

Soviet Art in the Making, 1917-1930s

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Abstract—The article covers the issues of the interplay between the artists' elite and the authorities. The conditions of the creation of the art groups and communities of artists in the 1920s are analyzed, as well as their artistic mission and the content, and the forming of the "art policy" of the Soviet Government and the Communist Party in the 1930s is covered. It is shown that the authorities, having understood the importance of the art, its ability to "charge" people with the right ideas, have focused its "art policy" on the instrumentalization of the art.

Keywords—Soviet art; literature; culture; artistic elite

I. INTRODUCTION

The research methodology for studies in the fields of literature and arts is quite complex.

First, it shall represent not only the state of the research in arts and literature itself, but also in social science. The analysis of the artistic creations shall go hand in hand with the analysis of the high-level the leadership of the government and Communist party has defined at that time.

However, the artistic creativity is always manifested on the level of an individual. The freedom of the creators to choose their themes suffered after 1917 and became negligible in the 1930s. This situation gave rise to very critical accounts of the state of the art and literature at that time. However, those accounts should be considered lopsided. Understanding of the art as part of the culture characteristic to the given epoche is impossible without consideration of the historical context [1]. The insights from the consideration of the historical context are of great importance in the understanding of the art and culture at any moment of time [1]. The historical background (in the first place, from the history of culture) is the key to understanding of the trends in art [2].

II. THE ARTIST AND THE REVOLUTION

The art scene was never homogenous. The nature of artists is defined by their social background, education, age, current position in the society and the factors of their personality. The euphoria the intelligentsia felt in spring of 1917 was caused by their affinity to the idea of freedom, which was also the moving force behind the February 1917 revolution. The ideas of the October revolution, however,

were received cautiously. Many artists left Russia in 1918 and 1919. Those who remained were overwhelmed by the revolutionary pathos, by the ideas of re-making of the world. An example from M. M. Zoschenko: "I didn't feel any regret for the past. On the contrary, I wanted to see new Russia, which wouldn't be as pitiful as the one I saw before. I wanted to see healthy and thriving people around me. There was no 'social dissent' from my side. I welcomed the new life, as it promised the change to the best" [3]. Among those inspired of the ideals of the October revolution were the futurists in literature (V. V. Mayakovsky, V. V. Khlebnikov, A. E. Krutshionykh, B. K. Livshitz), cubists in the fine arts (P. P. Kontschalovsky, A. V. Kuprin, I. I. Mashkov, R. R. Falk, K. S. Malevitsch), constructivists in the architecture and applied arts (A. M. Rodchenko, V. E. Tatlin, L. S. Popova, L. M. Lisicky etc.) The constructivists claimed: "We are constructivists – we deny the art, as it does not serve any purpose. Art is passive in its very nature, as it only reflects the reality. Constructivism is active, as it doesn't only reflect the reality, but also acts) [4].

The 1920s saw the creation of many art groups inspired by the revolution and political activism. Among them, there was "All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers" (ARAPW), which was followed by the "Russian Association for Proletarian Writers" (RAPW) in 1925. The founding principle of the RAPW was the fight for the alignment between the Communist party and the literature, and the inoculation of the masses with proletarian ideology. The RAPW writers were interested not in the literary qualities of the new pieces, but how the authors followed the party line and from which social background they came. Everything that was not in full compliance with the official ideology or written by a person not coming out of the working class was considered alien.

The Association of the Painters of Revolutionary Russia (APRR, renamed "Association of the Painters of the Revolution" in 1928) took the role of the organization outlining the content for the future socialist art. The APRR stated: "Our civil duty and our duty to the mankind is to imprint the greatest moment in history, the revolutionary break-through. We shall portrait today: the life of the Red Army, life of workers and peasants and not the abstract pictures defacing our revolution in front of the proletaries of the world" [5]. The themes addressed in the works of the

APRR members were the life of Red Army soldiers, workers, peasants, revolutionary cadres and heroes of labor.

Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) was the sister organization of those listed above in the field of music. The music composed by RAPM members was not sophisticated and well-understandable for any listener. There was also the Association for Modern Music (AMM), where more academic and elaborate music was appreciated.

III. THE AUTHORITIES AND THE CULTURE

The leadership of the Communist party and the state in 1920s was mostly observing the discussions between the creative groups [6]. The RCP(B) Central Committee (CC) provision "On the Party policy in the field of fiction" from June 18th, 1925, stated: "Recognizing without any mistake the social and class content of various literary movements, the Party supports free competition in the field of literary forms" [7]. The RCP(B) CC called on the writers and painters to create artworks which would be "understandable and sympathetic to the millions of workers" and, using all the best techniques developed up to the moment, "the forms clear for millions" were created.

Many reasons motivated the change of the policy in the end of the 1920s.

Nationwide meeting was on campaigning, propaganda and cultural policy was held at RCP (B) CC in May and June 1928. The participants found out that the deployment of revolutionary movements in the field of culture met strong opposition from the people of bourgeois culture. The conclusion of the meeting was to start a campaign against the artistical views associated with petty bourgeoisie.

The landmark year 1932 saw a significant policy change. In April the RCP (B) CC published a provision "On reorganization of artistic and literary organizations". This provision dissolved all existing creative groups and created new artist unions, open for all "who support the platform of the Soviet Government and willing to participate in the development of socialism". Right-wing historiography understands this provision as the ultimate failure of all hopes and dreams. However, an impartial analysis reveals that the goal of this provision was to set new goals for the artists.

Composers unionized in 1932 within the "Union of Soviet Composers". "Union of Soviet Writers" was created in 1934, a "Union of Soviet Architects" in 1937.

Socialist realism was proclaimed the mandatory creative method for all new artistic unions. Unlike the Russian classical realism, which focused on one's soul life, critique of the vices of the society, the socialist realism was aimed at the creation of an image of the future Soviet citizen, who loves his comrades and the Motherland. Soviet art focused its attention on the revolutionary struggle of the people, the life based on social justice, loyalty to the Party, patriotism, love to the people and hate towards the class enemies. Art and literature shall be filled with the ideas of bright and live-loving ideology, the beauty of the future socialist society and the need to fight for that great goal.

The cultural development of the 1930s was hard to compete with. The number of theaters, philharmonics, concert halls and libraries exploded; cinema network expanded, and the number of amateur-talent group rose. Clubs, community centers, youth clubs were built throughout the country, the amateur-talents shows and exhibitions of the amateur artists reached unprecedented grandeur. Number of copies of newspapers and books increased sharply. Besides the national and regional newspapers, almost every engineering center, production facility, mine, or sovkhos had its own press: either a printed one, or a bulletin board. Clubs of the plants' employees, as well as clubs of soldiers or sailors, opened their own amateur choirs, amateur theaters, and amateur orchestras.

The cultural policy of the authorities can be clearly followed from their views on the trends in the world economy and the tasks they devised for the country.

The idea that the private property is the root cause behind social injustices and vices can be dated back to the times of Plato [8]. However, since then no one asked the question "Which culture is good for the society where there is only public (state) property?" The answer has had to be found in a practical way in the 1920s and 1930s.

Logically, the culture of such a state should be collectivist, and the leadership of the Party and the state made the promotion of collectivism its goal. The art as individual creative activity was out of question. The culture of individualism, characteristic for the market economy, had to give way to the culture based on public interests and spiritual values [9].

Some members of the artistic elite did not accept those spiritual values and decided not to join the effort on inoculation of the masses with the Communist ideology. During the first plenary meeting of the Union of Soviet Writers (1934), Yu. K. Olesha and B. L. Pasternak dared to challenge the party line in their speeches. The speech of N. I. Bukharin was an outright impudence: he claimed that B. L. Pasternak was "the first Soviet poet" and not V. V. Mayakovsky, D. Bedny or A. I. Bezymenski; he quoted from N. S. Gumilyov who was a victim of the purges. After N. I. Bukharin finished his speech, the stenographical record reports a storm of applause, the audience stood up to greet the presenter. N. I. Bukharin got scared, leaning to M. Gorky, he said: "That applause is my death sentence". M. Gorky's speech didn't meet the expectations of I. V. Stalin either. According to N. N. Primochkina, "Gorky's speech against communist writers was a part of his elaborate plan for the liberalization of society, which he implemented subtly but with great determination". [10] This can hardly be true. All Gorky's friends pointed out that he was in no condition for fight. Nevertheless, Stalin interpreted Gorky's position as an escapade and stopped calling Gorky, as well as never answered his calls.

From the point of view of the authorities, it was clear that the opposition among artists was still alive. The fight with artistic elite was not the authorities' goal by itself, but it had to be secured that the artists understand the tasks set for them by the Party and the Government.

On January 26th, 1936, I. V. Stalin, V. M. Molotov, A. A. Zhdanov, and A. I. Mikoyan visited Bolshoy theatre, where *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was given as part of the program of Soviet music festival. I. V. Stalin admired the classics; he enjoyed listening to Russian operas and ballets by M. I. Glinka, P. I. Chaykovsky, A. P. Borodin, N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov. He also visited theaters (although not as often) to see the operas by G. Bizet or G. Verdi. He favored E. G. Gilels, a piano player, and D. F. Oistrakh, a violinist [11]. At that time, D. D. Shestakovich was a rising star, and someone recommended the opera to Stalin. However, reading the libretto drove Stalin in rage. The author clearly sided with the female protagonist, who was floozy and skanky. That was too much in contradiction with the official trend towards strengthening the families in the Soviet Union.

Soon after that, on January 28th, *Pravda* featured an editorial headed “Mess Instead of music”. After that a series of articles appeared, which shocked the artists: “Ballet Falsehood” (February 6th), “Rough Scheme Instead of Historical Truth” (February 13th), “Cacophony in Architecture” (February 20th), “Daubers” (March 1st), “Glam Outside, False Inside” (March 9th). Their content can be understood only if we analyze them together.

Traditionally, those articles are considered another attack on the artist elite. However, the leadership of the Party and the state had totally different goals.

The series of editorials printed over a short period of time shows that the authorities wanted to explain their policy in the field of culture. For example, in “Mess Instead of Music”, we read: “Neglecting of the main principles of the classics, preaching atonality, dissonance and disharmony is marketed as an expression of ‘progress’ or ‘novelty’. The absence of such an important element of a musical piece as melody favors messy and neurotic combinations turns the music into cacophony, chaotic mixture of sounds” [12]. Soon, artistic expert boards were established at all General directorates of the Committee of Arts. Well-known maîtres received positions there: e.g. artistic expert board at Directorate of Establishments for Music listed Prof. G. Neygauz (Moscow Conservatory), Prof. A. Goldenweiser, Moscow choir chapter art director A. Sveshnikov, composer A. Melik-Pashaev, Prof. R. Glier (Moscow Conservatory, People’s Artist of the USSR), composer D. Shostakovich etc. [13]

It was quite a coincidence that on January 27th, 1936 (i.e. the next day after Stalin saw the Shestakovich’s opera), a message was published in the *At USSR Sovnarkom and RCP(B) CC* clarifying the reasons of the attack the authorities made against the school of historian M. N. Pokrovsky. The reason was changing attitudes towards the Russian history. Unlike the 1920s, when the Pokrovsky’s scholars scoured the “wretched and retarded” Russia before the revolution, from now on the Motherland had to be adored. That publication signaled that the efforts of the artists shall be directed that way as well.

IV. CONCLUSION

The analysis of literary and art history in the period between 1917 and the 1930s lead us to the following conclusions:

- Any national culture has multiple layers. A culture is interplay between subcultures, each motivated by objective reality. The artistic elite usually understand the world through emotions. Revolutionary cadres and politicians think differently: rationalism is their main feature. A conflict happens when the representatives of the two groups lack education, experience or goodwill to understand each other [14].
- The artworks attract attention because their authors have a worldview different from that of the majority: they feel the world in a more focused, more vulnerable and brighter way. An artist recognizes a social problem long before the others. This creates a misunderstanding between the artist and the society. This pattern is exemplified by the artists who joined the side of the revolution early and resolutely: S. Esenin, V. V. Mayakovsky, V. E. Meyerhold.
- It appears that the liberal paradigm shall be used for the analysis of art and literature, as the artistic process takes place on the level of individuals. However, in the 1930s the art was seen as a part of culture, and in the field of the culture a big goal was set: to create a new society. The authorities wanted the artistic elite to follow this goal.
- Many historians agree that, thanks to the effort of the Soviet Government, the 1930s created the Soviet society [15]. Foreign historians also notice that a new society has come to the world [16]. This was a generation filled with patriotism and new spiritual values. It is clear that the young generation’s mind was influenced by the state propaganda; however, new literature and arts played not a lesser role.

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