

TRANSFORMATION OF THE HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS:  
THE ORIGINS OF SOCIALIST REALISM  
IN THE SOVIET UNION

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Abstract

The Soviet Union endorsed Socialist Realism as its official artistic style in 1932. This style used depictions of workers, factories and agriculture to idealize the Soviet State, essentially turning the arts into a form of government propaganda. While the adoption of Socialist Realism as artistic policy is frequently traced to Joseph Stalin's rise to political preeminence after 1928 and his solidification of power from 1932 to 1936, the true origins of Socialist Realism can be found earlier.

This paper seeks to trace the formation of Socialist Realism as an artistic policy and to demonstrate the continuity in official attitudes toward art from 1917 through 1932. It finds the policy's origins in state sponsorship of propaganda during the Russian Civil War (c.a. 1918-1921), the constant ideological commitment of Bolshevik officials to the use of art for social benefit, and the institution of harsh censorship throughout the 1920s. Socialist Realism did not emerge from Stalin's dictatorship. Rather, it was

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the culmination of developments that had occurred in Soviet artistic policy since the Bolsheviks' rise to power.

## Introduction

“Comrade Stalin has called our writers ‘engineers of the human soul,’” said Soviet culture boss Andrei Zhdanov at the 1934 First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers. “What does this mean? What obligations does this title impose on us?”<sup>1</sup>

Zhdanov's words illuminate the attitudes and expectations underlying the artistic doctrine known as Socialist Realism. This doctrine became an official part of Soviet cultural policy in 1932, and would remain in place for decades after. Mandating that artists must depict reality ‘in its revolutionary development,’<sup>2</sup> it imposed aesthetic and ideological uniformity on art. The doctrine was not a written law or document, but was rather an orthodoxy that formed around the state's belief that art should be realistic in style and propagandistic in intent. A series of speeches and proclamations from prominent figures such as Stalin and Zhdanov form the core of the doctrine. The main directive Zhdanov issued was to “depict reality in its revolutionary development,”<sup>3</sup> focusing content on the transformation of the Soviet state into the ideal Communist society. In 1932, Stalin stated, “[t]he artist ought to show life truthfully. And if he shows it truthfully, he cannot fail to show it moving to socialism. This is and will be socialist realism.”<sup>4</sup> The imperative to depict life ‘truthfully’ was intertwined with the imperative to glorify socialism and the State. The Socialist Realist doctrine rested upon the expectation that artists would align their work with the interests of the government.

A substantial body of historical work portrays this artistic policy as the product of Joseph Stalin's totalitarian state. Sheila Fitzpatrick, one of the most prominent cultural historians of the Soviet Union, argues that the State had a moderate and tolerant attitude toward artists until the rise of Stalin. Fitzpatrick finds that literary policy prior to 1928, “was soft, insofar as it existed at

all”<sup>5</sup> and then notes that State tolerance “ended abruptly”<sup>6</sup> under Stalin’s auspices. Fitzpatrick identifies an abrupt policy reversal in 1928 and portrays artistic oppression as a byproduct of Stalin’s desire to solidify his power. Such an approach to Soviet cultural policy interprets Socialist Realism as the result of a single leader’s ambitions.

This paper argues that Socialist Realism was not, fundamentally, a Stalinist doctrine. Rather, it argues that Socialist Realism was the logical continuation of the actions and values of the early Bolshevik state. Prior to Stalin’s political hegemony in the 1930s, the core ideas of Socialist Realism were already in place. While Stalin did officially implement the policy, the concept of controlling artists and using them to serve the Soviet people was a part of Bolshevik mindset and practice from the very beginning of the regime. Top officials such as Lenin and Trotsky spoke of art as a tool for both educating the masses and buttressing the State. Several left-wing artists themselves contributed to this vision by calling for more art oriented toward social improvement and more government intervention in art. While the chaos of the Civil War, which lasted from 1918 to 1921, prevented the government from systematically oppressing artists, the government did commission propagandistic art in the hope of uplifting and educating its people. The propaganda projects the state sponsored were an early example of the government’s vision of “appropriate” socialist art. Directly after the close of the Civil War, the State began to implement that vision by putting an extensive censorship apparatus into place. From 1922 onward, documents detailing censorship operations demonstrate that the Bolshevik (Communist) State sought to control artists for the protection and benefit of the proletarian masses. Censors evaluated workers’ responses to art in order to determine whether certain works should be allowed, providing a precedent for Socialist Realism’s prioritization of the impact of art on the proletariat. After 1928, the state controlled artists through a series of artistic organizations and unions. The final result of these actions was that by the time Socialist Realism became policy in 1932, the foundational components of the

doctrine had long since been in place: censorship and control, for the sake of the people, was already reality. Socialist Realism possessed a strong sequence of historical precedents, and was not the unique policy of Stalin's totalitarian regime.

### Foundations of Socialist Realism in the Early Bolshevik Regime

The ideological foundations of government control over artists existed from the very beginning of the Bolshevik regime. Lenin was suspicious of the notion of artistic freedom, noting in a letter to German Communist Clara Zetkin, "every artist...claims as his proper right the liberty to work freely according to his idea, whether it is any good or not. There you have the ferment, the experiment, the chaos."<sup>7</sup> Lenin presents the concept of artistic freedom as an excuse for mediocrity and closely associates "experiment" with "chaos," implying that the creative process is analogous to social disorder. He believes that the role of the Communist is to "guide this development consciously, clearly, and to shape and determine its results."<sup>8</sup> To Lenin, artistic liberty is fundamentally opposed to social stability, while artistic control can serve the purpose of statecraft. Trotsky shares this view of art as a powerful, but dangerous, tool. In his 1923 essay *Literature and Revolution*, he refers to "the plow of the new art,"<sup>9</sup> comparing art to a productive implement that leads to a quantifiable social gain. This metaphor implies that the artist will be akin to the farm worker, engaging in a task that requires neither creativity nor experimentation. Trotsky also issues judgments regarding style, claiming that "[t]he Revolution cannot live together with mysticism. Nor can the Revolution live together with romanticism..."<sup>10</sup> Although *Literature and Revolution* contains no specific policy recommendations, it demonstrates a presupposition that the government should determine artistic direction; this attitude provides a clear ideological precedent for the 1932 Socialist Realist doctrine.

The State's extensive sponsorship of art during the Civil War was its first practical implementation of the concepts of So-

cialist Realism, as first articulated by Trotsky and Lenin. The large quantity of propagandistic art that the government commissioned demonstrates its profound faith in the power of art to both educate the population and strengthen the State. The theater was the area in which the Bolsheviks were most involved. The 1919 First National Conference on Extra-Mural Education spoke of theater as an educational and revolutionary force,<sup>11</sup> and by October 1920, the Red Army had organized 1,415 theaters and 250 cinemas to “educate” the population about the revolution.<sup>12</sup> The government instituted a 500 percent tax on private theater profits in 1918, and then officially nationalized the theater in 1919.<sup>13</sup> As private theaters closed in Petrograd, the Commissariat of Enlightenment sent various state-approved theater groups into the old performance spaces.<sup>14</sup> One of the most iconic works the Bolsheviks sponsored was the 1920 reenactment of the storming of the winter palace in Petrograd, in which the director of the spectacle, Nikolay Yevreinov, used 8,000 actors and counted 100,000 in the audience.<sup>15</sup> Members of the Red Army, in addition to professional actors, worked in the play. The dramatized reenactment included “capitalists push[ing] sacks of money with their bellies toward Kerensky’s throne,” mock combat between Red Army and White Army forces, and a rousing rendition of the national anthem. Yevreinov noted that “the man of the theater possessing social ideals” would see the spectacle as “a revelation, pregnant with suggestion towards that theater of the future which shall fully answer the need of spiritual social service.”<sup>16</sup> Yevreinov’s concept of the theater as “social service” is an early articulation of the idea that would become fundamental to Socialist Realism.<sup>17</sup> He associates the interests of the government with those of society: the play, which was a celebration of the new State, is now conceptualized as a celebration of the people.

Government sponsorship of art was by no means confined to the theater. In 1918 Lenin approached Anatoly Lunacharsky, head of the culturally and educationally focused Commissariat of Enlightenment, to request a series of statues of revolutionary figures,<sup>18</sup> each of which was intended to inspire a sense of awe in the Communist regime. Lunacharsky ultimately produced a list of 67 socialist heroes for the state to monumentalize.<sup>19</sup> In the field

of propagandistic poster design, the state commissioned artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko to create new styles to support the revolution.<sup>20</sup> Various artistic groups competed for a commission to design decorations for Petrograd's 1919 May Day celebration of the revolution.<sup>21</sup> The government's propagandistic commissions demonstrate a clear vision for the use of art in the new regime. Art was a public utility that could educate the people and thereby support the State.

While the government attempted to use art for social benefit during the Civil War period, it did not actively repress artists. Practical restraints prevented the government from translating the oppressive will of Lenin and Trotsky into reality. From 1917 to 1921, the government was embroiled in a bloody civil war that ultimately resulted in the death of millions.<sup>22</sup> The resources and administrative oversight necessary to suppress dissident artists had to be allocated to the state's primary goal: winning the war. Art was important, but not a priority. Symptomatically, when the government moved from Petrograd to Moscow in 1921, the Commissariat of Enlightenment was one of the last departments to move.<sup>23</sup> When it did at last move, it took several months to do so, and during that time, branches operated semi-autonomously in both cities.<sup>24</sup> Centralizing and coordinating policy would have been nearly impossible, given the severe logistical constraints. Furthermore, the fact that the Commissariat of Enlightenment was one of the last departments to move demonstrates its relative unimportance to the State during the Civil War. Defeating the White Army took precedence over cultural and artistic policy.

The seeds of Socialist Realism were thus present both in 1917 and through the close of the Civil War in 1921. During the earliest years of the Bolshevik regime, the ideological impetus to use art for a social purpose was strong. Although the government was not able to take significant steps toward oppressing artists during this period, its sponsorship of art expressed a clear faith in the power of art to educate the people and legitimize its own existence.

## Radicalization of the Artists: 1917-1929

The actions of artists themselves also provided a substantial precedent for Socialist Realism. Many left-wing artists and culturati called for greater government intervention in art, as they believed this intervention would further the goals of the revolution. Revolutionary artists were intolerant of approaches other than their own and accused one another of 'counter-revolutionary' or 'bourgeois' tendencies. The overall result was the repeated validation of government oppression and intervention in art and the strengthening of the core values of Socialist Realism.

Prominent members of the radical cultural intelligentsia believed that the government should become more actively involved in art in order to benefit the masses. Dramaturge Adrian Piotrovsky, in a 1920 article entitled "Dictatorship," contended that the Bolsheviks should have a "repressive policy in the arts." Piotrovsky noted, "either the proletariat will make art, or it will be made by petty shopkeepers." In response to the dangerous influence of the "superficially educated," the government must "show another way by force."<sup>25</sup> Piotrovsky's article provides an early example of support by artists of repressive government interference for the benefit of the proletariat. Proletarian culture movements of the pre-Stalinist regime echoed Piotrovsky's beliefs. The Proletkult group formed in 1917 to promote the art of the working class over 'bourgeois' art. The group asked the government for the authority to independently create proletarian revolution in the cultural sphere, but by 1919 Lenin had grown weary of the group's request for autonomous power and withdrew his support.<sup>26</sup> The concept of totalitarian control over the arts did not, therefore, originate with Stalin, and was not even unique to top Bolsheviks such as Lenin and Trotsky. Although not all artists supported increased government intervention, there was certainly a group of artists in the early Soviet Union who provided a precedent for Socialist Realism. As a result of the influence of artistic radicals, relatively moderate artists continually faced attacks from the far left. Bolshevik supporter and Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky

created a journal called *Left Front of Literature* [LEF] in 1923, but militant proletarian groups called the magazine 'bourgeois'. A group of proletariat-supporting writers then created *On Guard*, a competing magazine that claimed revolutionary content was more important than literary form. Facing mounting criticism, LEF later dissolved.<sup>27</sup> The fate of LEF was in many ways emblematic of the pressures artists in the early Bolshevik regime faced. Even a poet as pro-revolution as Mayakovsky, who titled his journal "Left Front," could receive heavy criticism for being 'bourgeois'. According to Proletkult, movements such as Futurism focused on aesthetic form rather than uplifting content, rendering them unsuitable for a new proletariat culture.<sup>28</sup> Proletkult viewed artistic unsuitability as a sign of political deviance, a viewpoint that cast artists such as Mayakovsky as enemies of the State. The actions of left-wing artists themselves thus provided a precedent for the monolithic Socialist Realist doctrine. The concept of artistic control implemented by the State, for the good of the people, was common to both top Bolshevik officials and radical artists.

The foregoing reflects how the core idea of Socialist Realism did not originate in the 1930s and was not fundamentally Stalinist. Rather, it was a part of the Bolshevik revolutionary attitude, and had been present at all levels of discourse since the very beginning of the regime.

#### Apparatus of Oppression: 1922-1928

The conclusion of the Civil War afforded the government the time and resources with which to develop an extensive censorship apparatus. This apparatus provided the State with the organizational infrastructure it could use to further the goals central to Socialist Realism. From 1922 on, the apparatus worked to centralize its control over artistic production and eliminate private publishing. Using this control, censors attempted to reform artistic expression to maximize social good. This situation provides a strong precedent for Socialist Realism's control over

art for the supposed benefit of the people. Ideological commitment combined with government resources to help create the first practical example of Socialist Realism in action. It is significant that this apparatus expanded concurrently with Lenin's decline and the power struggle following his death in 1924. Stalin was not the central authority until several years following Lenin's death,<sup>29</sup> which indicates that censorship and oppression increased under non-Stalinist auspices.

The first step toward control was the development of a centralized bureaucratic structure that extensively censored works. While Gosizdat, the state publishing house, had served as an ad hoc censorship agency during the Civil War,<sup>30</sup> in 1922, a new department became responsible for censorship: Glavlit.<sup>31</sup> The fact that censorship received its own department merely one year after the conclusion of the Civil War indicates its importance to the government. In the absence of the practical and logistical constraints of war, the State could implement Trotsky and Lenin's ideological will. Control was centralized and extensive, since works could face two rounds of censorship, as both a regional censor and the central office frequently reviewed the same titles.<sup>32</sup> Glavlit exercised substantial power over the literary world. Of the 497 works Glavlit reviewed in the 3rd quarter of 1923, 20 percent faced cuts or changes and 6 percent were banned.<sup>33</sup> A 1923 State decree created another department called Glavrepertkom to oversee art, cinema, and music. The decree mandated that institutions register lists of their workers and programs with Glavrepertkom, and ordered all texts to be submitted for censorship in their final form,<sup>34</sup> reflecting how centralization of the artistic world began before Stalin's rise. Glavlit further increased its control in a mid-1920s campaign to consolidate the printing industry under its supervision. The department began to limit presses to certain predefined genres, forbidding presses to publish works outside of their assigned scope.<sup>35</sup> After 1926, the number of private presses dropped sharply,<sup>36</sup> and although private presses printed 23 percent of works in 1925, by 1926 they printed only 10 percent.<sup>37</sup> The establishment of Glavlit was the first step toward making the Bolshevik leaders' dream of control over artists a practical reality.

The goals and expectations for 1920s censorship provided a significant precedent for Zhdanov's 1934 exhortation for writers to lead a "transformation of the human consciousness."<sup>38</sup> Censors used the new censorship infrastructure to reshape artistic expression for what they believed was in the didactic interest of the masses. In one report to Orgburo, a department that oversaw personnel issues and policy implementation,<sup>39</sup> Glavlit head Lebedev-Polyansky contended that Glavlit censorship had a "pedagogical bias," making its decisions based on the educational value a text might yield to workers.<sup>40</sup> In the same report, Lebedev-Polyansky asserted that Glavlit suppressed "the flow of vulgar literature" but allowed certain works "of a light genre which help spread Soviet influence to the broad philistine masses."<sup>41</sup> While Lebedev-Polyansky clearly disapproved of the 'light' literature, he felt that the social benefit it brought overruled all other considerations. His judgment of 'vulgar' literature also demonstrates that censorship was used to direct public tastes, not just to conceal State secrets. One 1928 Glavlit report counts the pages of 'worthless reading' published in the past year: 3,607,730.<sup>42</sup> Another Glavlit report contended, "[p]etty-bourgeois and low-brow tastes, the sentimental, philistine and erotic novel, adventures, ridiculous science fiction, eroticism and boulevard tastes—such are the main forms of belles-lettres production by private presses."<sup>43</sup> Defending the masses against their own poor taste, for their own welfare, emerged as a central goal for Glavlit. Glavlit reported to Politburo, the executive branch of the Communist Party, which also served as the Soviet Union's most powerful final censorship authority and displayed an attitude similar to that of Glavlit. The State's vision of an "appropriate" culture for the proletariat served as an important factor in deciding which works were to be permitted. In 1929, the Agitation and Propaganda Committee (Agitprop) wrote a report to Politburo speaking against Mikhail Bulgakov's play *Flight*, contending that to permit the production of the play "would only make it harder to bring Soviet theater closer to the worker-audience."<sup>44</sup> Once more the government's vision of proletarian social benefit proved a crucial consideration. When Zhdanov spoke in 1934 of the "education of the working people in the spirit of Socialism,"<sup>45</sup> he was really

articulating the policy that the government had implemented a decade before. Glavlit had transformed the Civil War-era intent of artists and Bolsheviks into a system of oppression and control.

One of the most important aspects of Socialist Realism was its concern with mass reaction to art. The consideration of workers' and factory representatives' opinions during the censorship process indicates that the government strongly considered this factor prior to the solidification of Stalin's power in the 1930s. Not only was censorship implemented for the benefit of the proletariat, it was implemented by the proletariat. Agitprop member S. Krylov's correspondence regarding Mikhail Levidov's play *Conspiracy of Equals* refers to "responsible worker Communists—thirty to thirty-five people" invited to a viewing of the play.<sup>46</sup> Though the final decision itself was intended to be secret and made by a central authority, the reactions and impressions of workers would inform that decision. Other documents confirm the importance of worker response to the censorship process. In 1931, out-of-favor writer Eugeny Zamyatin wrote to Stalin protesting the 1928 censorship of his play *Attila* and asking for permission to emigrate. In his own support, Zamyatin noted that the play had already been read at a session of the Bolshoi Theater with "representatives from eighteen Leningrad factories" in attendance.<sup>47</sup> Zamyatin quoted the responses of various factory representatives in the letter, including the Volodarsky Factory representative's impression that the play "treats the theme of class struggle in ancient times...in [a manner] in keeping with modern times."<sup>48</sup> Zamyatin's use of worker response as self-defense indicates a desperate faith in the power of proletariat opinion to redeem him.<sup>49</sup> The workers are the jury to Stalin's judge, a source of limited authority in the process of Soviet censorship. The prioritization of the proletariat was a longstanding theme in the Soviet Union's control over artists.

Politburo's extensive involvement in the censorship process placed artistic expression under the complete control of the government. Documents regarding the operations of Politburo demonstrate the extent of the centralization of censorship and control over printing and the arts in pre-Stalinist Russia. One

1926 Politburo resolution on B. A. Pilnyak's "Tale of the Unextinguished Moon" calls the work a "malicious, slanderous, and counterrevolutionary attack" against the Party.<sup>50</sup> Politburo banned all presses from reprinting the story, recommended the seizure of the issues of the journal in which the story appeared, and instructed the state publishing house to examine the remainder of Pilnyak's stories for "unacceptable" political content. Politburo's ability to command such far-reaching consequences suggests that the censorship apparatus was highly developed and coordinated prior to the rise of Stalin. Politburo served as an absolute authority and refused to enter into negotiation or accept appeals. When Politburo considered banning the play *Conspiracy of Equals*, director Alexander Tairov wrote to Politburo member Mikhail Tomsky to testify to the "moral importance of this matter of survival for our theater."<sup>51</sup> By way of response, Tomsky was outraged by the breach of Politburo confidentiality. In an irate memorandum to Molotov he asked, "Isn't it time to put an end to the shameless chatter about the Politburo and its resolutions? How did Tairov find out about the PB resolutions? Why does he need to know this? Can't you instruct someone to investigate?"<sup>52</sup> The involvement of the top echelons of the Soviet State in artistic matters signaled the demise of any limited power the cultural intelligentsia had once enjoyed. Tairov's letter demonstrates a presumption that he can influence the censorship decisions of the government, a presumption that is clearly no longer valid in 1927.

Artistic policy had escalated in importance, as it could now become a State secret. The final Politburo resolution "found it unnecessary to permit the performance of *Conspiracy of Equals*" and asked the Party's Central Control Commission to "investigate those guilty of disclosing the Politburo's resolution on *Conspiracy of Equals*."<sup>53</sup> The language of the resolution, in which Politburo "found it unnecessary to permit" a work, also demonstrates a belief that artistic expression is a privilege or favor granted by the state. The pre-Stalinist government had already managed to erode the foundations of artistic freedom. Glavrepertkom's original decision to allow the play also convinced Politburo that

the censorship apparatus needed to become more stringent. The resolution mandated the replacement of current Glavrepertkom members with stricter “individuals who can ensure the proper work of Glavrepertkom.”<sup>54</sup> As testament to the increase in centralized control, the secret police (OGPU) paid Glavlit officials’ salaries starting in the late 1920s.<sup>55</sup> One account of the department also reports that the censors wore OGPU uniforms.<sup>56</sup> Politburo’s pervasive interference in artistic affairs provided yet another limitation on artistic freedom. Secrecy, centralization, and control increased over the course of the decade. Lenin’s dream of restricting “the ferment, the experiment, the chaos” had become practical reality.

The effect of these developments was to make the artist into the tool of the State. Artistic freedom was virtually nonexistent by this time, as works now only existed by virtue of Politburo and Glavlit’s permission. In this manner, Socialist Realism’s unification of artist with State was in place long before 1932.

#### Consolidation of Control: 1928-1934

From 1928 to 1934, the state organized artists into a series of groups and unions under its control. These groups provided the means through which the state introduced Socialist Realism in 1932. They represent the culmination of the process of control and oppression that began in 1917.

In 1928, the Soviet Union granted the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) and Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) broad authority over the arts. With State support, RAPP pressured LEF to dissolve, gained power over the All-Russian Union of Peasant Writers, and lead campaigns against artists such as Zamyatin and Bulgakov.<sup>57</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick notes that Politburo began to appoint RAPP members to the editorial boards of non-RAPP journals and grant greater consideration to the opinions of the RAPP group.<sup>58</sup> She interprets the party’s decision to grant RAPP special powers as a part of the radicalization surrounding Stalin’s rise to power. She identifies RAPP’s new-

found authority with Stalin's "class war"<sup>59</sup> that included the 1927 Five-Year Plan for the economy, the 1928 Shakhty Trials against engineers for "wrecking" factory equipment, and the movement toward immediate collectivization.<sup>60</sup> According to Fitzpatrick, these decisions were part of a "cultural revolution" that Stalin initiated in order to outmaneuver his political opponents.<sup>61</sup> While Fitzpatrick is correct in identifying the "class war" toward the end of the decade as an immediate motivation for the empowerment of RAPP, the State's actions were in fact completely aligned with developments throughout the 1920s.<sup>62</sup> Viewed in the context of Glavlit and Politburo's escalating intervention, it is clear that there was no radical break or "revolution" in cultural policy following Stalin's rise. There was merely an intensification of the preexisting trend toward control and centralization.

Although RAPP was technically a non-governmental organization, the State continued to heavily supervise the arts. In 1929, Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky resigned under rising pressure from radical elements in the Party and was rapidly replaced by the more intolerant Zhdanov.<sup>63</sup> The OGPU also remained highly involved in the arts. A 1931 secret police report celebrated the "rout of counterrevolutionary organizations of the intelligentsia" but noted that individual members of the intelligentsia remained "counterrevolutionary."<sup>64</sup> This report illustrates both the government's sense of triumph at successful suppression of the cultural intelligentsia and its desire to further consolidate control. It predates the formation of the Union of Soviet Writers by barely one year. The report also lists the attitudes and "creative moods of right-wing film directors," such as that of a Leningrad director, Beresnev: "I don't understand politics in art, I hate all that. Just think what themes we have in cinema and art—tractor building, diesel building, and muck like that."<sup>65</sup> Beresnev's criticism of the predominance of agricultural and industrial themes in art marked him as a subversive, indicating both the prevalence of propagandistic art prior to 1932 and the controlling attitude of the state. Politburo also continued to interfere in the arts. Though Politburo chose to appoint many RAPP-connected artists to the boards of journals, it retained the power to make these editorial

appointments without RAPP input, thereby continuing the control it exercised throughout the 1920s. The State also began awarding its own artistic ranks and titles during this period,<sup>66</sup> further underscoring its authority over RAPP. While RAPP proved a convenient means of organizing the artistic milieu, the State never lessened its grip on the arts. The overall trend of rising government control continued from 1928 through the 1930s.

In 1932 the State created the Union of Soviet Writers, the body that served as the first official Socialist Realist organization. The 1932 Politburo resolution, "On restructuring literary and arts organizations" removed power from RAPP and proposed a new national organization to replace it.<sup>67</sup> A Union of Architects and a Union of Artists were also created alongside the Union of Soviet Writers.<sup>68</sup> Politburo affirmed that, "major quantitative and qualitative growth has been achieved in literature and art," but feared that RAPP alienated some pro-Soviet artists through its aggressive attitude. To this end, Politburo aimed to "unite all writers [and artists] who support the platform of Soviet power,"<sup>69</sup> a decision that promoted increased centralization of control over the arts and ultimately brought Socialist Realism into being. At a 1932 meeting at Soviet cultural leader Maxim Gorky's house, Stalin issued his famous statement about how "the artist ought to show life truthfully."<sup>70</sup> This statement was the founding principle of the Union,<sup>71</sup> of which Gorky was the head. Support of the State and portrayal of Soviet triumph formed the core principles of both the Union and Socialist Realism. P. Iudin, a leader of the 1932 Union of Soviet Writers, proclaimed in a speech, "[i]n their works, with their books and at their first congress, Soviet writers affirm openly before all the world that they are proponents of the communist worldview, that they are firmly behind the positions of Soviet power..."<sup>72</sup> Iudin presents the unification of artist and State as a triumph for both parties and reduces the artist to one more voice in a supportive chorus for the State. This development occurred under the auspices of Stalin but was by no means purely Stalinist. The Union of Soviet Writers was one more step in the escalation of control the government had initiated, and represented the formalization of the propagandistic intent of early Bolshevik art.

In 1934, Politburo replaced the Union of Soviet Writers within the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, as the former grew paralyzed by internal division and bickering,<sup>73</sup> but retained the focus on Socialist Realism in the new organization. Since the aesthetic was still inherently political, the artist was still the agent of the government. At the end of his 1934 speech to the Congress, Zhdanov exhorted, “Be as active as you can in organizing the transformation of the human consciousness in the spirit of Socialism!”<sup>74</sup> Zhdanov contended that the job of the artist was to reshape the people to suit the vision of the government, ostensibly for the benefit of the people themselves. The 1934 meeting of the Congress reiterated the basic principles of the 1932 Union and Stalin’s declaration on the nature of Socialist Realism. Ideology and policy that had existed from 1917 through 1932 became orthodoxy. Socialist Realism had officially arrived.

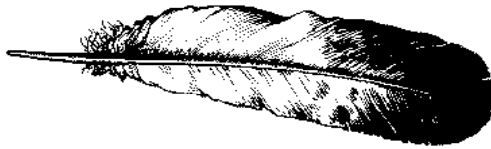
## Conclusion

From the beginning of Bolshevik rule, top officials had viewed art as the tool of the revolution. The events from 1917 to 1932 are thus best viewed as manifestations of this belief; the logical consequences of a philosophy of artistic control. This thesis is part of a broader historiographical trend of identifying continuity throughout the stages of Soviet rule. In *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler*, an analysis of early 20th-century dictatorship, historian Robert Gellately argues that the violence of Lenin’s regime provided a direct predecessor for the brutality of Stalin’s state. Gellately vigorously contests the idea that Stalin “polluted”<sup>75</sup> Lenin’s ideals, proposing instead that “Stalin was Lenin’s logical successor.”<sup>76</sup> Gellately finds the source of Stalin’s policy of violence in the ideology and early actions of the Bolshevik state.

Likewise, I reject Sheila Fitzpatrick’s notion of a Stalinist “class war” that ended prior respect for freedom in the arts. Socialist Realism was the result of a deeply-held belief in the need to use art to reshape society into a “better” State for the workers. Under

Lenin's rule, the government began wide-scale propaganda projects to influence the masses, and an invasive censorship apparatus began to form. The expansion and centralization of power over artists throughout the 1920s served as an elaboration of Lenin and Trotsky's vision of art as a tool of the State. Meanwhile, censors and Politburo members repeatedly spoke of the educational value of art and considered proletarian response of utmost importance to a work's value. By the time Stalin first uttered the words "socialist realism" at Maxim Gorky's house,<sup>77</sup> the infrastructure and ideology of oppression were already in place. Socialist Realism should not, therefore, be primarily identified with Stalin. It is fundamentally linked to the words and actions of government officials and left-wing artists who shared a common goal of creating an appropriate art form for the new State.

The development of Socialist Realism relied upon the participation and contributions of countless individuals in Soviet Russia. To grant Stalin primary responsibility denies the contributions numerous artists, censors and ideologues made to the policy. This episode in Soviet history serves as a reminder of how oppression develops: not by the will of one, but through the actions of many.



- <sup>1</sup> Andrei Zhdanov, "From Speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers 1934" in Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, Olga Taxidou (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) p. 525
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 525
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 525
- <sup>4</sup> David Hoffman, Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity (1917-1941) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003) p. 161
- <sup>5</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) p. 105
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 112
- <sup>7</sup> Donald Treadgold, Twentieth Century Russia: Seventh Edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990) p. 222
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 222
- <sup>9</sup> Leon Trotsky, "Literature and Revolution" in Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents p. 229
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 230
- <sup>11</sup> Katerina Clark, Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) p. 108
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 104
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 108
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 118
- <sup>15</sup> Nikolay Yevreinov, "A Member of the Audience: Storming the Winter Palace" in Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents, p. 224
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 225
- <sup>17</sup> William J. Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord, A Documentary History of Russian Thought: from the Enlightenment to Marxism (New York: Ardis, 1987) pp. 136-148, 199-227

My research suggests that the culture and philosophy of the 19th-century liberal intelligentsia may have also have contributed to the ideology behind Socialist Realism. The concept of the art as an instrument of social improvement appears throughout the writings of key members of this liberal intelligentsia. For example, writer and prominent socialist Alexander Herzen noted that the role of the artist was to utter "what exists in the dim consciousness of the masses," while the author and philosopher Nikolay Cherneshevsky spoke of

“the direct duty” authors felt to speak for their country. An examination of the influence of the 19th-century intelligentsia is not within the scope of this paper, and is a topic for later exploration.

<sup>18</sup> Victoria E. Bonnell, Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) pp. 21-22

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138

<sup>20</sup> Stephen J. Eskilson, Graphic Design: A New History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) pp. 204-206

<sup>21</sup> Clark, p. 103

<sup>22</sup> Robert Gellately, Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) p. 71

<sup>23</sup> Clark, p. 101

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119

<sup>26</sup> Hoffman, pp. 38-39

<sup>27</sup> Treadgold, p. 227

<sup>28</sup> Clark, p. 103

<sup>29</sup> Gellately, p. 159

<sup>30</sup> Michael S. Fox, “Glavlit, Censorship, and the Problem of Party Policy in Cultural Affairs, 1922-8,” Soviet Studies 44, no. 6, (1992) p. 1052, [www.jstor.org/stable/152329](http://www.jstor.org/stable/152329) (accessed March 2, 2010)

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1052

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1054-1055

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1054

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1056

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1059

<sup>36</sup> Only 78 of the 1,000 presses in the Soviet Union were private, as opposed to 232 in 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 1060

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1060

<sup>38</sup> Zhdanov, p. 526

<sup>39</sup> Gellately, pp. 146-148

Orgburo and Politburo were the two main committees of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Politburo served as the executive branch and strategic head of the Party, whereas Orgburo dealt with the logistical and personnel-related issues arising from Politburo directives. The Communist Party dominated the structure of the actual ‘state’ to such an extent that the Party was the government and vice versa. The main political body of the ‘state’ was Sovnarkom, or the Council of People’s Commissars, of which Lenin was chair. For this reason,

references to the “state” and the “government” in this paper also refer to Communist Party apparati.

<sup>40</sup> P.I. Lebedev-Polyansky, “On the activities of Glavlit” in Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, ed. Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko with Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) p. 124

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123

<sup>42</sup> Fox, p. 1061

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1061

<sup>44</sup> P.M. Kerzhentsev, “Report from P.M. Kerzhentsev, Deputy Head of Agitprop TsK VKP(b), to the Politburo of the TsK VKP(b) on M.A. Bulgakov’s Flight,” in Soviet Culture and Power pp. 98-103

<sup>45</sup> Yevreinov, p. 225

<sup>46</sup> S.N. Krylov, “Letter from Deputy Chief of Agitpropotdel TsK VKP (b) to V.M. Molotov” in Soviet Culture and Power pp. 94-96

<sup>47</sup> E.I. Zamyatin, “Letter from E.I. Zamyatin to I.V. Stalin,” in Soviet Culture and Power pp. 109-110

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110

<sup>49</sup> Stalin ultimately allowed Zamyatin to leave the Soviet Union. Zamyatin died in Paris in 1937.

<sup>50</sup> Politburo, “Resolution of the Politburo TsK VKP(b) on B.A. Pilnyak’s ‘Tale of the Unextinguished Moon,’” in Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents pp. 90-91

<sup>51</sup> A.Y. Tairov, “Letter from A.Y. Tairov to M.P. Tomsy,” in Soviet Culture and Power p. 96

<sup>52</sup> M.P. Tomsy, “Memorandum from M.P. Tomsy to V.M. Molotov,” in Soviet Culture and Power p. 97

<sup>53</sup> Politburo, “Resolution of the Politburo TsK VKP(b) on banning M. Yu. Levidov’s play Conspiracy of Equals” in Soviet Culture and Power p. 97

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98

<sup>55</sup> Jeffrey Brooks, Thank You, Comrade Stalin! (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) p. 4

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>57</sup> Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko, “The Demise of RAPP,” in Soviet Culture and Power p. 150

<sup>58</sup> Fitzpatrick, p. 52

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113

<sup>62</sup> Fitzpatrick views the Central Committee's 1925 refusal to endorse far-left proletarian groups as evidence of the Party's initial reluctance to interfere in the arts. But while Fitzpatrick justifiably interprets the refusal as a sign of relative moderation, the Party was still extensively involved in censorship at that time.

<sup>63</sup> Irina Lunacharskaia and Kurt S. Schultz, "Why Did Commissar of Enlightenment A. V. Lunacharskii Resign?" Russian Review 51, no. 3 (1992) p. 335, [www.jstor.org/stable/131115](http://www.jstor.org/stable/131115) (accessed March 2, 2010)

<sup>64</sup> OGPU Secret Police Department, "On anti-Soviet activity among the intelligentsia in 1931," in Soviet Culture and Power pp. 130-133

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131

<sup>66</sup> Brooks, p. 126

<sup>67</sup> Politburo, "On Restructuring literary and arts organizations," in Soviet Culture and Power pp. 151-152

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152

<sup>70</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore, Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004) p. 96

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95

<sup>72</sup> Brooks, p. 111

<sup>73</sup> A.E. Nikitin, "On the situation in the Union of Soviet Writers," in Soviet Culture and Power pp. 202-205

<sup>74</sup> Zhdanov, p. 526

<sup>75</sup> Gellately, p. 7

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9

<sup>77</sup> Montefiore, p. 96

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