the neo-Kantian Lukács, once described by Max Weber as the "hope of German social philosophy," chose "Marxism, in its Leninist incarnation, as his Weltanschauung," he "chose himself as a Leninist." That is, he chose an identity; the choice was existential. Lukács saw Sovietism, all of its "mistakes" notwithstanding, as the only alternative to capitalist dehumanization. Elaborating, Lukács quoted Émile Zola's statement in defense of Captain Dreyfus: "La vérité est en marche et rien ne l'arrêtera." (Truth is on the march, and nothing will stop it.)

That is what remains of Lukács, Hegelian-Marxist eschatology, an endeavor paradigmatic for the topic of our book: a frantic sense of historical inevitability, a revolutionary chiliasm unencumbered by tragic warnings of reality, a romantic cult of will, and a belief that every defeat contains the promise of future triumphs. Lukács was convinced that the Old Mole, the revolutionary spirit, would keep digging; and, one day, all the suffering and sorrow would come to a happy end. He epitomized the incandescent passion to build the City of God on earth, the Kingdom of Freedom announced by Karl Marx—and by the mystical political theologian Naphta in a Swiss tuberculosis sanatorium on the eve of the horrors of World War I.

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# Index





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