Class, culture and Stalinism

Most interested Westerners hold dear the idea that art is 'free', a matter for the artist expressing him or her self without restrictions. The notion that art should be 'used' for ideological purposes is presented in the media as a perversion practised mainly by Stalinists.

But the fact is that all ruling classes control artistic production. They hold the purse strings, have access to the publicity machine, and from their ranks come the critics who make and break reputations.

Of course the ruling class in capitalist countries does not lay down rules for art, demanding this or that style on pain of death or prison, but they don't have to buy what they don't like; and it is money which buys access to books, materials and education. If individual artists can support themselves, then technically they are free to produce what they like. But whether any of it is seen by the public or recorded in the history books is a matter for the ruling class. The history of art itself is a bastion of ruling class ideology.

The ruling class also benefits from the trade in art. Artefacts and artists are bought and sold like any other commodity. First make someone's reputation, then watch the prices rise. Good and bad art doesn't come into it, the criteria are saleability, ideological utility, reputability; investment security, likely value enhancement over time...Today single works of art may sell for a great deal more than the artist earned over an entire lifetime.

Everyone knows, of course, that many great artists have starved in the face of a hostile public. That many of the great leaps 'forward' in art were met with unbelief and ridicule. Self-proclaimed revolutionary artists — the Dadaists or the Surrealists, for instance — did not achieve instant popularity. Still, their works now fetch millions. Their ideas were quickly accommodated to by a ruling class, eager, amongst other things, to prove its open mindedness. The bourgeoisie pats itself on the back for having recognised 'good' art, and sneers at mere propaganda, while it organises the very lucrative business which could be called: 'art as an investment for rich philistines'.

Nevertheless, compared with the horrors of the totalitarian ice age in which art and literature have for many decades been gripped in the Stalinist states, bourgeois society has been by comparison a haven of artistic and literary freedom. And Stalinist attitudes on questions of art and literature, justifying and glorifying the artistic policies of ruling Stalinist parties, have unfortunately not been confined to fully-fledged Stalinists. The true teaching of Marxism on these questions is the very opposite of Stalinist practices; and not less so than is the true programme of working class socialism the literal opposite of what exists in the Stalinist states under the stolen name of socialism.

In the following article — written some time ago — Rachel Lever presents a comprehensive survey of the impact on art of the 1917 workers' revolution in the Tsarist empire; chronicles the advent of the Stalinist ice age which blighted art and literature for over half a century; and, finally, presents a brief examination of the theoretical framework within which Marxist socialists examine questions of art and literature.

Part 1: The impact of 1917

Awakening in the 1860s from the coma of the Tsarist Academy's unchallenged rule, Russian painters spent the next few decades alternately lapping up what their contemporaries in Europe were pioneering; and discovering that there had been active Russian art before the Academy had made 18th century French court art (at second-hand) the only style which could earn a painter a living. Earnest safaris up-country yielded evidence of rough decorative peasant woodcuts and embroidery; ancient icons were cleaned up and exhibited for the first time. Meanwhile, the Academy continued to patronise portrait painting in the manner of 18th century France; and the new movements found favour with the liberal bourgeoisie.

Like Russian industry and the Russian labour movement, Russian painting found its whole development telescoped. Learning quickly from French Impressionism and its multifarious preceeding and succeeding movements, but keeping their own identity by virtue of their passionate involvement with the national tradition, the most swiftly advancing groups and individuals soon found that they were ready for a revolutionary breakthrough, that they were no longer following their comrades in the west, but leading them. Now their patrons were not so keen; it was all very well while the avant garde was progressive only in relation to feudalism. But certainly not when the First World War came, and a definite rebelliousness, suspiciously resembling the rebellious Dada movement founded in Zurich, was seen in many avant garde activities. Now they found themselves out in the cold, their audience shrunk to a few intellectuals and unable — as yet — to turn to another class for support.

Two main movements emerged in 1915, called Suprematism and Constructivism. The first of these flourished mainly before the revolution; it was a form of completely abstract art, relying chiefly on geometric shapes and the confused and somewhat mystical 'philosophy' of its leader Malevich. Some of his ideas resemble those of Kandinsky (his compatriot and sometime colleague, and one of the greatest founders of 20th century art). But he'd lacked the latter's intellectual clarity and never achieved the same stature; nor was he able to develop his simple forms to any extent, and in the hands of less talented followers Suprematism became an easy and fashionable formula.

Constructivism was by nature far more extrovert and active; its vigour enabled it to seize the opportunities of revolution, and in fact it was only after 1917 that it came to life as a movement. Basically it grew out of Vladimir Tatlin's attempts to break down the barriers between art and life, and before the revolution these attempts were necessarily modest. They took the form of 'constructions' which shed the safe harbour of frame and wall, and came out into space. They couldn't be called sculpture, because that is basically solid. Now space itself became an element at the very heart and centre of the design. The constructions were made from wood, glass, wire and plaster — all potential builders' materials. The old duality of form and content was resolved in a synthesis where the actual materials, their texture, the juxtaposition of the planes and rhythms they formed, their shape and structure — became the main subject matter. Perhaps most important was the possibility it afforded of incorporating real movement: a very novel idea in 1915, though now it is an accepted element in both painting and construction.

These experiments, which Tatlin regarded in a somewhat scientific light, were bound to suggest more ambitious projects than his Corner Reliefs. Moreover, there was a marked streak of functionalism in its make-up, and in Tatlin's outlook (during the Civil War he was to design a stove to burn the minimum quantity of fuel while giving the maximum heat). This, before October, was bound to come up against numerous barriers and frustrations; later, having elaborated his theories of the Culture of materials and the Artist Engineer, Tatlin was to look back on this period as a time of back-room research, of thinking isolated from action.

Art comes out of its corner

Most important of all, the revolution

Art and the Russian revolution

A special eight-page photo feature

1

(1) Postcard of Lenin, B. Yemirov, 1918. (2) 'Lenin on the Tribune', 1930, A. Gernsimov. The difference between these images of Lenin is striking. In 1918 Lenin was portrayed as a thoughtful human figure. By 1930 he has become heroic — the leader rather than one of the masses.

(3) 'The Attempt on the Life of Lenin', PP Baloynsov.

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(4) Malevich with students departing for Moscow, 1920. (5) El Lissitsky in his studio, 1919

(6) A large part of the propaganda work for the new revolution was undertaken by artists who decorated trains, trucks, buildings, china, and produced posters using images of the revolution and a mixture of styles, including the style of icons familiar to the illiterate Russian peasants.

(7) 'Books are nothing but men talking to everyone', S. Ivanov poster, 1920. Posters like these, with a simple, bold message, were produced in vast quantities. They were both good communications and exciting images for everyone.

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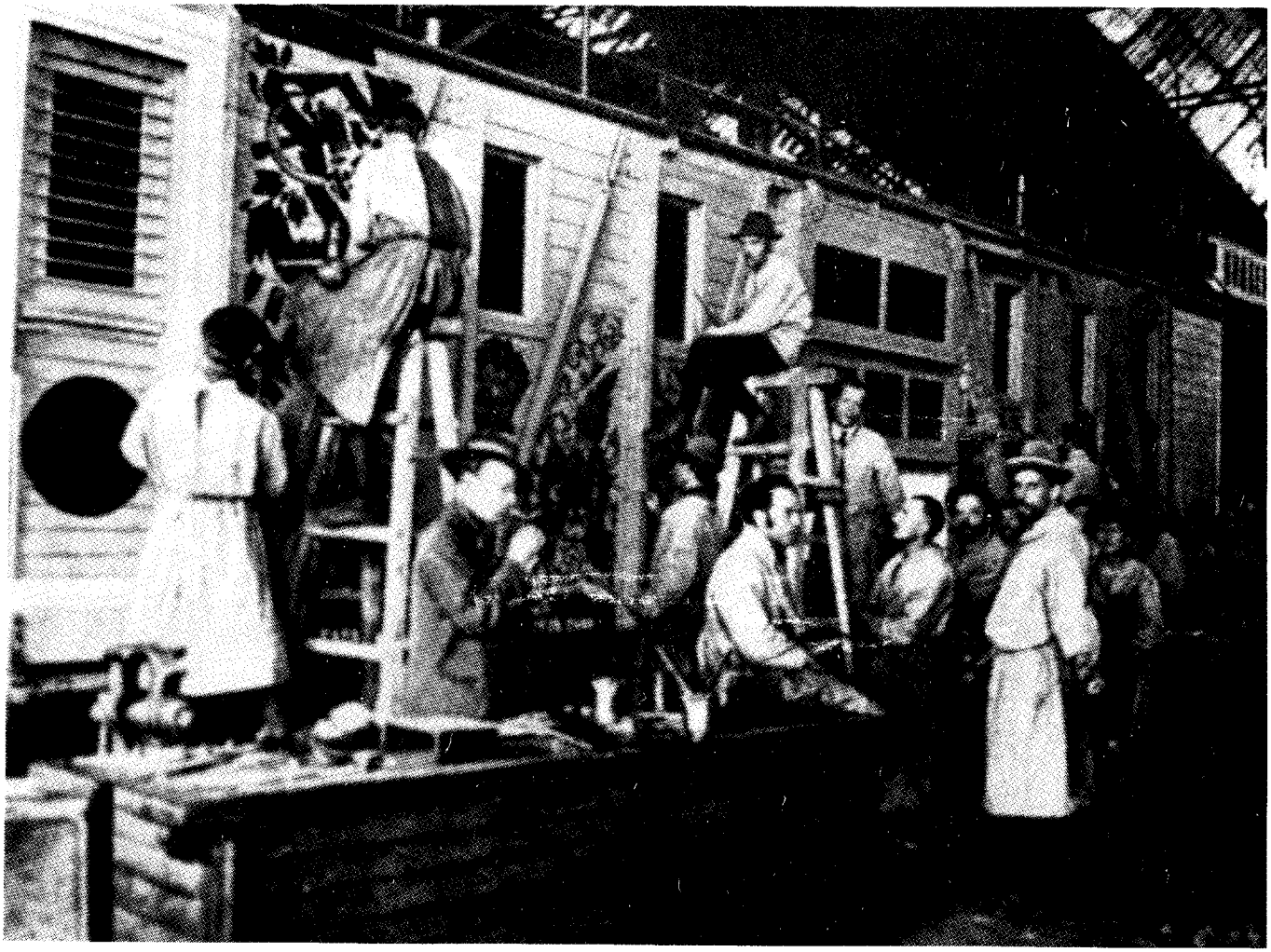


КНИГА ГОВО
НИЧТО РЯ-
ИНОЕ ЩИЙ
КАК ЧЕ ПУБ
ЛОВЕК ЛИЧНО.
КНИГА
СВЕТОЧ

8

(8) 'Either we destroy capitalism or it walks all over us', Victor Deni poster, 1917

(9), (10), (11), (12) As well as using traditional designs and styles based on woodcuts and peasant icons, the artists used styles and typefaces which were a development of suprematism and constructivism.
(9) Design for a stamp, N. Altman, 1922
(10) Poster against spitting, Pashkov, mid-'20s
(11) Poster advertising 'Blue Blouse' — groups of young actors producing agitprop plays, mid-'20s
(12) Poster advertising the free health service, Mayakovsky, mid-'20s
All this diversity was to disappear in favour of Socialist Realist blandness.

(13), (14) White on White, Malevich, 1917-8; Black on Black, Rodchenko, 1918
These images are the logical conclusion of the suprematism developed by Malevich. Earlier works are more interesting and it is easier to see their supposed spiritual significance. Even so, suprematism marked a decisive break with the past and a step into the new ground of abstract art. Russian artists were extremely innovative during this period until Stalin demanded a return to the past with Socialist Realism.

9

(15) Cover design for Mayakovsky's work, '13 years of work, Vol.2', Lavinsky, 1922. Russian artists were the first to use typography in this way, on posters, book covers, stamps, etc., using huge letters and few words

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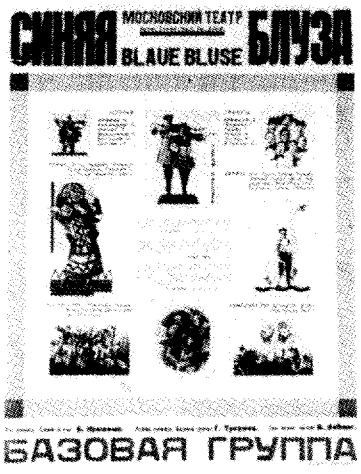

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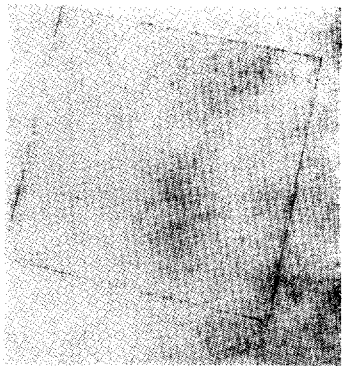

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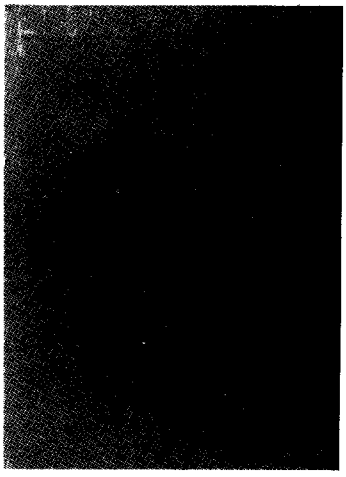


ВЛАДИМИР МАЯКОВСКИЙ
т 2
МАЯКОВСКИЙ
15 ЛЕТ РАБОТЫ
ТОМ 2

16

17

(16) 'The Tired Soldier', anti-war poster for Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, L. Pasternak, 1917

(17) Political meeting of factory workers in Briansk, October 1905

(18) Desecrated Torah Scrolls in the synagogue at Kishinev after the Pogrom of 1903. Inspired by the idea of a mystical Orthodox crusade, the Tsarist-backed Union of Russian People sponsored the Black Hundreds in their provocation of 'enemies of autocracy' and their inhuman pogroms against the Jews

(19) Cover design of Red Laughter, short-lived satirical magazine, B. Kustodiev, 1906. Cover is to commemorate Bloody Sunday when troops opened fire on a peaceful demonstration to the Tsar, killing over 200, in January 1905

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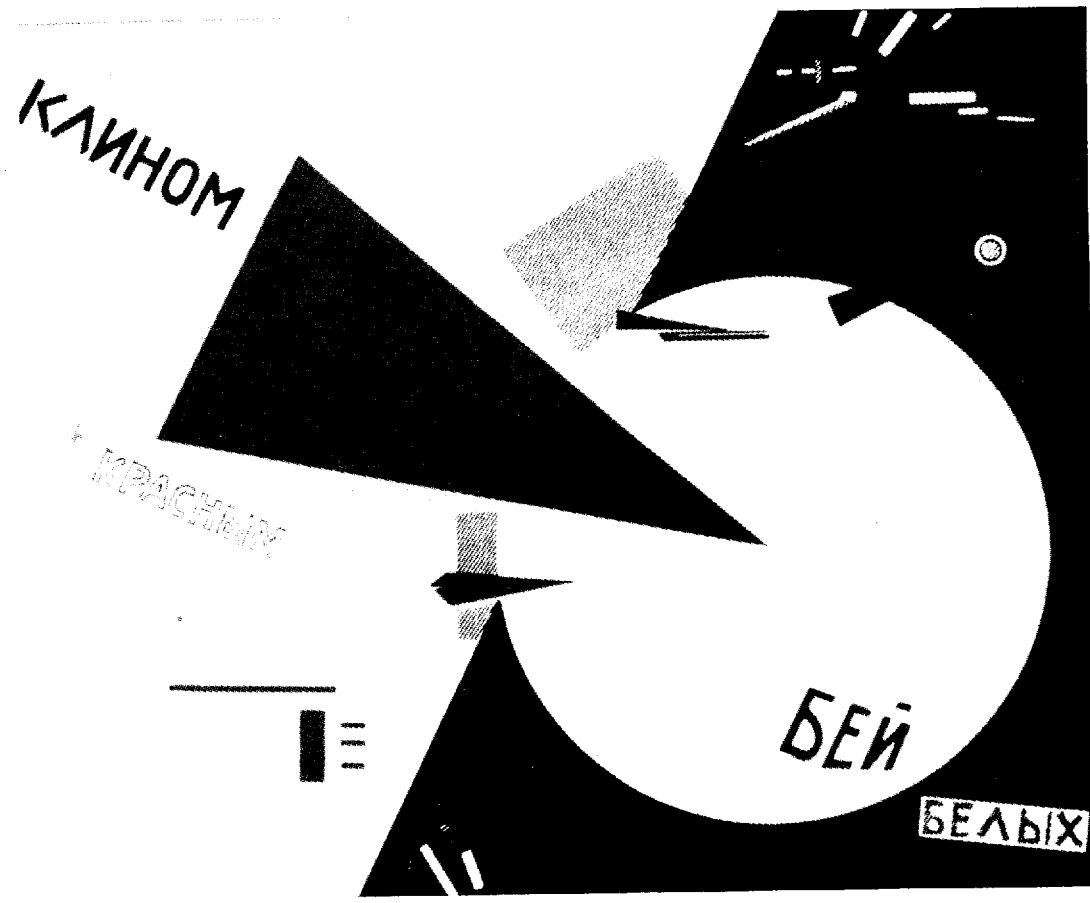
КРАСНЫЙ
СЛОВО



Above: Defend Petrograd with all your strength!
Alexander Apsit (Petrov), 1919

Right: Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge
Lazar (El) Lissitzky, 1920

offered the possibility of integrating art with society and bringing an end to its use as a mere market commodity which was enjoyed by at most a small elite. The results appeared almost overnight; from being hungry experimenters, artists of the avant garde suddenly found themselves in positions of power and influence — as heads of art colleges, leading members of the Commissariat for People's Education (NARKOMPROS), the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKHUK) and IZO, which had the task of reorganising the country's museums.

This favourable situation came about mainly because of these artists' attitude to the Revolution. While their reactionary critics and all the old Academicians immediately left the country (several returned, however... with the White Armies) the avant garde — now know as Leftists — leapt to action and gave all their energies to helping the spead of communist ideas throughout Russia, in Agitprop, the theatre, posters and many other spheres of activity. Unlike the present cultural hacks with their Black Sea villas, their only privilege in the first years was to be hardworking and self-sacrificing, to suffer the same cold, hunger and hardship as the working class and be as obdurate as the Bolsheviks; later, they continued to share in the fate of the Bolsheviks — in suicide, prison and Siberian cold.

Propaganda was put up everywhere; it was sometimes gigantic and hideous, often inventive and witty, with the emphasis on caricature. Walls of buildings were painted and covered with slogans, quotations from leading Bolsheviks and the 'Old masters', and even the latest news. All means of transportation, wagons, ships and trains were covered with brightly painted revolutionary pictures, so that the message might reach the most remote outposts. Even everyday objects like plates, cups and matchboxes carried pictures and slogans. Most of this work was based on the prevailing styles of the avant garde — at first Suprematism. Like the poster on the previous page (the lettering says: 'Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge') and later Constructivism. It was naturally very rough and ready (these examples, particularly the poster by El Lissitsky, are probably exceptional) but nevertheless the sudden proliferation of painted images and vigorous, strong typography must have been very exciting — not to say effective — while the lack of refinement was often compensated for by freshness and spontaneity. Its effectiveness, in this period when propaganda played a leading role in the defense of the workers' state, gives the lie to the Stalinist bogey about the remoteness and incomprehensibility of abstract art; at such a time of civil war and desperate self-defense by the regime it is unlikely that any medium of propaganda which failed to appeal to the widest masses would have been so encouraged.

Art to reach everyone

The first response to the revolution was seen in the abandonment of easel painting and all small scale work. For a time the 'Bolshevik monumental style' prevailed, with huge portraits set up of world heroes of revolution. Art had to be big and imposing enough to reach everyone. The failure of this 'style' depending as it did solely on size, was as rapid as it was inevitable. The most serious and lasting attempts were made in music.

After many discussions between Gastev and Mayakovsky, and trial perfomances at Leningrad and Nizhni-Novgorod, the first real performance took place in Baku, on November 7th 1922, to mark the fifth anniversary of the Revolution. Foghorns of the whole Caspian Fleet, all factory sirens, two batteries of artillery, several infantry regiments, a machine gun section and real hydroplanes took part — as well as massive choirs in which all the spectators joined. The Festival was described as very impressive, but later attempts at such things as factory whistle symphonies encountered unsurmountable problems, failing to achieve even a recognisable Internationale.

But the desire that art should reach out into the streets and factories was still foremost in the ambitions of most artists — expressed in Mayakovsky's aim to 'make the streets his brushes and the squares his palette.' The Constructivists' solution to this now brought them forward as the most important movement of the day. 'The Art of the proletariat", they said, "is not a holy shrine where things are lazily regarded, but work, a factory which produces new artists' things."

From this grew the desire to be active builders, not just back room designers. Tatlin saw his previous achievements as mere experiments to occupy his time until he could emerge as the artist-engineer of the new society. Indeed, he is generally best remembered now for the projected Monument to the Third International, rather than for his Corner Reliefs and had the monument been realised in its final form it would in fact have been his greatest achievement:

"The monument was to be twice the height of the Empire State building. It was to be executed in glass and iron. An iron spiral framework was to support a body consisting of a glass cylinder, a glass cone and glass cube. This body was to be suspended on a dynamic asymmetrical axis, like a leaning Eiffel Tower, which would thus continue its spiral rhythm into space beyond. Such 'movement' was not to be confined to the static design. The body of the monument itself was literally going to move. The cylinder was to revolve on its axis once a year: the activities allocated to this position of the building were lectures, conferences and Congress meetings. The cone was to complete a revolution once a month and to house executive activities. The topmost cube was to complete a full turn on its axis once a day and to be an information centre. It was constantly to issue news bulletins, proclamations and manifestos — by means of telegraph, radio telephone and loudspeaker". (Camilla Gray — the Great Experiment; Russian Art 1863-1922. Thames and Hudson, 1962).

This was an ambitious project for 1919 under any circumstances and considering Russia then as a country emerging from feudalism and fighting a civil war it is hardly surprising that the plans were never realised beyond a small wooden model. Other plans, for a huge Labour Palace in Moscow, for new workers' dwellings and the rational rebuilding of whole towns, never went beyond paper.

The Constructivists found themselves in the same predicament as that of the Bolsheviks. They were far ahead of the technical resources and know-how of a country with 150 million illiterate peasants. If the social aims of Lenin were in excess of the possibilities afforded by the objective situation, then all the more so were the aims of Tatlin, which far exceeded Lenin's hopes for the immediate future in the field of art and culture. Lenin believed that the masses deserved something better than pageants and circuses. "'They have acquired the right to a genuinely great art". But since art should be understood by the masses without being lowered, there must first be the "The broadest possible enlightenment and education. That will lay the foundation for a culture — on condition, of course, that the question of bread is solved. On that foundation there ought to grow up a genuinely great new communist art, which will create a form corresponding to its content". A concept which Stalin later saw fit to reverse, deliberately bringing art down to the lowest possible level in his use of it as bureaucratic propaganda.

Tatlin and his fellow artists saw the revolution as one event which would overnight bring them within reach of their highest ambitions, rather than as the first stage of a society in transition, a society which was even vulnerable to degeneration if faced with adverse conditions and isolation within national boundaries. His plans could never be executed, and he resorted eventually to industrial design — which later offered a fairly sheltered harbour from bureaucratic conformity. Many others, including Gabo and Pevsner, left the country to continue their work wherever they could find the technical resources. Most members of the Consructivist Group, however, stayed on and tried to find other outlets. This they did quite successfully for about ten years after the revolution, mostly in the Theatre, and with typography, poster design, photo-montage (which greatly influenced Eisenstein's film-making technique) and various projects which can be called 'mass theatre' — pageants, mass poetry readings, and the re-enactments of October which were organised by Nathan Altman, Ivan Puni, and his wife Bogoslavskaya: in 1918 to mark the occasion they covered the square in front of the Winter Palace in Petrograd with huge posters.

In the theatre

In reaction against the static bourgeois realism of Stanislavsky, the 'synthetic theatre' had been pioneered by constructivists at the Moscow Kamerny

Theatre. Their first attempts, before 1917, involved integrating the sets, costumes, actors and their gestures into a dynamic system; but the productions then were all put on for small circles of the intellectual avant garde and suffered from this unreal seclusion. The possibility of extending the scope of these productions, after 1917, led to a real flowering of the constructivist theatre and its many variants. Its exponents included men like Tairov and Meyerhold, who between them, using declamation, involving the audience and destroying the 'illusory' aspect of theatre, were the forerunners of Brecht's 'Theatre of Alienation'.

Vsevlod Meyerhold developed what he called the bio-mechanical technique, whose physical expressiveness and dynamic momentum became suitable for an extravert social experience. He replaced decorative scenery with constructions expressing 'action and technology', declaring:

"The new theatre denies and repudiates everything which is merely ornamental and not directly practical... therefore its framework must include the technical creations of the present, machines of all kinds, motors and cannons, all the more because these objects also strengthen the dynamics of the production". (R. Fulop-Miller: The Mind and Face of Bolshevism p.122).

These productions were often 'animated' by searchlights, steam sirens, peals of bells and air acrobats.

Meyerhold's Constructive theatre soon became the idiom for plays put on in factories and workers' clubs. It became so popular that soon even the classical theatre companies were using his methods, and the State Opera House 'revolutionised' Carmen and Wagner's Lohengrin with dynamic light effects and geometric props. Meyerhold was given much encouragement from the Party and honoured as People's Artist — but his mass popularity notwithstanding he was denounced as a formalist by those who were sending the Red Bolsheviks to their graves and arrested in 1939.

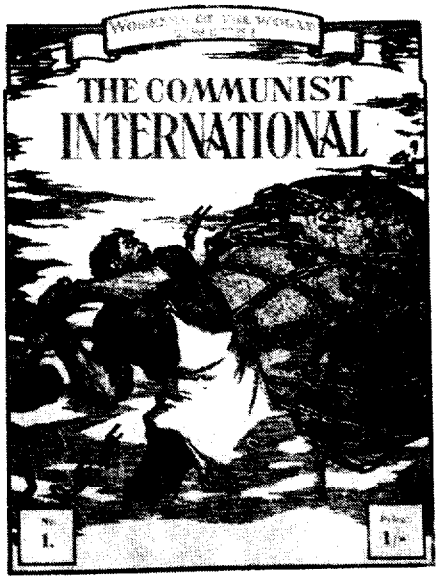
Experiments were also made with hanging planes and moving stairways, where the actors were to move vertically as well as horizontally. Eisenstein, working then for Forregger's Prolecult Company, moved the actors around on ropes, and would on occasion suddenly darken the stage, lower a screen and show a film. This company exaggerated the athletical aspect of Meyerhold's bio-mechanics into a predominating clowning and acrobatics. A similar emphasis emerged in another company, the 'Projection Theatre' which had no stage at all. The performances took place in the middle of the hall, and consisted entirely of silent action, using geometric constructions and appliances.

It was not only the use of actual 'constructions' in the production which was derived from the ideas of Tatlin and the constructivists; the exploration of space and materials, the dynamics of movement and the actual physical properties of the body were as integral to the theatre of Meyerhold and Forregger as they were to the art of Tatlin. Where Tatlin abandoned the background to his reliefs and integrated them into the surrounding life and space, Forregger similarly staged his productions 'in the round' and shed the constricting effects of stage and backcloth.

On the stage, Meyerhold often integrated the movement of great cylinders or wheels with the physical actions or emotional climaxes of the characters, thereby heightening the drama. Though Tatlin was technically unable to proceed at that period towards kinetic art, his plans for the Third International Monument reveal an increasing interest in movement. The experimental theatre was able to develop these ideas at a time when the artists outside the theatre were limited to plans on paper, and so became the only medium through which constructivism was actively realised in its full sense, in all its dimensions.

Museums for the present

Though the Constructivists had neither



the knowledge nor the material basis to be real artist-engineers, they did have an excellent opportunity in the field of education. This was time of discussion, experimentation and decision on the future organisation of art education and the institutions set up to direct the programme were either dominated or entirely staffed by 'leftist' artists.

Under Narkompros, IZO was set up in 1918, with David Sternberg as director, Alexander Rodchenko (a leading Constructivist) as head of its Museum Bureau, and Altman, Tatlin, Kandinsky, Olga Rosanova and the critics Osip Brik and Punin on its staff. In the 36 museums they launched in the next three years, 'leftist' art was predominant, though they usually included also an 'historical museum' section containing 'art of the past' for 'scientific study', the more than doubtful assumption being that it had no aesthetic contribution to make either to life in general or to the development of a new form of art. This rather dangerous view was not held by all the artists concerned; many felt that art of the past must be seen as part of a process, an element in the creation of a new art to be used and understood without having to be copied or repeated. As Lenin had said "you must take the whole culture which capitalism left and create socialism out of it". Later, he elaborated this view:

"Without a clear understanding that only with an accurate knowledge of the culture created by the whole development of mankind, only by working it over, can we create a proletarian culture — without this understanding we will never fulfill this task".

But while Lenin saw the past as the doorway to the future, Stalin was to use it as a straitjacket, resurrecting it to stifle any future art.

Schools for the future

It is most likely that the basic motive in the rejection of past and academic art was the desire to rectify the pre-revolutionary situation, where artists of the avant garde were expelled from the academies and schools, removed from their posts (if they had them), derided, mocked and persecuted and prevented from exhibiting, by members of the Academy — which often made it impossible for them to earn a living. It must also be said that, other than icons, there was only a negligible quantity of paintings from Russia's past that were even worth keeping. Before the 1860s Russia's cultural tradition was almost entirely literary. This desire to redress the balance was soon active in the schools themselves — hitherto a bastion of reaction — but now under IZO's directorship. In 1918 the Petrograd Academy of Art was re-opened as Svomas (Free Studios) whose programme allowed the entrance of anyone over the age of 16 at any time of the year, with the right to elect professors of their choice. This soon led to chaos, and the Svomas were abolished in 1921, to be re-established a year later on a programme worked out by Kandinsky.

In Moscow, the College of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture was closed and reformed, together with the Storganov School of Applied Art, as Vkhutemas or Higher Technical-Artistic Studios, aiming to bring about a synthesis of art, crafts and industry as another part of the general campaign to bring the artist into closer contact with the people and vice versa. It was also very liberal in its organisation and practically autonomous. Apart from the actual teaching much of the time was given up to discussion and seminars which were open to the public and to visiting artists.

This is by no means the whole picture, but a general survey of some of the major trends of the years (roughly) 1917-24. Beneath the surface were a number of issues and forces — political, personal and social which ultimately disrupted and changed it. Among the questions debated at length which ultimately was to become all-important was 'proletarian art' and the relationship of the artist to the workers' state. The rise of Stalinism with its artistic doctrine of 'socialist realism' buried all the experiments and ideas of the first years in its mud of compulsory mediocrity.

The Russian Revolution ignited the explosion of artistic creation we have surveyed. It was not planned, it happened; an epiphenomenon of the working class seizure of power and the savage class struggles that followed. But the proletariat in power needed theories of art, and so did the revolutionary artists and writers, to explain what was happening and why, to know what should be made to happen, and perhaps stopped from happening in the future.

Side by side with the explosion of cultural practice, there occurred an explosion of theorising about culture and the proletarian revolution. And then, almost as soon as the civil war and the wars of foreign intervention against the workers' revolution were over, the new bureaucracy began increasingly to make itself felt, in this field as in all others, until, ultimately, it had clamped its stultifying iron hoops around art and literature as on everything else in the new Soviet society.

Part 2: The transition

The statements and discussions of the CPSU in the early twenties left no doubt that artists must be left free to work, develop and experiment both in the matter of form, and regarding their relationship with propaganda or direct political commitment (I will discuss this in more detail below). Before the Stalinist bureaucracy could lay it down in 1932 that both the style and content of a work of art in any medium must follow certain rules, a period of time had to elapse, in which the transition could be made from Bolshevism to Stalinism.

It was during this period that RAPP (Association of Proletarian Artists and Writers) came into its own. It was supposedly independent and unofficial, but in effect functioned under the guardianship of the Stalin faction, and through economic boycott and strangulation, systematic political and social ostracism, it wielded enough power to bludgeon and bully and suffocate most artistic endeavour in the late 1920s.

Its main task was not to lay down formal rules for literature and art — the writers were not yet compliant enough for that. What it did insist on was the principle that art must serve propaganda, and this reached a climax in 1930 at an international Congress it sponsored at Karkov, with delegates from 22 countries.

RAPP owed its success to the fact that it managed to take into itself many genuine, if mistaken, communists who wanted to show their devotion to the Revolution as actively in the arts as in other spheres of life. Many of the campaigns were directed at writers outside the Party, and RAPP's early slogans, like 'The Living Man' and 'Tearing down the Masks' appeared harmless enough. They still insisted on the artist's right to tell the whole truth in objective and human characteristions, they had respect for psychological truth, and never advocated over-simplification.

Literary ability, however, was way down its table of virtues. Membership depended on ability to "organise the psyche of the toiling masses in the direction of the ultimate tasks of the proletariat" — which meant organising the writers in the direction of the tasks set by the Russian bureaucracy. Presiding over this process was Leopold Averbach, whose own style was once likened to that of "a business-college sophomore studying to be a publicity writer for a scenic railroad". Victor Serge described him around 1930: "He was a young Soviet careerist possessed of an extraordinary talent for the bureaucratic calling. Less than thirty, he had the hairless head of the young senior official, the verbal fluency of a congress demagogue, and the dominating false-sincere eyes of the manipulator of meetings."

The seizure of power in literature

A good deal had been accomplished by 1930, when such slogans as "The Five-Year Plan in Poetry" and "Creative Duty to the Socialist Fatherland" found mute acceptance at the Kharkov Congress. There, RAPP members spoke of 'the art job', 'poetic shock troops', 'turning out literary commodities' and 'the seizure of power in literature'. Heedless of Marx's opposition to that division of labour in the arts which reduced an artist to being solely a painter, writer, sculptor, etc., Tretyakov blithely outlined his plan — and was applauded!

"We foresee the operation of literary workshops where the functions are divided...That is, the workshops will contain specialists of an extra-literary order, having valuable material at their disposal (voyages, investigations, biographies, adventures etc); alongside them fixators will be at work gathering necessary material, happenings, notes, documents. The mounting of the received materials in this or that sequence, the working up of the language in dependence upon the public for which the book is being written — this is the job of the literary formulators...We can't wait forever while the professional writer tosses in his bed and gives birth to something known and useful to him alone. We assume that book production can be planned in advance like the production of textiles and steel."

Victor Serge remembered a similar RAPP meeting "...we heard a report from Averbach on the spirit of the proletariat, the collective farm and bolshevism in literature. Lunacharsky, frozen in a stance of weary boredom, kept passing me ironical little notes."

The purpose of these activities was to bring to heel the many bourgeois and fellow-travelling writers who had remained in Russia, and those writers and artists who had returned to seek private patronage after the NEP. They were destined to be the mainstay of the future regime in the arts, being far easier to control than those who had joined the Party and had worked with the Bolsheviks to make and hold the revolution. Among them were some fine and independent writers, like Boris Pilniak, who had to be picked out and humiliated before he could be useful to the bureaucracy. Others had been bourgeois hacks and, having learned the lesson from the example of Pilniak, were just as willing to be Stalinist hacks. When they were thoroughly broken in, they could be brought in to replace the Marxists — literary scabs. The Bolshevik historian Pokrovky for example, was denounced, and in his place two bourgeois historians, Tarle and Vipper, were rehabilitated and recalled to carry out the important Stalinist tasks of glorifying Russian despots of the past.

Despite all the bullying by RAPP, and the increasingly oppressive atmosphere, there was still a certain amount of latitude for intellectuals and, considering the coming ice-age, comparative freedom. Other small societies existed which could shelter the individual artist from the fury of RAPP; many managed to avoid RAPP by reason of their reputation — Mayakovsky stayed away from it until shortly before his suicide; and despite a spate of 'Five Year Plan' novels and plays, there was no Absolute Decree on style.

By 1932 it was judged that RAPP had completed its useful work, and as a reward it was summarily dismissed. All other writers' organisations were abolished, and the Central Committee assumed direct control through the single Union of Soviet Writers. At the same time 'Socialist Realism' was declared to be the official style of all Soviet writers, painters, film-makers, musicians etc.

RAPP had done its job and could not be trusted any longer — it contained too many people who were genuinely striving for 'proletarian' art, and a number of these were later denounced as 'Trotskyists'. As for Averbach — "He was still the nephew of Yagoda, the head of Security, and a good bureaucrat to boot. He delivered a number of speeches condemning his own 'cultural politics' of yesterday... And the CC gave him the task of managing a Communist organisation in Magnitogorsk. There Leopold Averbach initiated a sabotage-trial, acted himself as prosecutor against the technicians concerned, (and) had them condemned to death according to the rite".

Part 3: The Stalinist ice age

Socialist Realism

Everybody praises a work of art which is true to life; conversely, art which is false and artificial is generally regarded as signalling decadence, though it can still give pleasure and entertainment. As such, however, it is usually ranked second, as art, to the work of truth and sincerity..

But 'true to life' is a very general phrase and likewise the word 'realism' needs to be defined before it can be useful. Sometimes it rests on polar opposites: Classicism contains the essence of the real, a 'universal' reality derived from a constant study of nature; 'romantic' realism generally concentrates on the particular. It either depicts this particular with exact and photographically representational likeness , or caricatures, distorts and exaggerates it, ignoring the niceties of correct detail, in order to draw attention to it. Also, a work can be termed realistic simply because of its **choice** of subject matter, regardless of the **form** it takes — this usage in particular became popular in the last century to cover subjects which had hitherto not been considered worthy of art — ie ordinary everyday objects and the 'unheroic' lives of the exploited classes.

To merit praise as 'true to life' or sincere, a work of art may be realistic in any one of these ways, or in a suitable combination of them — or in none of them. But a bad combination of the contradictory elements in form or subject can lead to disaster, ie something just as false and meaningless as a piece of purely decorative art — except that the latter has no pretensions, and at least brightens up the view.

If one took the Stalinist bureaucrats at their face value, the only possible conclusion would be that they made every mistake in the book when they formulated their art of the Socialist Fatherland. Less charitable people will probably say that the bureaucracy didn't care a damn about the rules of art.

They started out from the 'social realism' of the 19th century — Balzac, Tolstoy, Zola. At the time, Marx had taken realism as the main criterion of a work of literature. Not only was it, in artistic terms, the avant garde at that time, but socially it could not be other than revolutionary. Both Marx and Engels thought that no matter where the writer stood politically, if he only faithfully portrayed the society he lived in and its relationships, his work would be revolutionary. This view was also held by the ruling class, which was horrified by the realists. The 'Social Realist' method of minute physical and psychological investigation, the documentary approach they often adopted, led to the shedding of much of the moralising sentimentality which had hitherto coated all depictions of the 'lower' classes.

Was this what Stalin's cultural commissar Zhdanov wanted? No, not quite. It was explained that these classics had used realism to negate their society. Socialist Realists must use realism to affirm theirs. In practice, in order to do this, genuine realism (loosely defined as 'true to life') had to be suppressed completely, and the **forms** of it harnessed to a fantasy-propaganda world; or, as another variant, a loose approximation to reality could be shown, but so generalised and so glossed up that it had nothing to do with realism either. The penetrating eye and unflinching pen of a genuine realist would surely have shown us something of the suffocating political atmosphere; it might have given a glimpse of old men rummaging through dustbins at the back of GPU men's homes, hoping to find some potato peelings; we may have been shown the wives and daughters of workers supplement their wages by selling themselves to those same GPU men, or the wife of a bureaucrat emerging from one of the special 'Luxe' shops laden with fine clothes, delicacies and perfumes, while homeless children are rounded up from the streets and treated like criminals. But Socialist (!) Realism (!) could show none of these — for its brief was, without looking or thinking, to be positive and affirmative about the Stalinist society around it. But not only did the truth have to be suppressed. It had to be suppressed while appearing to be shown.

So, when dealing with reality, the Socialist Realist writer or artist couldn't be too careful. Leonov's novel *Road to the Ocean* tells the story of a Bolshevik hero — but the presidium of the Union of Soviet Writers decided it was too individualised. History must never be just crudely reflected — but subtly fitted in with the demands of propaganda, spruced up to fit the image. Alexei Tolstoy's Civil War novel — Bread (1937) — had to alter countless historical facts so as to make Stalin the hero of the defence of Tsaritsyn. (Not that Alexei Tolstoy minded!) One had to be careful about ancient history too: Demyan Bedny's 'Epic Heroes' was denounced for treating satirically the 10th century conversion of Russia to Christianity.

What was wanted was not reality at all, but an idealised, generalised, 'typical' Soviet hero, the larger-than-life collective farm worker that-should-have-been; the Leader, recognisable only by moustache and pipe, inflated monstrously and surrounded by all the evidence of an apotheoisis. The observer's impartiality of many of the 19th century realists had been wiped out without a trace: RAPP had seen to that. The formula laid down "the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism". For 'Spirit of Socialism' read a strong tinge of Romanticism — "a supreme spirit of heroic deeds and magnificent future prospects".

What then was left of the classic realism which had once been so revolutionary and which, in Soviet conditions, would have been equally revolutionary? All that remained was the name, which was a very good — if ill-fitting — cover for the figments of a hack imagination. Who, after all, could object to the idea of an art which is true and sincere, or call into question such an eminent ancestry? Also, Marx and Engels could always be dragged in by the hair and made to testify that Realism is a desirable quality — forgetting the fact that 'Socialist Realism' had absolutely no connection with Realism. Their statements on commitment (the following two samples are Engels') could be quietly forgotten:

"The more the author's views are concealed the better for the work of art. The realism...may creep out even in spite of the author's views." (Letter to Margaret Harkness).

"...I think the bias should flow by itself from the situation and action, without particular indications, and that the writer is not obliged to obtrude on the reader the future historical solutions of the social conflicts pictured." (Letter to the novelist Minna Kautsky).

There remained also, as a hollow shell, the **forms** of the 19th century realism, the surface style. This, devoid of its content, was quite irrelevant to the whole question of realism. But it was a useful way to suppress experimentation, and by keeping to the conventions which the censors could understand, kept the artists safe from any deviations into genuine realism which might be cunningly disguised within some new found form.

Evidently taking it all at face value, Brecht summed up the whole question in a July 1938 article intended for Das Wort, a German literary review produced in Moscow, of which he was co-editor at the time, but which was not published until 1954:

"As a result no doubt of essays concentrating on a particular way of realist writing — that of the bourgeois novel — readers of Das Wort have recently expressed their concern that this review may be restricting realism in

literature within too narrow boundaries. One or two articles may have laid down unduly formal criteria for realist writing, and as a result several readers came to interpret this as meaning that a book is written realistically when it is 'written in the same way as the bourgeois novels of the last century'."

After quoting Shelley, Cervantes, Swift, Grimmelhausen, Dickens, Voltaire and Hasek as realists using different forms from those of Tolstoy and Balzac, he concluded that 'realism is not a matter of form' —

"Tying together a great conception like Realism to a few names is dangerous however famous they may be, and so is the bundling together of a few forms to make a universally-applicable creative method, even if those forms are useful in themselves. Literary forms have to be checked against reality, not against aesthetics — even realist aesthetics. **There are many ways of suppressing the truth, and many ways of stating it.**" (Emphasis RL).

Some years later, he summed up in retrospect the effect of this reduction of the notion of realism to one style. It is worth quoting at length again — Brecht was one of the few genuinely creative artists whose friendship Stalinism could boast. Although sufficiently disillusioned to write in the same notebook the cryptic question "Accessible to the people or accessible to the official?" he still writes with the sympathy of one who believes it was all just a matter of well-intentioned mistakes:

"The principles of a realistic and socialist art were not examined but simply treated as a style to be imposed on artists of very different sorts, some of them of world-wide reputation. This led to a pernicious levelling and to the discouragement of that individual and independent sense of form without which no art is possible. The campaign against the formalism of decaying bourgeois art was turned into a campaign against the sense of form... Without Marxist knowledge and a socialist outlook it is impossible today to understand reality or to use one's understanding to change it. For art, however, this is not a question of style, least of all today. Style only comes into the matter in so far as the style needs to be as simple as possible, as intelligible as possible; the battle for socialism cannot be won by a handful of highly educated connoisseurs, a few people who know how to understand complicated charades. But I said as simple **as possible.** Certain complex processes which we need to understand cannot be **quite** simply portrayed." (From Brecht on Theatre, trans. John Willet. Methuen.)

Another writer with no political fish to fry was the great Irish Stalinist playwright Sean O'Casey, who expressed himself rather more directly in a private letter (to Ken Coates in 1955):

Life, he said, was complex, "..bewildering, lively, dull, selfish, generous and so on. And what a complex thing is one human life alone! All it has to deal with, within himself, without from the life of others. Zhdanov — of whom you have heard, I daresay — didn't know what he was talking about; and all who echoed him in the Daily Worker and elsewhere, knew a damned sight less". (Published in The Socialist Register, 1964).

How was the 'most advanced literature in the world' brought into being? How could a writer or a painter abandon his life's course and "with hands that tremble for fear of the verdict of some official", as Brecht wrote, set about the precarious task of deriving "the material for his works of art, his subject matter, images, artistic language and speech, from the life and experience of the men and women of Dnieprostroy, or Magnistostroy...from the heroic epic of the Chelyuskin expedition, from the experience of our collective farms"; at the same time steering between the "seamy side of Soviet life" (a subject strictly forbidden) which stared him daily in the face, and the mythical master-race of the bureaucratic propagandists?

The answer is that, unless he wanted to emigrate, he had no choice. The Central Committee had the monpoly of publishing, printing, distribution, criticism: "Success was manufactured wholly by the Party offices. The chosen book, recommended to all the libraries in the land, was printed in tens of thousands of copies; the Foreign Languages Publishing House translated it into several languages, and the author, loaded with money and praise, became a 'great writer' in the space of a season, which of course deceived nobody" (Serge). Conversely, those books which accidentally got printed and were not favoured by the Writers' Union, were not even permitted a small circulation — they were sent immediately to be pulped.

Close supervision reigned long before the printing stage: "I was checked, line by line, by experts charged with the task of uncovering possible sabotage in the disposition of semicolons. I knew Nadezhda Constantinova Krupskaya was working in similar conditions on her memoirs of Lenin; a committee was reviewing her every line. Gorky was altering his own memoirs on the demand of the Central Committee."...To Boris Pilniak "it had been suggested...that to avoid banishment from Soviet literature, he should remodel 'Forest of the Isles', that 'counter-revolutionary' tale of his, into a novel agreeable to the CC. This body's Cultural Section had assigned him a co-author who, page by page, would ask him to suppress this and add that. The helpmate's name ws Yezhov..." (Serge).

There were inducements of a different kind. Serge continues: "Then came the years of rationing, famine and black-marketeering. Authors with the right ideas received fantastic secret rations from the GPU co-operatives, including even butter, cheese and chocolate! 'Do have a little taste' a friend asked me, 'of this highly confidential Gruyere...' Doubtful writers, that is any who were lyrical, mystical or unpolitical, got mediocre official rations." This was increasingly supplemented by imprisonment, deportation and killings.

The 1934 Writers' Congress

After several years of such conditioning, and two years after the announcement of 'Socialist' 'Realism', the intellectuals were brought out and put on show in a great circus called the first Writers' Congress. During 25 sessions over two weeks 200 speeches and reports were delivered to the 590 Russian delegates and 40 distinguished foreign guests. The main purpose of the exercise was to acclaim the 'most advanced literature in the world', and to attack and denigrate anything which looked like contending for the title.

The flavour of the affair — the awful combination of ignorance with Pope-like laying down of the law — is best savoured from the speech of Karl Radek, a renegade Trotskyist soon to be sent by Stalin to Siberia, where he perished. Radek laid about him condemning the 'decadence' of modern 'bourgeois' art. As his prime example he chose James Joyce's great novel 'Ulysses' which had been banned everywhere when Joyce published it in the early '20s. As everyone remotely interested in such things knows Ulysses follows the movements and encounters of a number of characters around Dublin during a single day in June 1904. Radek denounces Joyce for petit-bourgeois small-mindedness and indifference to great events for having set this highly personal chronicle against the background which Joyce allegedly ignored of the 1916 rising in Dublin! Plainly Stalin's cultural commissar, Radek, had never read the book he was condemning!

A few voices spoke in different tones — and within three years they were silenced. The short story writer Isaac Babel, author of the famous collection of civil war stories, 'Red Cavalry', spoke for the 'right to surprise', to experiment. Jean Richard Bloch advocated different levels for literature — that some could be written for a very small audience, but serve society generally by being "test pilots of literature, seekers after new forms."

The bureaucracy, however, was far from wanting new forms. After all, what was good enough for their great-grandfathers was good enough for the workers, though it was to be described by Che Guevara as "nothing more than the corpse of the bourgeois art of the nineteenth century". But anyone who harboured such thoughts could be silent and starve or be silent and make some kind of living working on translation of the bourgeois classics or converting folk songs into popular poems and songs, so long as the themes were general enough. For the hacks, those Guevara called the "docile servants of official thought", it wasn't a bad life.

These were by no means all revolutionaries. Ilya Ehrenberg had written in 1919 a long poem, "Prayer for Russia", an attack on Bolshevik rule and lament for Russia's fate. But probably the foremost of the hacks was Alexei Tolstoy, who hadn't even stayed behind: "I had met him in Berlin in 1922, an authentic counter-revolutionary emigre, negotiating his return to Russia and his future royalties. Highly esteemed by the educated classes under Tsarism, a discreet liberal and honest patriot, he

had fled with the White forces from the Revolution... In character, manner, morals he was really a high Russian lord of the olden days, loving beautiful things, good living, polite literature, cautiously liberal opinion, the odour of power..." (Serge). Tolstoy began to write historical works on Peter the Great, and with unerring instinct, or perhaps an eye on the main chance, managed to bring out certain comparisons with his own newly embraced Great Leader. Stalin was well flattered, and later Tolstoy wrote two plays glorifying Ivan the Terrible in the same way. This was also in accordance with the build up of nationalistic propaganda. Little wonder that Tolstoy was soon acclaimed as the official Great Writer.

On this note the Thirties drew to a close. Most of the really talented writers were no longer to be seen — they had either been purged, or taken their own lives, or just quietly given up the ghost and stopped writing, lapsing into what Babel had called the 'Genre of Silence'. The tight control over literature continued, on the pretext that there was a constant danger from counter-revolutionary Trotskyists and saboteurs, until the German attack in 1941. When the real danger came the controls were relaxed, within the specified formal limits. A writer could find satisfaction in

Isaac Babel

writing genuine documentary reports and stories from the Front. Thus true realism was only permitted when it did not indict the regime.

Zhdanovism

To counter the effects of war-time looseness and re-establish the Party's role and its 'ideological orthodoxy', Andrei Zhdanov dropped back into the scene like a ton of bricks, and initiated a period of such tight control that the 'Party line' was carried out to the letter — with catastrophic consequences.

He started out in August 1946 with a denunciation or two. This was how it was reflected in the British Stalinist press: "Zoshchenko was condemned for 'scratching about amidst the lowest and pettiest sides of life' and not being at all concerned with the efforts and heroism of the Soviet people. Akhmatova's poems, 'mainly emphasising erotic love themes, interwoven with notes of sadness, yearning, death, mysticism and fatality'," — Jack Beeching's description, in 1957, was of "an elderly lady writing, apparently, mainly on the themes of pussy cats and unrequited love...[which] could do young people nothing but harm — 'they can only sow gloom, low spirits, pessimism, the desire to escape from the vital problems of social life'." (Emile Burns, 'The Soviet Discussions', in The Modern Quarterly, Autumn 1948).

Zoshchenko and Anna Akhmatova were among the few to have survived the Thirties without becoming hacks, and during the war had formed a rallying point for younger writers of the new generation. They had been attacked in a half-hearted way as far back as 1943, and now that absolute obedience was once again required, their influence had to be removed. They were also to serve as an example and a warning to others.

The initial keynote, then, was optimism. Whereas before the stress had been on the socialist struggle, conflict was now reduced to a minimum. Lest Akhmatova's fate befall them, the well-trained pen-pushers responded with bright saccharine smiles. They succeeded so well that all the theatres remained half-empty, and there was no sale for their books.

To neutralise this, the critics were brought in to complain. Safronov, writing in the magazine *October*, in 1948, condemned plays with "neither conflict nor character; they have only comedy-type situations." In the same journal, I. Altman said that "the main defect of our drama is the quite unjustified attempt on the part of our writers to smooth out the conflicts which manifest themselves in life, to make a play less sharp-edged, and to make the hero into a 'mouthpiece for ideas' who loses the traits of a living character."

Now it seems that the critics did their job a little too zealously, and had themselves to be reined in. An editorial article on 28 January 1949 in *Pravda* initiated the new campaign, against "an anti-patriotic group of theatre critics" which embraced "nests of bourgeois aestheticism, camouflaging an anti-patriotic, cosmopolitan corrupt attitude towards Soviet art". They had indulged in the vile crime of raising the question of an opposition "between literature's educational role and its artistic standards." The article defined the task of Soviet literature as the glorification of the regime's achievements and successes, and went on to list the most suitable 'sources of inspiration'.

The chief emphasis now was on patriotism, though this was hardly new. This twist in the campaign had been heralded as early as 1947 when Nusinov was attacked for having given too much credit to Western influences in the development of...Pushkin! Now any critic who had objected (or even mentioned) that characters pronounced didactic high-flown speeches about the Motherland, was accused of lack of patriotism. However, the new patriotism demanded a specific condemnation of the old and praise for the new in each and every work. To make their point, the Union of Writers picked out V. Sosyura's poem, 'Love the Ukraine', as a dismal failure, for it had concentrated on the 'eternal Ukraine of field and sky and nature' without mentioning the power plants or telegraph poles that were a new feature of these fields. Though it had been written in 1942, long before the current campaign, it was singled out in 1951 and attacked as 'bourgeois nationalist', and both Sosyura and the translator Prokofiev had to admit their error.

As a result of the campaign against the iniquitous cosmopolitan critics (many of them Jews; and this was a time of a wholesale anti-semitic campaign, thinly disguised as a campaign against 'rootless cosmopolitans' and 'Zionists') a whole series of new rationalisations had to be constructed. What now was the function of the critic? What authority had he? The answer was that he must 'hold dear the fate of Soviet literature' and not be 'alien and hostile'. And presumably the converse applied — the right line of criticism was right because it 'held dear the fate of Soviet literature' and wrong line because it was 'hostile and alien'!

The 'Optimism Campaign' of 1946 had led to synthetic smiles all round, and the critics' remedy had been too strong. To try and find a happy medium, a new law of 'dialectics' was concocted, whereby there was not exactly conflict, but something faintly resembling it...**misunderstanding!** Henceforth, all 'conflict' within Soviet society was not between Good and Bad, or Black and White, as it had been previously, but between the Good and the Better, or the Good and the Excellent. Principally, it must be between old and new production techniques.

The next period saw a crop of plays about workbench lovers falling out over safety regulations, the wife who leaves her husband because he favours sowing a 'backward' crop, the collective farm hero who works himself to death during harvest time, disregarding the doctor's advice, and the girl who, waiting for her boyfriend in the woods, thinks he must have made the date to discuss production problems. To the extent that these worthy artistic entertainments gained an audience at all, it was from dearth of choice offered to the newly literate masses avid for culture. But on the whole they showed their discrimination by ignoring the 'most advanced literature in the world', and turning to the classics. Theatres showing 'Soviet' plays stayed half-empty, and 'Soviet' novels and poetry remained unopened in shops and libraries.

In yet another bid to win an audience, the bureaucracy now turned to ridiculing the products of its last campaign, pointing out the rather obvious fact that this was really not quite how everyone lived their lives. Moreover, they complained, the story of the wife leaving her husband belittled Soviet marriage, while the one about the hero of the harvest belittled Soviet medicine! In the same breath they called for a little satire and fun, but nobody by then felt in the mood — who knew what he might unwittingly be in danger of belittling?

All the zig-zags and exaggerations of the period known as Zhdanovism were a logical culmination of the attempt to dictate the content and style of a work of art. The better trained were the hacks, the more they carried out to the letter the latest instruction; until, finally, every iota of individual creative interest had been drained out. It was exactly as Brecht once warned: "It's not the job of the Marxist-Leninist party to organise production of poems as on a poultry farm. If it did, the poems would resemble one another, like so many eggs." Soviet arts had come to a complete full stop. The masses, increasingly discriminating and having a little leisure in which to think, were every day voting no confidence in the 'works of genius' offered to them from on high. The situation was changing, and the policy had to be modified accordingly.

Part 4: The post-Stalinist 'thaw'

Stalin died in March 1953. After a prolonged struggle at the top of the bureaucracy, he was succeeded by the first reforming Stalinist Tsar, Nikita Krushchev, who stopped the permanent terror, opened the labour camps and allowed some critical voices to be heard, the first such voice for a quarter of a century. Intellectuals were permitted a **slightly** longer rein. A few critical voices were heard, but only when their criticism was 'safe'. Writers and artists were no longer shot, but hundreds of them — at least — were kept hidden away in asylums, together with people such as the organisers of an underground free trade union. It was demanded of the poet Brodsky when he was tried as a malingerer that he **prove the usefulness** of his poetry! When the anti-Stalin upheavals of 1956 were found to have unleashed a flood of experimentation, the bureaucracy had to stem the tide: at a gathering of writers in 1957, Khrushchev declared that "his hand would not tremble" if it came to shooting a few who had strayed too far. Art exhibitions could now include, occasionally, a work which attempts to break out of the bounds of the 19th century academicism; but not too far — several exhibitions that got as far as opening their doors had them closed within the hour on a flimsy pretext.

Under Brezhnev, who ousted Krushchev in October 1964, there was a partial re-Stalinisation, though it was more a matter of the icing over of the sludge of Krushchev's partial 'thaw' than a return to the deep ice age. Even so, this period saw a savage and prolonged persecution of the Ukrainian identity by way of assaults on its language and culture. It is too early to assess what the reign of Gorbachev, the second reforming Stalinist Tsar, will bring in this field.

Soviet arts have reflected and paralleled at every turn the economic and political basis of Russia. In every sphere of life the slight lessening of the official grip has led to a situation where the genie (of the free activity of both workers and intellectuals) has oozed out of the bottle and been pushed back, with the bureaucracy wrestling to replace the cork. But the battle to free the arts will not be won until the workers have re-taken power, and re-established the principles of the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s. In 1956 some intellectuals may have imagined that the ice was about to melt; they learned that only the top layer had thawed a little, that Stalinism is not 'the reign of Stalin' but the rule of bureaucracy, and that the ice must be broken by the proletarian sledgehammer, not merely modified by a controlled change in official temperature. The bureaucracy even today under Gorbachev has just as much monopoly control over what is published and exhibited as it ever had in the days of Zhdanov and Stalin. The fact that it may choose to exercise its power more liberally should not blind anyone to the fact that it does so only in order to secure that power.

It is ironic that, in the sphere of culture — and this is particularly strange, considering that **creatively** the past 60 or so years in Russia has been 'an epoch of mediocrities, laureates and toadies', as Trotsky wrote in 1936, when only half the damage had been done — the Russian masses are probably the most literate and most receptive in the world to the best of bourgeois culture. The general education of the proletariat, which Lenin specified as an essential prerequisite for a workers' culture, is now a reality in the USSR. It has come about precisely because these workers were offered only two choices — either to read the bourgeois classics, or to plough through the fifth-rate Stalinist imitations of them.

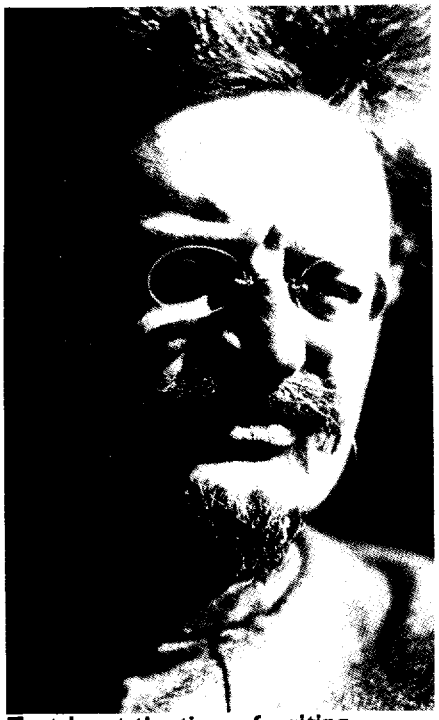
At the present time, by comparison with the total censorship enforced by Stalinism, bourgeois culture manages to appear completely free. When the time comes, as it must come soon, that the Russian workers establish the genuine freedom of a proletarian democracy, it will be obvious at first glance that bourgeois art has been and is weighed down by the money-bags-society only a little less than Russian art has been by the censor.

Part 5: Can there be a proletarian culture?

The horrors in art and literature of the Stalinist ice-age were an aspect of the untrammelled rule of the bureaucracy. It was not proletarian rule but bureaucratic rule over the proletariat in society which generated that system of regimentation of art, life and thought.

Nevertheless, the Stalinists claimed to rule for the working class, and claimed that they were applying the ideas of Marxism to the work of creating a proletarian culture. The great and obvious lie at the heart of such a claim does not automatically dispose of the issues thus posed on the level of ideas. And though the relationship of the Stalinist cultural commissars with even the most confused of the earlier genuine enthusiasts for 'proletarian culture' and 'art' was that of a direct negation, nevertheless, the forms of the ideological rationalisations employed by the Stalinist dictators did bear some relationship to the ideas of Proletcult and RAPP.

We must, therefore, finally, consider the question as posed by both the earlier honest enthusiasts and later, hypocritically, by Stalin's cultural policemen: can there be a proletarian culture? Could there have been a genuine proletarian culture had the Stalinist bureaucracy not taken power and stamped their own image on this as on all other aspects of Soviet society?

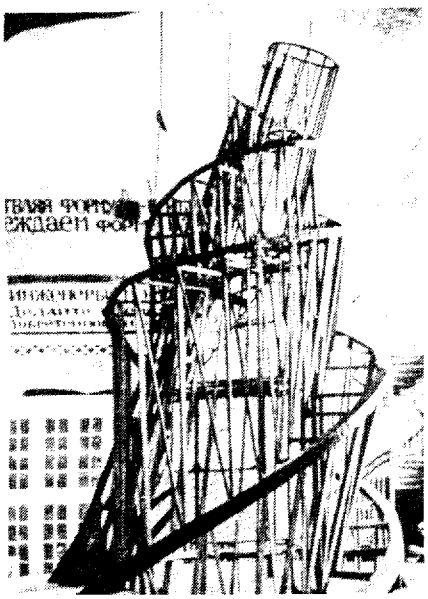


Trotsky at the time of writing 'Literature and Revolution'

A workers' art for a workers' state

In his preface to the first Italian edition of the Communist Manifesto in 1893, Engels had asked: "Will Italy give us the new Dante, who will mark the hour of birth of this new proletarian era?"

Ten years later his question was answered for him by Rosa Luxemburg:



Tatlin's monument to the Comintern

"the working class cannot create its own art and science until after it is completely emancipated from its position as an actual class". (Vorwaerts, March 1903). In 1925, Leon Trotsky elaborated on this. The bourgeoisie, even though they came to political power after a long period of gradual accumulation of independent wealth and culture, took several centuries to develop their own art. How can the proletariat which comes straight to power from a state of wage slavery, be expected to produce from its sleeve a fully grown culture. But will it ever develop its own culture? Trotsky argued that since nobody envisaged the Dictatorship of the Proletariat as lasting long enough to do this before altogether abolishing classes in society, including itself as a class, the proletariat would never find the time, historically, to create its own independent art: "The proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture, and to make way for human culture..."

By then, proletarian culture had become quite an issue. Within the Party, there were very few who felt like being dogmatic about it, and I know of no official statement on the matter being made until 1924; then a special Party conference on art declared that the hegemony of the proletariat must be won in the field of art by superior productions that there must be free competition among all groups, and that the main task in any case was to raise the cultural level of the masses. Its conclusions were published by Krassnaia Nov as a pamphlet entitled "On the question of the Policy of the Russian CP in Artistic Literature". At the same time, it sharply denounced all forms of "pretentious, semi-literate and self-satisfied combigotry" (a term to describe bureaucratic, pompous self-importance).

This was particularly aimed against Proletcult (Organisation for Proletarian Culture) which was a seedbed for the assumptions which were to prevail in the coming Stalinist era in the arts. Its ideology was a convenient one for use later by the bureaucracy, so that all the issues which arose in the discussions around this (in itself sincere and fairly harmless) organisation were perfectly relevant to the period of Stalinism. In effect, the last free discussion about the '30s and '40s took place in the early and mid-1920s.

There were two mainstays to its credo: that the arts must be strictly organised and regimented to act as a weapon of the proletariat; and that to this end a new mass culture must be created, which would be proletarian not because it came from the workers, but by virtue of having been cultivated in the hothouses of Proletcult itself. The founding president, Bogdanov, actually declared that proletarian poetry was neither proletarian nor poetry — which gives the measure of his patronising attitude.

'What a mess!'

Bogdanov's successor Pletnev wrote an article for Pravda (September 27, 1922), on which Lenin made his view clear by writing in the margin of his copy such telling comments as "Ha, ha!", "What a mess", "arch-fiction" and ..."bunk". In October 1920 he had made his views known more publicly. At the 3rd All Russian Congress of Communist Youth he had said: "The proletarian culture is not something that jumps up from nobody knows where. It is not a thought-up scheme of some people who call themselves specialists in proletarian culture. That is all pure nonsense. The proletarian culture must appear as a natural development of those stores of knowledge which man has worked out under the yoke of the capitalist society, the landlord society, the bureaucratic society."

For Lenin, there were certain preconditions for any art of the whole people. Whether or not the proletariat would still exist as a class, these preconditions were the same as those for socialism: "In order to have a culture a certain development of the material forces of production, a certain material basis, is necessary." (On Cooperation). In this sense, the mass culture would develop organically, together with socialism: neither can be instituted by decree. It was, above all, a question of broad general education. Vyacheslav Polonsky, in 'Lenin's views on Art and Culture', quotes him as saying: "In order that art may draw near to the people and the people to art, we must in the first place raise the existing level of culture and education". And again, 'Page from a diary', Jan 1923: "While we were jabbering about proletarian culture and about its relation with bourgeois culture, facts have been presented to us and figures demonstrating that even in the matter of bourgeois culture things with us are weak indeed. It became known that...we are still far behind the goal of universal literacy... This will serve as a warning and a threat and rebuke to those who have been soaring and are soaring in the empyrean of 'proletarian culture'. That shows how much real dirty work remains for us to do in order to attain the level of an ordinary civilised state of western Europe. It shows, moreover, what a mountain of work stands before us now before we can attain, on the basis of our proletarian acquisitions, any kind of real cultural level at all."

But what about the question of the use of art as a class weapon? Here again I feel one could do worse than turn to Lenin, the greatest of socialist revolutionaries, whose views most likely sum up the outlook consistent with the healthy workers' state. Lenin neglected nothing he considered vital for the proletariat's fight for power, using to the full every possible weapon and front of the class struggle, and in particular waging a constant struggle on the front of ideology. Yet far from wishing to organise and use the fine arts, he always aligned them with the goal, rather than the instrument of the revolution; the theatre, he said (and art) is the only single thing that can replace religion in the consciousness of the masses. It must be for enjoyment and relaxation — "A theatre is necessary" he had said in 1919 during a debate on whether to close the Bolshoi Theatre "not so much for propaganda, as to rest hard workers after their daily work. And it is still early to file away in the archives our heritage from bourgeois art." But perhaps more eloquent than anything he did write on this subject, is what he didn't write. Not a word could the Stalinists later find to suggest that Lenin would have approved of "socialist realism", of the 1934 Writers' Congress, or of Zhdanov's regimentation.

New Narodniks

Unwittingly, the Proletcult organisation was instrumental in reviving many of the old Narodnik approaches, of worshipping the masses at their existing level and thus standing in the way of the future. Trotsky in Literature and Revolution described the attitudes which led from the genuine wish for an art of the proletariat, back in the opposite direction:

"It would be monstrous to conclude...that the technique of bourgeois art is not necessary to the workers. Yet there are many who fall into this error. Give us," they say, "something even pock-marked, but our own'. This is false and untrue. A po marked art is no art and is therefore necessary to the working masses. Th who believe in a 'pock-marked' art imbued to a considerable extent w contempt for the masses and are like breed of politicians who have no faith class power but who flatter and pra the class when 'all is well'. On the h of the demagogues come the sinc fools who have taken up this sim formula of a pseudo-proletarian This is not Marxism, but reaction populism, falsified a little to sui 'proletarian' ideology. Proletarian should not be second-rate art. One to learn regardless of the fact t learning carries within itself cert dangers because out of necessity one to learn from one's enemies. One ha learn and the importance of s organisations as the Proletcult canno measured by the rapidity with wh they create a new literature, but by

extent to which they help to elevate the literary level of the working class, beginning with its upper strata."

The ideas and attitudes which Proletcult fostered were later caricatured by Stalinism, which had arrived at the end of the trail towards populism when Trotksy wrote, in 1936 — "'What is not wanted by the people', Pravda dictates to the artists, 'cannot have aesthetic significance'. That old Narodnik formula, rejecting the task of artistically educating the masses, takes on a still more reactionary character when the right to decide what art the people want and what they don't want remains in the hands of the bureaucracy." (Revolution Betrayed, p.185)

It need hardly be said that the alternative to Proletcult was not a passive acquiesence in the continued separation of the artist from the masses. The evidence of the early period of the revolution clearly shows a constant striving by the avant garde artists and poets to find new forms which would bring them closer to the workers. To a large extent they met with success. But this success in reaching the workers, in their case, meant looking to the future, and not, as in the case of the hacks of the thirties, bringing out of the past all the stale, ready-made bourgeois entertainment-'art' forms. They were constantly seeking new forms, not for the sake of novelty, but with the consciousness that art could make a big break through the walls and barriers which stood between it and the life of the workers.

In 1937 the Soviet Bureaucracy invented 'formalism' to silence Lissitsky, Tairov, Meyerhold and others seeking new forms through which to liberate art. It even brought in 'dialectics' to claim that such over-insistence on forms at the expense of content was 'anti-socialist'. Of course it never occurred to these gentlemen, who didn't know Matisse from Michelangelo, that perhaps the real content of these 'empty forms' was the laying of roads to the future.

The limits of revolutionary censorship

Proletcult implied, and Stalinism of course instituted, censorship over artistic productions. The CP had clearly gone on record in 1924 in favour of a variety of groups and styles. Did this include openly counter-revolutionary propaganda? Where was the line to be drawn?

Trotsky had then defined the question thus: "while holding over them all the categorical criterion, FOR the revolution or AGAINST the revolution, to give them complete freedom in the sphere of artistic self-determination." At the Special Conference on Art in 1924 he had spoken of dangers of revolutionary censorship, which was of course essential within strict bounds, spreading uncontrollably: "Our standard is clearly political, imperative and intolerant. But for this very reason, it must define the limits of its activity clearly."

His view was that: "A work of art should be judged by its own law...The Marxist methods are not the same as the artistic. A philosophy which 'conceives' reality in the form of a practical procedure towards a goal cannot give directives to creative art which **perceives** reality and carries a goal within itself." This view was not limited to the Left at this Conference. Even Bukharin declared for a separation of creative endeavour from the Workers' State machine: "It seems to me that the best means of ruining proletarian literature...is to reject the principle of free anarchist competition. If we take our stand for a literature which is to be regulated by the State power and enjoy all kinds of priveleges, then there is no doubt that we will put an end to proletarian literature." Prophetic words indeed!

The heyday of Stalinism saw a censorship which broke all bounds. Perhaps its must repugnant aspect was the tight grip of the state in every sphere of the arts on form and style — in the name of 'Marxism'. In this connection I shall say no more, and let Marx himself speak:

"My property is **form**, it is my spiritual individuality. **The style is the man.** And how! The law allows me to write, but on condition that I write in a style other than my own, I have the right to show the face of my spirit, but must first set it in **the prescribed expression!** What man of honour would not blush at such presumption and prefer to hide his head under his toga? At least the toga suggests the head of Jupiter. The prescribed expression only means putting a good face on a bad situation.

You admire the delightful variety, the inexhaustible wealth of nature. You do not demand that a rose should have the same scent as a violet, but the richest of all, the spirit, is to be allowed to exist in **only one** form? I am a humorist, but the law orders me to write seriously. I am bold, but the law orders me to be modest. Grey and more grey, that is the only authorised colour of freedom. Every dewdrop in which the sun is reflected, glitters with an inexhaustible display of colours, but the sun of the spirit may break into ever so many different individuals and objects, yet it is permitted to produce only one colour, the **official colour.** The essential form of the spirit is **gaiety, light,** and you make **shadows** its only proper manifestation; it must be dressed only in black, and yet there are no black flowers. The essence of the spirit is always **truth itself,** and what do you make its essence? **Modesty.** Only the knave is modest, says Goethe; and you want to make a knave out of the spirit? Or should the modesty be that modesty of genius of which Schiller speaks, then first transform all your citizens and above all your censors into geniuses."

(Ueber die Neueste Preussische Zensurinstruktion ['A new Prussian censorship law']. MEGA, Part 1, Vol.1, p.154)

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