

THE POLITICS OF CULTURE IN THE U.S.S.R.:

Art and The Soviet Government

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A commissar with only one leg, one arm, and one eye wanted his portrait painted. A Soviet painter painted him with one leg, one arm, and one eye — and was shot for bourgeois naturalism. A second Soviet painter painted the commissar with two legs, two arms, and two eyes and was shot for reactionary idealism. A third Soviet artist posed the commissar in profile, showing the good leg, good arm, and good eye and was given a medal for socialist realism.

Aline E. Saarinen, "U.S. Art for Moscow," *The New York Times*, June 14, 1959, p. 9.

In the Soviet Union art and politics are inseparable. Professor Ernst J. Simmons, an expert in Russian literature, who attempted without success to negotiate library and educational exchanges with Soviet officials in 1947, noted that "culture in the Soviet Union is political, and there is a direct correlation between all cultural manifestations and Soviet domestic and international politics. In short, the determination of cultural policies rests entirely with the government."¹ Artistic aesthetics and hence style are dictated by the exigencies and purposes of politics.

In general terms, government policy has dictated three basic styles of twentieth century Russian art, two inspired by creative trends from abroad and the third in accord with government condemnation of Western artistic values.² The first phase was a continuation of nineteenth century trends. Iconography, adopted from the Byzantine culture, was promoted by the state to inspire the masses. Thus the residences of the Tsar and the homes of most Russian families were filled with icons. The Soviet state has utilized this traditional devotion of the populace to icons and has mass-produced iconographic representations of Soviet citizens. The likeness of Lenin, in particular, is found in the homes of Soviet citizens in the position formerly reserved for a patron

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1. Ernest J. Simmons, "Negotiating on Cultural Exchanges, 1947," in *Negotiation with the Russians*, ed. by Raymond Dennett and Joseph E. Johnson (Boston: The World Peace Foundation, 1951), p. 268.

2. Nina Juviler, "Forbidden Fruit," *Problems of Communism*, XI, Number 3 (May/June, 1962), p. 42.

saint or other beloved religious figure — a symbol of the changes which Russia has undergone.

The second phase of twentieth century Russian art may be described as one of experimentation, when artists such as Mikhail Larionov and Kasimir Malevich built upon western influences and went far beyond the then avant-garde in western, particularly French, art. These Russian works were, by and large, for the more privileged elite who could understand and appreciate the nonrepresentational art. This elite had many members who had traveled or studied in Western Europe or were otherwise exposed to western ideas.

The third phase of Russian art of this century, socialist realist (or Soviet realist, as it has sometimes been labeled) has been the prescribed Soviet art style since approximately 1930.³ Official policy dictates that artists must depict socialist realism as interpreted by the Government. The workers are to be shown as glad that they are able to toil for the good of the socialist homeland. The leaders of the socialist state are to be glorified. "All portrayals must be aggressively optimistic; since the 'victory' of the proletariat has been achieved, 'negative pessimism' is not permissible."⁴

The objective of official policy is the use of art to educate the masses. Socialist artists are informed of the correct manner in which to further their efforts to reach the masses by statements such as this 1934 pronouncement by Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's cultural spokesman, at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers:

Artists must know life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, to depict it not in a dead, scholarly way, not simply as 'objective reality', but to depict reality in its revolutionary development.

In addition to this, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remolding and education of the working people in the spirit of socialism.⁵

Ideology and Art

As Yuri A. Pismenny states in his monograph for the Institute for the Study of the U.S.S.R., "There is no other sector of Soviet life in which

3. Camilla Gray, whose *The Russian Experiment in Art* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1970) is the leading text on Russian avant-garde art dates the end of the period at about 1922. George Costakis, the preeminent collector of Russian avant-garde art, dated the end of the avant-garde period as 1926 or 1927 in a personal interview with the author on November 16, 1973. Although 1930 is a somewhat arbitrary date for the commencement of socialist realism, it represents the year by which the Soviet Government had begun systematically to introduce socialist realist dicta in the arts.

4. Jacob Landy, "Soviet Painting and 'Socialist Realism', *Problems of Communism*, II Number 3/4 (March/April 1953), p. 20.

5. Andrei A. Zhdanov, "Official Speech of Greeting from the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Soviet Government to the First Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow, August 17, 1934," *Essays on Literature, Philosophy, and Music* (New York: International Publishers, 1950).

Party policy has been so inconsistent as in the arts."⁶ Since Karl Marx did not construct a conclusive theory on the state and art, it has been the interests of the Soviet state which have determined Soviet cultural policy. Though Marx had few aesthetic concerns, he did suggest the existence of a linkage between art and society:

The development in all aspects of social reality is determined, in the final analysis, by the self-development of material production.... Art, like law or the state, for example, has no independent history, i.e., outside the brains of ideologists. In reality, literature and art are conditioned by the entire historical development of society.⁷

While Marx did establish the rudimentary bond between art and the state which it was to serve, it was his associate Frederick Engels who expounded more specifically on the style to which the art would conform. Engels found realistic representation to be of greatest service to the state. He noted that "realism implies beside truth of detail the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances."⁸ Engels' reference to typical characters and typical circumstances would be echoed in later socialist thought on the arts.

Like Marx and Engels, Lenin left no formal theory of art. Much of his thought on art and the role it should play in a communist society are found in the records of conversations with the Soviet leader kept by Clara Zetkin, a German revolutionary and devoted Leninist. According to Zetkin's *My Recollections of Lenin*, the Soviet leader offered the following discourse on art:

...our opinion on art is not the important thing. Nor is it much consequence what art means to a few hundred or even thousand out of a population counted by millions. Art belongs to the people. Its roots should be deeply implanted in the very thick of the labouring masses. It should be understood and loved by these masses. It must unite and elevate their feelings, thoughts and will. It must stir to activity and develop the art instincts within them. Should we serve exquisite sweet cake to a small minority while the worker and peasant masses are in need of black bread?⁹

This statement, made after Lenin assumed power in the Soviet Union, reveals two areas of conflict. First, what is art for the masses? Does this mean that only that art of which a certain percentage of the population or a certain percentage of the workers and peasants approves is truly art? How must it "elevate" them? Emotionally? Intellectually? Secondly, to what extent should party control extend over the arts? Is it

6. Yuri A. Pismenny, "Lenin and the Arts," Institute for the Study of the U.S.S.R. (Munich), April 28, 1970, p. 2.

7. Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Karl Marx*, Trans. by Ralph B. Winn, ed. by Angel Flores (New York: Critics Group, 1938), p. 60.

8. Frederick Engels, Letter to Margaret Harness, April 1888, quoted in Landy, p. 18.

9. Clara Zetkin, *My Recollections of Lenin* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), pp. 19-20.

up to the people to decide what penetrates to their deepest roots? How can the party determine these nonquantifiable factors? Shall there be only artistic black bread and nothing else to provide variety to the aesthetic palate? Lenin continued:

In a society based on private property the artist produces for the market, needs customers. Our revolution freed artists from the yoke of these extremely prosaic conditions. It turned the state into their defender and client providing them with orders. Every artist, and everyone who considers himself such, has the right to create freely, to follow his ideal regardless of everything.

But then, we are communists and ought not stand idly by and give chaos free rein to develop. We should steer this process according to a worked-out plan and must shape its results.¹⁰

This statement displays both tendencies which Lenin, untutored in aesthetics, professed before he came to power and those to which he subscribed after October, 1917. The freedom of the artist, granted prior to the takeover of Bolshevism, was to be circumscribed by the will of the party.

With the coming to power of the Bolshevik regime and its continuation as the government of Soviet Russia, Lenin reached the conclusion that art must serve in a positive fashion to reinforce the dicta of the party. Art must perform the utilitarian function of furthering the Revolution. The first Soviet leader thus set the future pattern by strongly advocating that artists serve party interests. He, however, did not carry this policy to what Stalin evidently considered its logical conclusion — the severe punishments which were the fate of those who did not follow the party line.

Leon Trotsky, in *Literature and Revolution* (1924), discussed the role of art as he envisioned it in a communist society.

Our Marxist conception of the objective social dependence and social utility of art, when translated into the language of politics, does not at all mean a desire to dominate art by means of decrees and orders. It is not true that we regard only that art as new and revolutionary which speaks of the worker, and it is nonsense to say that we demand that poets should desire inevitably a factory chimney, or the uprising against capital!¹¹

However, he goes on in another section of his work to qualify his position.

The new man cannot be formed without a new lyric poetry. The proletariat has to have in art the expression of the new spiritual point of view which is just beginning to be formulated within him, and to which art must help him give form. This is not a state order, but a historic

10. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

11. Leon Trotsky, "The Formalist School of Poetry and Marxism," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. by Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971).

demand. Its strength lies in the objectivity of his true necessity. You cannot pass this by, nor escape its force.¹²

Though government need not dictate to the artist, the artist must perform in a manner which provides the proletariat with "the new spiritual point of view." Clearly there is a rudimentary conflict if the artist does not desire to paint or sculpt in such a manner as to inspire the masses to revolutionary zeal.

G.V. Plekhanov, party theoretician and chief expositor of modern communist aesthetics, whose views on art were influential in Russia throughout the 1920's, "held that such theories as 'art for art's sake' (*l'art pour l'art*) came to serve the interests of the bourgeoisie, asserting that the merit of a work of art, in the final analysis, is determined by the 'specific gravity' of its content."¹³ He contended that:

the value of a work of art is measured by the 'loftiness' of its idea, that art is one of the means of spiritual intercourse among men, and the loftier the sentiment expressed by a given work, the better will the work fulfill its role as a means of intercourse.¹⁴

The inauguration of the Soviet state meant not only that the government would regulate art, which the Tsars had done to some degree. It also redefined art. Art was that which glorified the ideals of the state.

The Rise of Socialist Realism

The modern art which marked Moscow as the center of "leftist" art¹⁵ in prerevolutionary days continued to thrive during the period of war communism. The government was preoccupied with the civil war and the allied intervention—matters crucial to the very survival of the Bolshevik regime. An article appearing in 1933 in *International Literature*, an organ of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, declared the party's policy during the war communism to have been "a waiting policy with respect to the art of painting, as bourgeois influence was still strong in this field and didn't serve the revolution directly."¹⁶ "Leftist" artists such as Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko became professors at Moscow State Art School in 1919. Also on the faculty were Vladimir Tatlin, Antoine Pevsner, and Naum Gabo. The Institute of Art Culture, founded in 1920 by Vassily Kandinsky, sponsored "nonobjective art and conducted experiments in the use of musical sounds and pictorial colors and forms to evoke emotions."¹⁷

12. Ibid. p. 823

13. Paul Sjeklocha and Igor Mead, *Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 25-6.

14. Ibid., p. 26.

15. Here I use "leftist" to describe art which is abstract or bordering on the nonrepresentational.

16. Bela Uitz, "Fifteen Years of Art in the U.S.S.R.," *International Literature*, #4 (1933), p. 143.

17. Landy, p. 16.

By 1920, however, a schism had developed within the artistic community itself between those who maintained that art should be placed exclusively at the service of the Revolution, and others who desired the preservation of the independence of art. Tatlin and Rodchenko were prominent among the artists who fell into the former category, Pevsner and Gabo among those in the latter.¹⁸

Those who felt art should aid the revolution often created posters. The poster art of the revolutionary and war communism periods served the function of inspiring the masses to action. El Lissitzky's *Beat the White with the Red Wedge* is a typical example of the communicative appeal of the poster art of the period, if untypical in the high quality of its execution and aesthetic appeal. In the end, the success of poster art, from the point of view of the state, destroyed the chances of those artists demanding the separation of art and government. The regime's desire to employ art in the creation of a Bolshevik state became a reality.

Lenin, in the few years remaining to him after the revolution, never made a concerted attack on the problem of compelling the artist to paint in a manner to inspire the masses with revolutionary fervor. As early as 1922, however, at an art exhibition held in Moscow to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, paintings by the old Wanderers School of nineteenth-century realists and their more modern followers received the approval of both the party and the public.¹⁹ The Wanderers School was composed of artists who had rejected academic painting and gone to the people; they traveled throughout their native land (hence their name) and painted life as they discovered it, aiming to portray realistically social injustice as it existed.²⁰ Ilya Repin, perhaps the foremost member of the Wanderers group, was particularly acclaimed by Soviet critics for the "profound democracy and humanism" of his art. He nonetheless denied the "social significance" of his own works and spent the final years until his death in 1930 in voluntary exile in Finland.²¹

In 1924, the year of Lenin's death, the so-called "Discussion Exhibition" was held in Moscow. Works of the left and right—the avant-garde and the realist—were intentionally "juxtaposed for public view and comparison." Nikolai Bukharin chaired the discussion which revealed that the official and the public moods favored "rightist" art. The avant-garde styles of the "leftists" — cubo-futurism, suprematism, constructivism, and rayonnism, among others—had not appealed to the unenlightened masses and now they rejected them for realism.²²

18. Ibid.

19. Sjeklocha and Mead, p. 40.

20. See Gray, pp. 9-12.

21. Landy, p. 18.

22. Sjeklocha and Mead, p. 40. Gray provides the best description and analysis of the various types of leftist art.

The "realist" trend reached its apogee in the days of Joseph Stalin, under whom the Party was to dictate the parameters within which artists were to operate. Artists were to portray their subjects without relying on the corrupting influences of the West. Non-representational art was unacceptable because it was intended for an elite audience. The Party's message had to be communicated to the masses in a manner which allowed for easy comprehension and willing acceptance. A typical subject of a realist painting might be workers in a factory, with sweat pouring down their foreheads, and a hint of a smile on their faces. Or a peasant laboring on a newly organized collective farm on a beautiful day might be shown joyously reaping grain from the fields. Also encouraged were paintings portraying Lenin or Stalin in a glorified "realistic" manner.²³ Thus the masses would be able to identify with those portrayed and also be indoctrinated with the sentiment that service to the Soviet State was commendable.²⁴ Under Stalin, socialist realist art was not to reveal life as it was in reality, but rather to interpret life in terms of future reality.²⁵

The First Five Year Plan which was initiated in 1928 foreshadowed the more severe policy toward art which would be a trademark of the Stalinist period. The Plan "emphasized as its major cultural aims an increase in the proletarian consumption of art and a reorganization of art under party administration."²⁶ The following year painters, graphic and decorative artists, sculptors and architects were joined in a single artists' cooperative, the Vsekhudozhnik, directed by Y.M. Slavinsky. "It was hoped that it would bring about the unity and creative uniformity capable of placing Soviet art behind the industrialization-collectivization drive"²⁷ of the Soviet economy.

At the Sixteenth Party Congress in 1930, Stalin pronounced the attainment of a "national culture" to be a positive goal of the regime and gave it a new theoretical interpretation. Under Lenin national culture had been considered a bourgeois nationalist concept. Now "national culture" was to be "socialist in its content and national in its form, having as its object the education of the masses in the spirit of

23. For instance, although Stalin was in actuality quite short, he was always portrayed as if he were as tall as everyone else shown or perhaps even taller.

24. The works commended by Stalin very much followed this subject line. In 1948, for example the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R. awarded prizes to paintings entitled: J.V. Stalin at the Funeral of A.A. Zhdanov, J.V. Stalin in the Years of the Great Patriotic War, and A.S. Popov Demonstrates to Admiral Marakov the First Radio Transmitter in the World. In 1950 first prize was awarded to an artist who painted Lenin Addressing the Third Congress of the Komsomol and second prize to the painter of Power to the Soviets—Peace to the People. Landy, p. 23.

25. Juviler, p. 49.

26. Ibid., p. 50.

27. Sjeklocha and Mead, p. 40.

internationalism and the consolidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat."²⁸ Thus the educational role of socialist art advocated by Lenin was transformed: art was to serve as a propaganda tool, "national in form and socialist in content." A congress of artists and writers which met in Kharkov in 1930, resolved to collectivize the creative process under the "firm guidance" of the Communist Party.²⁹

The most severe blow yet to artistic freedom and initiative was dealt in the form of a Central Committee decree of April 23, 1937. Entitled *Reorganization of Literary and Art Institutions*, it constituted the preliminary step toward the doctrine of monolithic socialist realism. In preparation for total Party control over the arts it stated

that socialist realism was the sole theory and method of artistic expression suitable to Soviet society and demanded that all artists conform to its principles regardless of the mode of their past work.³⁰

No independent or unofficial artists or art groups would be allowed to function. "Leftist" artists, already disillusioned by the post-revolutionary developments, were dealt a fatal blow. The violence of collectivization and the immediate repercussions of rapid industrialization left them very little in which to believe. Thus already weakened, they became simply another part of the industrial sector or emigrated from the Soviet Union in order to create as they desired, rather than in the interests of the masses and "realism."³¹ The Second Five Year Plan had begun and with it the sterile academicism of Soviet art.

The Ascendancy of Socialist Realism

In 1934 the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers formulated a definition of socialist realism.

Socialist realism...demands of the artist a truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of the ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism.³²

28. J. Stalin, *Leninism*, Vol. 11. (London: Modern Books Ltd., 1933) p. 401 as quoted in Juviler, p. 49.

29. Landy, p. 16.

30. Juviler, p. 50.

31. John Berger, *Art and Revolution*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), p. 48. At this time Berger notes, Malevich "retired from public life altogether," Tatlin became involved in the less controversial areas of theatre design and ceramics and Lissitzky worked on exhibition layout.

32. Juviler, p. 49 quoting a Statute of Union of Soviet Writers.

The socialist realist dictum was justified on the grounds of art in this mode being popular and also meeting the demands of the masses.

According to John Berger, the noted British art critic, there is a distinction which can and should be made between naturalism and realism, a distinction vital to the understanding of Soviet art. Naturalism can be characterized as

unselective or rather selective in order to present with maximum credibility the immediate scene. It has no basis for selection outside the present; its ideal aim would be to produce a replica, thus preserving the present. Such a replica is impossible because art can only exist within the limitations of a medium. Consequently naturalism relies upon tricks of illusionism to distract attention away from the medium.³³

Realism, as Berger understands it,

is selective and strives towards the typical. Yet what is typical of a situation is only revealed by its development in relation to other developing situations. Thus realism selects in order to construct a totality.³⁴

Socialist realism as it emerged from the 1934 decree employs the techniques of naturalism in its mission.

First create, according to the demands of purely theoretical dogma, an artificial or hypothetical event, then paint it with maximum naturalism, so that it appears to have been taken from life.³⁵

Stalinist regulations also extended to museums. In June of 1936, Comrade Kerzhentsev, head of the Committee for the Affairs of the Arts assailed the acquisition policy of the Tretyakov Museum in Moscow.

Its directors have acted on the liberal principles that the Museum's task was to display...every tendency in painting, without any adequate criterion and without in the least considering whether the works were realistic or not. This supposed objectivity, in reality, masked encouragement given to all formalistic and crudely realistic tendencies in painting.³⁶

Analysis of this sampling of esoteric communication reveals that only that art which is approved of by the government is to be publicly displayed. Those artistic creations which do not fit into the mold are to be condemned as formalistic, a conventional Soviet term (as is naturalistic) used to describe works which do not fit within the

33. Berger, p. 50.

34. Ibid., pp. 50-1.

35. Ibid., p. 53.

36. Philip E. Mosely, "Freedom of Artistic Expression and Scientific Inquiry in Russia," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, CC (Nov., 1938), p. 259.

prescribed guidelines. Comrade Kerzhentsev, speaking for the Committee for the Affairs of the Arts, was reported by *Pravda* to have announced a decision to remove all formalistic and naturalistic paintings of the last twenty-five years from the Tretyakov and Leningrad's Russian Museum.³⁷

As a Soviet official said:

Such paintings have no place in the public halls, but belong in special buildings to be used by art specialists or to illustrate the very coarse formalistic and naturalistic errors made by some of our artists. The Soviet section in these museums must be gone over with special care and supplemented by the principal works of Soviet realist artists....Through understanding the artistic heritage of the masters of painting—the realists—through relentless struggle against formalism and crude naturalism, we will build the road for socialist pictorial art to flourish.³⁸

Professor Philip Moseley of Columbia University contends that under Stalin, private patronage in the arts did not exist within the Soviet Union. Therefore the Art Committee's decision to restrict museum acquisitions to socialist realist works had far greater implications than that only officially sanctioned art would hang in government museums. It meant that only those artists who painted in the prescribed fashion would be able to earn a livelihood as artists.³⁹

On the eve of World War II Stalin himself alerted Soviet artists to their proper role in the tumultuous days ahead. At the Eighteenth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the spring of 1939, the inheritor of the mantle of the Bolsheviks advised:

A follower of Lenin cannot be just a specialist in his favorite science or art; he must also be a social and political worker taking a vital interest in the destinies of his country. He must be well acquainted with the laws of social development; he must be able to apply these laws and must actively participate in the political guidance of the country.⁴⁰

For the Soviet artist there was no opportunity to be an individualistic aesthetician; his role, as designed by the Soviet government, was to demonstrate the views of that government and, if necessary, to silence his own.

During the war years, cultural matters were not of prime urgency. They, along with other less immediate considerations, were placed in

37. Ibid.

38. Mosely, p. 259.

39. Under Stalin's successors unofficial artists have fared better. The role of these painters and sculptors will be discussed later in this article.

40. Landy, p. 19 and Sjeklocha and Mead, p. 44. Quoted from the stenographic report of the 18th Congress of Communist Party of the Soviet Union, p. 174.

abeyance by the Soviet regime as it strove to forge a united effort against fascism. No revised governmental dicta on style appear to have been issued, and the fact that the government was totally involved in the war effort would lead one to presume that governmental supervision of the arts was much less rigid than in previous years.

Government silence on things of cultural significance did not long outlast the war, however. As Sjeklocha and Mead succinctly put it:

If the Soviet Union was to remain an effective world power it quickly had to reach the masses through many avenues, and art was an old and proven method. It was necessary to drive away the fog of sentiment which had gathered during the war years; the Soviet position on the capitalist West had to be communicated in a decisive fashion; and the massive job of reconstructing at hand demanded use of every method of communication with the people. State control over the arts was tighter and omnipotent.⁴¹

Art was thus to serve the purpose of propagandizing for the dissolution of the united front from above and the abandonment of the "rightist" line which had been the favored policy during the national struggle for survival. Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's heir apparent, spearheaded the ideological retrenchment in the arts. That such a high level Party official gave considerable attention to a firmer government stance on the arts seems to indicate that it was a policy which had been given high priority by Stalin. As the difficult years of the first Five Year Plan followed upon the relatively freer years of the New Economic Policy and required a tightening in the arts to educate the citizens of the Soviet Union to the new party line, so the arduous years following the great patriotic war required an artistic offensive to acclimate the people to the government's "leftist" policy which was its response to the defeat of fascism.

Although the attacks made by Zhdanov, the Secretary of the Party Central Committee and chief propaganda administrator, were primarily directed toward literature (1946) and music (1947-1948), their impact was felt almost immediately in all spectra of cultural life. His primary thrust was made in a speech of August 21, 1946, to the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in Leningrad in which he interpreted the August 14, 1946, resolution of the Central Committee of the Party which set the pattern for Zhdanovism—the brutal repression of creativity in the arts by "the vital force of the Soviet order—its politics."⁴²

State censorship and terror were absolute. Zhdanov and his followers had three specific primary objectives in the cultural realm.

41. Sjeklocha and Mead, p. 47.

42. Quoted in Robert V. Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism*, Vol. II (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 147.

1) To cut off contact with foreign non-Communist countries, and make it compulsory to praise everything Russian.

2) To impose a ban on artistic experiment, insisting that all media should preserve a straight-forward plain-man's approach untainted by "modernism."

3) To guarantee that all forms of art should actively promote official optimism about the present and future of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. ⁴³

Zhdanovism outlasted Zhdanov, who died in 1948 under mysterious circumstances, and it remained official policy toward the arts until Stalin's demise in 1953. At the Nineteenth Party Congress in October of 1952, Zhdanov's rival, Georgi Malenkov, reported to his comrades in terms which are pure Zhdanov:

The typical should correspond to the essence of the given socio-historical phenomenon; it is not just the widespread, the frequently repeated, or the commonplace. Deliberate exaggeration which gives sharpness to an image does not make the image atypical but shows and stresses the typical more fully. The question of typicalness is the chief sphere in which the party spirit manifests itself in art. The problem of the typical is always a political problem. ⁴⁴

Khrushchev and "Liberalization"

The "little thaw" of 1953-1954, immediately following the demise of Stalin, allowed artistic creativeness to emerge slightly. Works by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, Paul Cezanne, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso reappeared after over fifteen years of official disgrace. The creations of the Russian avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century were not displayed, however. These artists continued to be branded as formalists. An essay from the Party theoretical journal, *Kommunist*, clearly demonstrates that while the party line may have loosened a bit, it had not slackened.

The artist who deviates from social realism serves interest alien to the proletariat and to his creative effort: "Socialist realism" is the only method of our art...Any other method, any other "direction" is a concession to bourgeois ideology...In our country, where socialism has been victorious, where there has arisen a moral and political unity of the people unprecedented in the history of mankind, there is no special basis for different directions in art. ⁴⁵

43. "Khrushchev on Culture," Encounter, Pamphlet 9, undated, p. 10.

44. "Malenkov's Report of 19th Party Congress," Pravda, October 6, 1952.

45. "For Future Development of Soviet Literature" in *Kommunist* (Moscow), No. 9, 1954, p.

24. As quoted by Sjeklocha and Mead, p. 33.

While Khrushchev would allow some cultural liberalization, he appeared in no way willing to grant functional autonomy to the artistic community. From late 1954 to early 1956 Khrushchev—perhaps reacting to criticisms from those who favored Stalin's cultural policy—asserted himself via a policy toward the arts which was less liberal than his policy of 1953 and early 1954. In 1953, a book critical of the Stalinist regime (*The Thaw* by Ilya Ehrenburg) was allowed to be published. In late 1954 it was criticized, but not in terms so severe as to recall the cultural reign of Andrei Zhdanov.

It was not until February of 1956 and Khrushchev's secret denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress, however, that it appeared that the pressure on the creative intelligentsia would be eased. The repudiation of Stalin inspired hope that the more liberal outlook of Khrushchev would permit greater freedom in the arts. In October (prior to the Hungarian Revolution) a retrospective exhibition of Soviet-owned works of Pablo Picasso opened in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. Huge crowds attended the showing of the works of the famous Spanish artist. At the University of Moscow, debate on Picasso and modern art began to be heard. In addition to the Picasso show several other significant events took place at about the same time. These radical occurrences included a showing of the works of the symbolist painter James Ensor, an exhibition of Mexican drawings and one of contemporary Indian painting. In this more liberal atmosphere the selection of works for the international art exhibition at the World Youth Festival to be held in Moscow the next year was made and several modernist works were included.

Then, in October, the Hungarian Revolution erupted and Khrushchev felt the need to be more severe with the artistic community in the Soviet Union to ensure that similar problems did not occur at home. Because the intellectuals had figured prominently in the impetus to revolution in Hungary, Khrushchev felt compelled to halt the liberalization of cultural policy which had been evident since the Twentieth Party Congress. Khrushchev's methods of thwarting the growth of liberalism in the arts were, of course, significantly less severe than those of Stalin; however, it was quite apparent that more repressive measures could be instituted if Khrushchev felt that they were required and that he could afford to use them. Soviet artists responded by behaving cautiously in an attempt not to forfeit the gains they had made through the denunciation of Stalinism.

Two articles appearing in the Soviet press during the summer of 1958 typify the official atmosphere regarding the arts in the immediate post-Hungarian Revolution period of 1956 to 1959. One, written by a student, declared:

Revisionism in aesthetics is expressed in the repudiation of the fundamental ideas of Marxist-Leninist teaching on art, particularly the Leninist principles of the aesthetics of socialist realism.

Contemporary revisionists are not aesthetes who reject any tie between art and life and politics; on the contrary, they all clamor that the artist should be conceded the right to interfere in the life of society, to pass judgment on the activity of the parties and states and debate the direction of their policies. However, they deny the right of the Party and the state to guide the development of art or to influence the creative process of the artist. They all uphold the 'autonomy' of art.⁴⁶

Much the same attitude is found in "The Trojan Horse Will Not be Admitted!" which appeared a month earlier in *Sovetskaya Kultura*.

Today's revisionists aim their poison barbs at one of the greatest achievements of Marxist philosophy—the theory of reflection, on which Marxist-Leninist aesthetics is based. They describe art not as a reflection of life, but as the subjective expression of the views and sentiments of the artist. . . . The revisionists are particularly malicious in their attack on one of the fundamental principles of the art of socialist realism—the principle of Party spirit in art. . . . The idea of Communist party spirit helps artists to take an active part in the implementation of Party policy, to create successfully for the benefit of the people and to struggle resolutely against bourgeois ideology. Party spirit is the wellspring of the outstanding achievement of the art of socialist realism.⁴⁷

Here too the message is clear. Revisionism, meaning (in practice) that of which the Party disapproves, that which does not educate the people, or that which contains too much Western influence, will not be allowed. Socialist realism must triumph. Yet, of course, socialist realism in the late 1950's was a much looser term than it had been a decade earlier. Khrushchev, after he unseated the so-called anti-Party group (Malenkov, Bulganin, Molotov, Zhukov and others) and established his own personal power, "acknowledged the need of art to give its members individual recognition in their search for personal expression, accommodating and accepting that borderline experimentation which hitherto had been unacceptable."⁴⁸ Only the rather undefinable borderline was acceptable, yet the very impreciseness of its nature left it susceptible to expansion.

On May 22, 1959, Khrushchev delivered a major address at the Third Congress of Soviet Writers. Reprinted in full on the front pages of both

46. A. Zis, "Present Day Revisionism in Esthetics," *Izvestia*, August 27, 1958, pp. 4, 6.

47. N. Parsadanov, "The Trojan Horse Will Not Be Admitted!" *Sovetskaya Kultura*, July 24, 1958, p. 3.

48. Sjeklocha and Mead, p. 64.

Pravda and *Izvestia* on May 24th, it revealed a slightly more liberal attitude toward literary expression and experimentation. Writers were free to describe "private situations;" however they still could not criticize the Soviet system.⁴⁹ This speech informed all members of the artistic community of the exact conditions under which the government would allow them to pursue their creativity. During the next three years, artists as well as their literary colleagues took advantage of the slightly more relaxed atmosphere; however, nothing comparable in quality to the works produced in the literary community appeared.⁵⁰ Most revolutionary, from the point of view of artists, were the exhibitions, official and unofficial, of abstract art which occurred during this more liberal phase.

The Reaffirmation of Socialist Realism

The advent of 1963 marked the end of relative government leniency towards the arts. The setback of the Cuban missile crisis, mounting Chinese criticism of Khrushchev's domestic and foreign policies, and limited internal violence within the Soviet Union caused Khrushchev to reverse his policy towards the arts. By instituting a more repressive policy he could have more control over domestic dissidence. A stricter policy toward the arts was in line with his overall policy shift away from liberalization in the winter of 1962-1963.

On the first day of December, 1962, Nikita Khrushchev and an entourage including party functionaries and Vladimir Serov and Sergei Gerasimov, prominent painter-officials known for their hard-line views on art, visited an art exhibition entitled *Thirty Years of Moscow Art* at the Manezh, a reconverted Tsarist riding stable near the Kremlin. The exhibition included in three separate small galleries a selection of nonrepresentational paintings and sculpture, which according to numerous reports were not avant-garde by western standards. Khrushchev's violent and rather crude reaction to these deviations from socialist realism marked the first step in a broad campaign against the liberal tendencies which had developed in the arts:

As long as I am President of the Council of Ministers, we are going to support a genuine art. We aren't going to give a kopeck for pictures painted by jackasses. History can be our judge. For the time being history has put us at the head of this state, and we have to answer for everything that goes on in it. Therefore we are going to maintain a strict policy in art.⁵¹

49. *Pravda*, May 24, 1959, pp. 1-3; *Izvestia*, May 24, 1959, pp. 1-3.

50. During this period *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by a Solzhenitsyn was officially published in the Soviet Union.

51. Nikita S. Khrushchev, "Remarks at Manezh exhibition, December 1, 1962" in Priscilla Johnson, *Khrushchev and the Arts*. (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1965) Document 3, p. 102.

The Soviet press opened fire upon abstract art, quoting the Premier as having said:

. . . the organizers of the exhibition have fallen under the sway of those who defend weak and unacceptable works, who have manifested liberalism. Such a policy cannot lead to a further upsurge of the Soviet art of socialist realism. In guiding art we need ideological consistency and devotion to principle, clarity, precision and implacability toward any vascillations and deviations from the main line of development of our art — the art of a people building communism.⁵²

In spite of the official attack from numerous sources on that art which did not fit within the confines of the socialist realist framework, a showing of modern paintings from Yugoslavia, which included works which were antithetical to socialist realism, was allowed to remain open at the Hermitage in Leningrad. An exhibition of works by Fernand Leger was permitted to open in January, 1963, at the Pushkin Museum Moscow and to remain open for three months. These and other similar events⁵³ demonstrate that while the cultural crackdown was indeed severe, it was not totally repressive.

By the early months of 1963 it became obvious that the decision for official retreat in policy towards the arts had been made. Khrushchev's major two and one-half hour long speech of March 8, 1963, to a meeting of artists and party leaders tolled the death knell of liberalism in the arts:

No matter what abuses are hurled against artists who adhere to positions of realism, and no matter how much glory is heaped on the abstractionists and all other formalists, all reasonable people understand clearly that in the first case, we are dealing with real artists and genuine art, and in the second, with people with perverted tastes whose brains are, so to speak, topsy turvey with ignoble hackwork that insults people's feelings.⁵⁴

Khrushchev did not, however, utilize Zhdanovian measures to put down artistic dissent, and there was room within the system for unofficial artists.

Initially, Khrushchev's successors were slightly more lenient toward the arts than their predecessor had been in the post-winter 1962-1963 period. The new party leadership found other matters, more closely related to the consolidation of their newly acquired power, more pressing. Although it may be argued that certain moderates in the government desired to encourage participation by intellectuals in the

52. "The Lofty Calling of Soviet Art is to Serve the People and the Cause of Communism," *Pravda*, December 2, p. 1.

53. See Sjeklocha and Mead, pp. 100-101.

54. "Khrushchev on Culture," p. 29.

new programs in the arts, there is no question that by September of 1965 the hardliners had successfully overcome the more liberal strains within the party.

The liberals maintained that the private truth [istina] of the artist did not necessarily conflict with the big truth [pravda] — and that anyway it was the prerogative of the Communist artist to express his personal view of reality.⁵⁵

This opinion was widely attacked by party functionaries as one which served to distort the realities of Soviet life.

At this juncture all debate ended. During the second week of September, authors Yuri Daniel and Andrei Siniavski were arrested for slandering the Soviet state by publishing abroad. The showcase trial⁵⁶ signalled victory for cultural hardliners.

A British observer of Soviet affairs who writes under the pseudonym of Timothy McClure characterizes the late sixties as years in which Soviet cultural policy reflected two discernible strands:

The party seemed to come to the tentative conclusion that by permitting cultural experimentation and foreign import—within bounds—the intellectuals' energies could be sidetracked from potentially more dangerous anti-regime activity. At the same time, there was no let-up in the authorities' efforts to quell the intellectual underground; indeed, the recent strengthening of laws against anti-Soviet propaganda, as well as continuing reports of arrest among young intellectuals, seemed to reflect the regime's determination to impress upon the intellectual community the lesson that dissidence doesn't pay. Finally, while the top leadership continued to stand aloof from the conservative-liberal struggle, there were persistent indications that official pressure was being brought to bear in certain ideological 'problem areas.'⁵⁷

Soviet art critic V. Zimenko, writing in *Sovetskaya Kultura*, the newspaper of the Ministry of Culture, in March, 1966, suggested that the time was propitious for the reappraisal of prerevolutionary experimental schools of Russian art as a means of broadening the concept of socialist realism. He commented that socialist art "cannot develop fruitfully on the narrow base of the traditions of one school. . . . The wealth of all periods, of all epochs, the entire inheritance of all artistic culture of mankind must be subjected by us to an active re-evaluation, adaptation and reworking in the crucible of the new and great culture that is taking place."⁵⁸

55. Timothy McClure, "The Politics of Soviet Culture, 1964-67," *Problems of Communism*, XVI, number 2 (March/April 1967), p. 33.

56. See Max Hayward, ed. *On Trial: The Soviet State versus "Abram Tertz" and "Nikolai Arzhak"*. New York: Harper (Row, 1966).

57. McClure, p. 39.

58. V. Zimenko writing in *Sovetskaya Kultura* as quoted by Raymond H. Anderson, "Soviet Critic Urges Relaxation of Curbs on Art," *The New York Times*, March 23, 1966, p. 20.

For the most part, however, voices of relative liberalism were not able to be heard in the late 1960's. Those who considered nonconformism were reprimanded by forces of conservatism. Typical is an attack leveled at them by Nikolai V. Tomsy, President of the Soviet Academy of Art. Tomsy praised socialist realism as the only art which is "closely connected with the life of the people". He characterized other forms of art as "poor in thought and feeling and...incapable of stirring the aesthetic sense."⁵⁹ This statement followed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia by only one month. The events of August 21, 1968:

demonstrated how serious the Kremlin considered the threats of liberalization, revisionism, and reform. Czechoslovak liberalization had been sparked by intellectuals and writers, another example of how a determined minority could help to change the political, economic, and social shape of a nation. It reminded the Soviet leaders of the role Hungarian intellectuals and artists had played in the 1956 revolt in Hungary and of the efforts of the Polish intelligentsia in the October days of 1956. . . .⁶⁰

The *Pravda* article puts Soviet officials as well as artists on notice that the rigors of socialist realism must be closely adhered to. Symbolic of the "restalinization" of the Brezhnev years was a larger than life-size gray granite bust by Stalin-prize winner Tomsy unveiled over Stalin's grave on June 25, 1970. The body of the late dictator had been removed from Lenin's mausoleum in 1961 and the placement of the statue represents a public acknowledgement of the rehabilitation of Stalin. Tomsy presents the man in a paternal, benevolent manner, far removed from the paranoid mass murderer denounced by Nikita Khrushchev in 1956.⁶¹

Under Leonid Brezhnev, members of the creative intelligentsia are once again being exiled to places far from the cultural centers of Moscow and Leningrad. The atmosphere more closely resembles that which prevailed under Zhdanovism than that which existed during most of Khrushchev's tenure in office.

Reacting to the announcement of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Nobel Prize, *Sovetskaya Rossia*, a daily published jointly by the Party and the government of the Russian Soviet Republic, printed a strong statement expressing the sentiments of the government regarding artistic freedom. "The Soviet writer does not at all resemble his predecessors; he is a

59. "Soviet Art Academy Head Scores Nonconformists," *The New York Times*, September 25, 1968, p. 12.

60. Abraham Rothberg, *The Heirs of Stalin: Dissidence and the Soviet Regime 1953-1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 244.

61. For a description/and a reproduction of the bust see *Time*, July 6, 1970, p. 31.

writer-warrior, a writer-builder, a direct participant in the historic event he chronicles."⁶² Substitute the Soviet artist for the Soviet writer in this statement and one finds that he is to be an artist-warrior, an artist-builder and a direct participant in the historic events he paints. This sounds much like Stalin's preferred term for the artist in Soviet society — "the engineer of men's souls."

Artistic Policy in the Age of Detente

Throughout the 1970's, the Kremlin has called for increased ideological vigilance at this time of increased contacts with the West. Cultural policy was laid down, until her demise in 1974, by Yekaterina A. Furtseva, a long-time party functionary who headed the Ministry of Culture. While many Western observers felt her to have iron-handed control over the arts, more recent analysis has postulated that after the fall from power of her benefactor Khrushchev, primary control over the arts covertly was given to higher party officials such as premier party ideologist Mikhail A. Suslov and perhaps also to Pyotr N. Demichev, Party Secretary for Culture and later successor to Furtseva as Minister of Culture. Both of these men, and particularly Suslov, have firm socialist-realist biases.⁶³ It was perhaps due to the input of Suslov and Demichev that domestic policy toward the arts became more stringent after the fall from power of Khrushchev, in spite of the presence of the incumbent Minister of Culture.

A few months prior to the death of Furtseva a portrait of Leonid Brezhnev was unveiled in Moscow. Executed by Dmitri A. Nalbandyan, Stalin's favorite portraitist, and displayed adjacent to a portrait of Lenin, in a manner formerly reserved for portraits of Stalin, it is part of an exhibition composed solely of works of the socialist realist style.⁶⁴ Certainly this is not an overly subtle indication that orthodox socialist realism remains in vogue in the Soviet Union today, as it did in the time of Joseph Stalin.

Fear of the growing demands by nonofficial or underground artists has caused the regime to respond harshly to those who do not create within the prescribed framework. The much-publicized "bulldozed art exhibition" of September 1974 focused world-wide attention on the efforts by the Soviets to prevent an outdoor art show of

62. *Sovetskaya Rossia*, October 14, 1970, p. 2.

63. "Yekaterina Furtseva Dead; Top Soviet Party Woman," *The New York Times*, October 28, 1974.

64. Hedrick Smith, "A Portrait of Brezhnev Causes Mild Sensation," *The New York Times*, February 24, 1974, p. 12.

works by Oskar Rabin,⁶⁵ and Yevgeny Rukhin,⁶⁶ and others. Criticism in the Western press at a time when Moscow was attempting to gain support for the Helsinki Declaration from nations wary of the Soviet stance on intellectual freedom presumably was the motivation for the subsequent Soviet decision to allow a similar outdoor exhibition to take place on September 29, 1974. Hedrick Smith of *The New York Times* spoke with Aleksandr Goldfarb, a young scientist⁶⁷ and friend of many of the artists at this second exhibition. Goldfarb called the event "a classic example" of the influence of detente. "This never would have taken place without the pressure of the West, and hard pressure at that,"⁶⁸ he added. There is no evidence that the West exerted actual pressure; rather, it is obvious that the Soviets did not want to alienate the West, already increasingly sensitive on the issue of free flow of information, during the period of negotiations for an agreement on security and cooperation in Europe.

Boris N. Chaplin, the hard-line official who ordered the closing down of the initial exhibition, was removed from his position as Communist Party chief of the Cheremushki district of Moscow soon after the second exhibition. No public explanation for the change was made. Although this may appear to be an indication of a mellowing on the part of the higher leadership, the fact that Chaplin was appointed to the significant post of Soviet ambassador to North Vietnam reveals that his removal from the Moscow position was done for Western eyes and did not signal any deviation from a hardline domestic policy toward the arts.⁶⁹

In mid-November of 1974 Pyotr N. Demichev was appointed Minister of Culture to succeed Furtseva. In spite of some Western speculation to the contrary, the appointment was a demotion for the man who had held the more important and prominent position of Secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee since October 1961. Since the ouster of Khrushchev, Demichev had served as an alternate member of the Politburo of the Central Committee, as well. It

65. Jacques Cateau, "Oskar Rabin, Painter," *Survey*, October 1965, No. 57, pp. 81-85, is an excellent study of the Rabin aesthetic.

66. Rukhin died on May 24, 1976 at the age of 32 in a fire that swept his Leningrad studio. His widow termed the cause of the fire "very strange". See Christopher S. Wren, "Rukhin, Dissident Artist, Dies in Leningrad Studio Fire at 32," *The New York Times*, May 25, 1976.

67. The scientific community which enjoys a rather elite position in Soviet society has close connections with the Soviet underground artists. Scientists have the money and the sophistication to appreciate non-socialist realist art.

68. Hedrick Smith, "Excited Russians Crowd Modern Art Show," *The New York Times*, September 30, 1974, p. 1.

69. See "Modern Art and Moscow Bureaucrats," *Soviet Analyst*, Volume 3, number 24 (November 28, 1974), pp. 4-7.

is not unlikely that a politically sensitive event such as the art exhibition of September would be referred to the Central Committee Secretary responsible for cultural affairs, Pyotr N. Demichev. Christian Duevel, the renowned Kremlinologist of Radio Liberty, feels there is every reason to believe that Demichev was responsible for the authorization of the second art showing. According to this analysis, Chaplin was rewarded for his "vigilance" and "party-mindedness" with the Hanoi post and Demichev was reprimanded for allowing the second abstract exhibition with the demotion to the Minister level.⁷⁰ The second exhibition therefore did not represent a liberalizing tendency of official domestic cultural policy.

Thus, the hardliners would seem to have succeeded at last in removing Demichev from his key ideological position in the Central Committee, in which he had always seemed "too liberal" to them, even though he did, no doubt, do his best to execute faithfully the increasingly rigid Party line in ideological and cultural affairs, as he understood it.⁷¹

A speech delivered by Nikolai Podgorny⁷² on the occasion of the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the Maly Theater in Moscow on November 10, 1974, pinpoints the new domestic line in the arts:

In conditions when the ideological struggle between socialism and capitalism acquires even greater acuteness, our art is called upon steadily to raise its ideological armor, its implacability toward manifestations of alien views, and to combine the affirmation of the Soviet way of life with the debunking of indifference to politics and a consumers' psychology. As in ideology in general, so in every kind of art, any deviation from our principles is impermissible. Real art—including theater—ends where its high spiritual, cultural and moral principles are replaced by lack of ideas [bezydeinost'], philistinism [obyvatel'shcina] and banality [poshlost']. There can be no two opinions about this, Comrades...⁷³

More recently, Nikolai Malakhov, who has been labelled one of the pillars of socialist realism, wrote an article which appeared in the influential journal, *Ogonek*. He roundly condemned "modernism" and defended socialist realism as the only truly creative method available to an artist.

70. Christian Duevel, "Demichev Demoted to the Position of USSR Minister of Culture," *Radio Liberty Research*, RL 380/74, November 14, 1974.

71. *Ibid.*

72. According to Professor Jerry F. Hough of Duke University, Podgorny (as well as Suslov) is part of the five-man "inner core" of the Soviet Communist party leadership. See Jerry F. Hough, "The Brezhnev Era: The Man and The System" *Problems of Communism*, Vol. XXV, No. 2, March/April 1976, pp. 1-17.

73. *Izvestia*, November 12, 1974. At the suggestion of C. Duevel, the first sentence of the next paragraph appears here as the final sentence of the paragraph quoted.

Samples of abstract wares are beginning to appear which blindly copy the shabbiest specimens of Western modernism. It never occurred to their creators that they have swallowed the bait of bourgeois propaganda. But in due course they will realize that, for a long time, "art" of this kind has not been so popular in Western Europe and the U.S., and that in fact many obstacles are placed by art dealers in the West in the path of true artists who uphold realism. The aim of those who try to corrupt the minds of the Soviet people is clear: to create distrust in the high principles of socialist realism, to deprive the people of the art which supports high humanist ideals.⁷⁴

Khrushchev in the 1950's and early 1960's was directly and personally involved in events dealing with regime policy toward the arts. Brezhnev has not been. Yet it is apparent that he and his colleagues strongly advocate socialist realism and find precious little room within the system for deviation from the official line. A *Pravda* editorial entitled "The Artist's Calling" labeled literature and art as "a combat sector of ideological activity which requires constant attention."⁷⁵ The current leadership keeps well in mind the role assigned to the arts by its ideological and political forebears. It also notes the ambiguities of past arts policy which permits the use of that policy in the service of the state.

74. Nikolai Malakhov, "The Blind Alley of Modernism," *Ogonek*, Number 38, September 20, 1975, pp. 28-29. (As translated in *Radio Liberty* 27/76, January 21, 1976.)

75. Editorial, "The Artist's Calling," *Pravda*, April 1, 1976, p. 1.