

RED LETTER DAYS

Bolshevik Cultural Theory and the Development of Soviet Literature, 1917-1934

INTRODUCTION

During the 1920s, the Soviet Union experienced a period of incredible cultural development. My project seeks to understand how leading Bolsheviks thought about literature, and culture more broadly, during the 1920s, and how their thought related to the development of literature over that period. Based on the research I have conducted so far, I have found that prominent early Bolsheviks expressed a wide range of views on the role of literature and culture in society, ranging from the radically experimental to the traditionally conservative, the libertarian to the more dictatorial. However, these views most often were not reflected in the actual development of literature during the 1920s.



OBJECTIVES

My project is guided by the governing question "What did leading Bolsheviks think about literature and culture from 1917 to 1930?" In this question, "leading Bolsheviks" refers definitely to Lenin and Trotsky, but will include other preeminent Bolsheviks depending on the available sources.

My guiding question includes an investigation of a few interrelated points. Perhaps foremost is the issue of how, why, and to what extent Bolsheviks advocated press censorship. Moreover, I will also explore what leading Bolsheviks promoted as positive literature and art.

A number of subsidiary questions support this primary topic. First, how were Bolshevik opinions on culture shaped by Tsarist precedents? Second, how were Bolsheviks influenced by precedents in Marx's views on literature and culture? Finally, how did practical necessity impact Bolshevik theory and practice in culture?

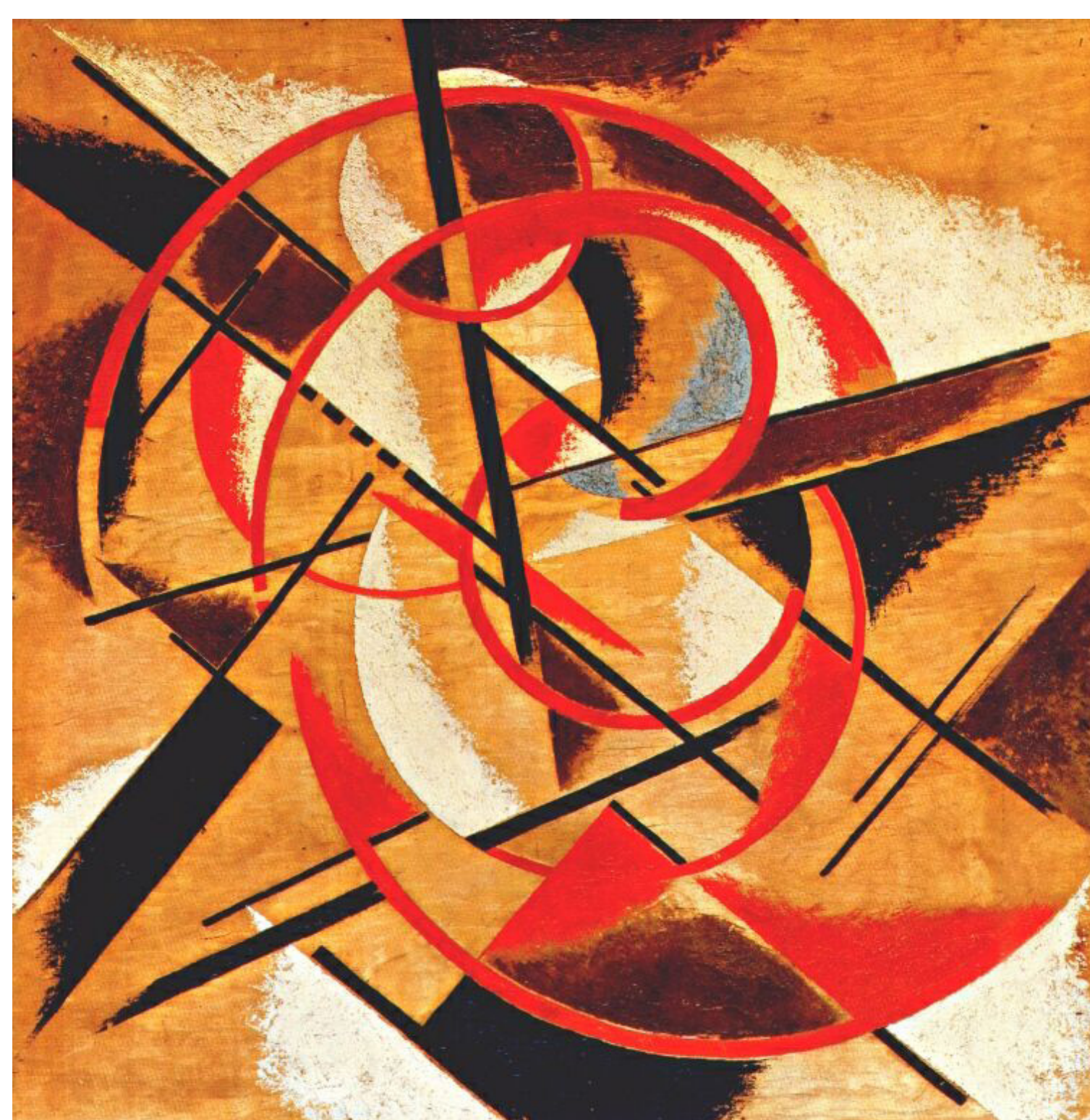


METHODOLOGY

To successfully answer these questions, I will need to consider a few distinct fields of literature. Thus far, I have done a broad review of the scholarship covering the literary movements of the Soviet 1920s and early 1930s, and I have begun to explore the literature on Lenin, Trotsky, and Bogdanov. Moving forward, I will survey the major sources on Tsarist censorship as well as the major works on additional Bolsheviks.

In addition to a thorough review of the scholarly literature, my project will demand a strong base of primary sources. I intend for the translated works of Lenin, Trotsky, Bogdanov, et al. to serve as my core body of primary sources, supplemented by memoirs and relevant texts from the Marxist tradition.

To successfully carry through my project, I will pursue the following broad methodology. First, I will develop an annotated bibliography of primary sources. Following this, I will revisit the necessary secondary sources, both on the issues under consideration by my selected Bolsheviks, as well as on these individuals themselves. Throughout, I will engage with the History department Thesis Colloquium, as well as my thesis director and thesis readers.



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RESULTS

Each of the leading Bolsheviks during the 1920s expressed unique, developed opinions regarding literature and culture. Here, I will consider the best known of the Bolsheviks--Lenin.

V.I. Lenin's prescriptions for culture followed from his Marxist analysis of Russian society and economy. In 1917, Lenin's believed that the system of international finance capitalism was "rotten ripe for socialist revolution." Consequently, he worked to create a socialist superstructure, offering complete freedom of expression and state patronage for writers and artists.



However, after half a year in power, Lenin's analysis shifted. Forced to consider Russian conditions in isolation, Lenin found Russian capitalism to be underdeveloped, appropriate only to "radical democratic" goals. Thus, in the cultural arena, Lenin worked to complete the historic achievements of capitalism--universal literacy and mastery of bourgeois artistic techniques.

While Lenin was alive, literature developed according to his prescriptions. Censorship was lax, creative groups received no favor or impediment from the government, and universal literacy was vigorously pursued. However, following Lenin's death in 1924, literary policy in the Soviet Union became less and less "Leninist." Most revealingly, while Lenin's cultural program was intended to raise the cultural level of the masses and prepare the dissolution of the state, literature as it developed--Socialist Realism--popularized state power among its readers.

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