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Art and Totalitarian Regimes: Why Did the Young Soviet Union Change Its Policy from Initially Supporting Avant-Garde Art to Suppressing It?

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INTRODUCTION

Between 1917 and the end of the 1920s, Russian art faced a turning point, navigating from bold creative freedom to the first attempts at ideological regulation. This effervescent period, when suprematism and constructivism co-existed side by side, was the culmination of decades of artists' push for more freedom in a new society in which everything needed to be built from scratch. By the early 1930s, the state took control and imposed strict rules on art creation. For the clarity of this article, we will define a totalitarian regime as a political regime in which a single party or leader exercises absolute control over all aspects of public and private life, suppressing opposition and individual freedoms. In *1984,* George Orwell identifies the characteristics of totalitarianism as follows: submission to an omnipresent glorified leader, denunciation praised as a civic virtue, social cohesion maintained by constant war against internal and external threats, creation of a new man, relentless surveillance, and propaganda. However, fear and coercion can only last so long. To protect its durability, such a regime has to win the hearts and minds of its people, and the young USSR turned to art to do just that.

Bolshevik Russia embodied a revolution, in the literal sense: a complete rupture with the past in their will to build a new man and a new society, by any means necessary. As expressed by Christine Lindey in "Art and the Bolshevik Revolution", at the beginning, art was part of the revolutionary toolbox, first to contest the status quo and then to help create the new society. The Russian Avant-Garde was at the forefront of the push for the revolution, and artists and politicians were allied on their common goal to gain freedom from the past and create a new, better world. By the 1930s, however, the politicians took over and narrowly defined art and creation. We can ask ourselves what happened at that time and why there was a seemingly sudden change in policy. Was this change primarily driven by ideology, political consolidation, or something else? This is what we will explore in this article. This paper argues that the Soviet Union's shift from supporting avant-garde art to suppressing it was the result of the consolidation of stricter political control under Stalin: the artistic freedom of the early revolutionary period was tolerated because it served the immediate needs of the Revolution, but was replaced by state-controlled art once the regime sought to consolidate its power.

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the relationship between the Russian avant-garde, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the establishment of Socialist Realism. Scholars such as Christine Lindey have emphasized the initially close relationship between revolutionary politics and avant-garde artists, while other studies have explored the development of Soviet cultural policy and the emergence of Socialist Realism as the official aesthetic of the Stalinist state. This paper builds upon this existing scholarship by examining the artistic transformation and the political circumstances that made it possible. In particular, I seek to explain why a regime that initially gave avant-garde artists considerable institutional influence and allowed significant experimentation eventually suppressed many of the same artists and imposed strict requirements on artistic form and content. By placing the evolution of Soviet art within the chronology of the Revolution, the Civil War, the New Economic Policy, and Stalin's consolidation of power, I argue that the apparent rupture of the 1930s can instead be understood as part of the Bolshevik regime's consolidation of political and ideological control. My contribution is therefore to connect the history of Soviet artistic movements with the changing political needs of the revolutionary state, showing that the early artistic freedom was not a permanent commitment to avant-garde experimentation, but was instead shaped by the regime's immediate political circumstances and its need to mobilize artists in the revolutionary project.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What follows is a literature review of the sources used to fulfill this research paper's purpose. The paper in itself is a qualitative study that analyzes the shift in art policy in the early years of the Soviet Union. To conduct such a study, many sources have been referenced to compile background information and evidence.

Christine Lindey, "Art and the Bolshevik Revolution" (2015). Christine Lindey's essay is one of the principal secondary sources informing this paper's understanding of the relationship between the Russian avant-garde and the Bolshevik Revolution. Lindey emphasizes that many avant-garde artists initially welcomed the Revolution because they saw the Bolsheviks' political radicalism as compatible with their own desire to overturn established artistic and social conventions. Her discussion demonstrates that the relationship was not initially one of state domination: artists such as Tatlin, Malevich, Kandinsky, Popova, Stepanova, and Rodchenko were given important roles in newly created artistic institutions and participated in the construction of Soviet cultural life. Lindey also highlights the diversity of political and artistic positions within the avant-garde, contrasting artists who believed art should serve revolutionary purposes with those who defended artistic autonomy. This source is particularly valuable to my argument because it establishes the initial period of cooperation between avant-garde artists and the Bolshevik state.

Igor Golomstock, *L'art totalitaire* (1991). This source provides a theoretical and comparative framework for understanding art under totalitarian regimes. While this paper focuses on the Soviet Union, Golomstock's work is useful because it treats totalitarian art as a political phenomenon in which artistic production becomes subordinated to the requirements of the state. His approach helps situate Socialist

Realism within the history of totalitarian cultural policy rather than treating it as an isolated Soviet artistic style. In the context of my argument, Golomstock's perspective supports the interpretation of Stalinist art as an instrument of political control: the state expressed its ideology through art and sought to establish control over the production, distribution, and interpretation of cultural works. This perspective is particularly relevant to the paper's discussion of the increasingly comprehensive regulation of Soviet artistic production during the 1930s.

Philippe Sers, *Totalitarisme et avant-gardes* (2001). Philippe Sers examines the relationship between avant-garde art and totalitarianism from a philosophical and aesthetic perspective. Rather than treating avant-garde movements as collections of experimental artistic techniques, Sers emphasizes the intellectual and ethical ambitions of avant-garde artists and their attempts to transform both the individual and society. His study encompasses figures including Kandinsky, Malevich, Eisenstein, Duchamp, and Schwitters and considers the relationship between artistic experimentation, political radicalism, and totalitarian ideology. This perspective is useful for this paper because it reinforces the importance of distinguishing between avant-garde art and later totalitarian art. The avant-garde's desire to transform society did not necessarily imply obedience to the state; indeed, its emphasis on experimentation and individual artistic creation would ultimately conflict with the Stalinist demand for ideological uniformity.

Aleksei Gan, *Constructivism* (1922). Gan's *Constructivism* is a primary source that provides direct evidence of the political and artistic philosophy of the Constructivist movement. Published in 1922, it was an early theoretical statement of post-revolutionary Constructivism and rejected bourgeois conceptions of art in favor of a fusion between artistic production and everyday life. Gan conceived artists and architects as "Constructors" whose work should contribute to the practical construction of the new communist society. This source is central to my discussion of Constructivism because it demonstrates that some avant-garde artists were not politically neutral. They sought to place artistic production at the service of revolutionary transformation. At the same time, Gan's position reveals an important distinction between voluntarily politicized art and the later state-mandated artistic system: Constructivists chose to subordinate traditional artistic autonomy to revolutionary purposes, whereas Stalinist cultural policy ultimately determined both the political message and the acceptable artistic form.

Vladimir Lenin, "Party Organization and Party Literature" (1905). Lenin's 1905 essay is one of the most important primary sources for understanding the ideological foundations of Bolshevik thinking about artistic and literary production. Lenin argues that literature should become part of the organized work of the socialist movement rather than functioning as an autonomous activity independent of politics. At the same time, the essay acknowledges that literature cannot be mechanically controlled and that individual initiative and creative judgment must retain some space. This tension is particularly important to my argument. Lenin's position helps explain why the early Soviet cultural environment could combine political commitment with considerable experimentation: the political purpose of art could be defined while the precise form remained relatively open. I therefore use Lenin's essay as evidence of an ideological tension between political utility and creative autonomy that would later be resolved under Stalin.

Vladimir Lenin, "From the Destruction of the Old Social System to the Creation of the New" (1920). Lenin's 1920 text provides a further insight into the Bolshevik conception of the "new Soviet man." He describes the emergence of a new type of individual who understands himself as the rational builder of a new social order. This conception is important because the transformation of the individual was central to the Bolshevik project and consequently to Soviet cultural policy. Art could therefore be understood as a means of representing and normalizing the behavior expected from this new socialist citizen. This paper uses this source to connect the ideological objective of creating a new human being with the later demands placed upon Soviet artists to depict idealized workers, sacrifice, and optimism.

Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World* (1927). Malevich's *The Non-Objective World* provides a primary source for understanding the philosophical foundations of Suprematism and its commitment to artistic autonomy. Malevich rejected the requirement that art serve the state, religion, history, or practical utility, instead placing individual feeling and non-objective expression at the center of his conception of art. This position is significant to my argument because it helps explain why Suprematism became incompatible with Stalinist cultural policy. Whereas Constructivism could initially be interpreted as useful to the revolutionary project because of its emphasis on function and production, Malevich's insistence on autonomous artistic expression was difficult to reconcile with a regime that increasingly required art to communicate ideological messages. Malevich's writings therefore provide an important counterpoint to Gan's explicitly functional conception of art.

Leon Trotsky and André Breton, *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art* (1938). Trotsky and Breton's manifesto represents a direct theoretical rejection of state control over artistic creation. Trotsky argues that art should remain independent from political command even when it is committed to revolutionary transformation. He rejects the idea that a state can simply decree the existence of a "proletarian culture" and instead argues that culture develops through a less controllable historical process. Although the manifesto was published after Trotsky had already been defeated politically and exiled, it is useful for this paper because it makes the conflict between revolutionary politics and artistic autonomy explicit. Trotsky's position provides a theoretical alternative to Stalin's conception of art and helps demonstrate that the suppression of avant-garde art was not an inevitable consequence of revolutionary politics but resulted from a particular political trajectory.

Maxim Gorky, "Soviet Literature" (1934). Gorky's speech at the First Congress of Soviet Writers is a key primary source for the institutionalization of Soviet cultural policy. The Congress established a framework in which writers were incorporated into an officially organized professional structure, while control over publishing gave the state substantial power over who could work and whose work could reach the public. Gorky also connected literature to the creation of the ideal "new Soviet man." This source is important because it demonstrates that the transition toward Socialist Realism was an institutional one. Artistic production became dependent upon organizations controlled by the Party, allowing political authorities to regulate not only what artists were encouraged to create but also the material conditions under which they could create and circulate their work.

Andrei Zhdanov and Aleksei Stetsky, speeches at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers (1934). The speeches of Zhdanov and Stetsky provide direct evidence of the demands placed upon Soviet artists. Zhdanov explicitly identified Socialist Realism as the official cultural style and defined the artist's task as representing reality through its revolutionary development. Stetsky, meanwhile, emphasized that literary works should be immediately comprehensible to the masses and that artistic form should serve the effectiveness of the ideological message. These sources are essential to my analysis of the decisive change in Soviet cultural policy during the 1930s. They show that the state was prescribing the themes, purposes, and forms through which support for socialism had to be expressed. This evidence supports my argument that the Stalinist system represented an expansion of political control over art.

The Central Committee, "Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations" (1932). The 1932 Central Committee decree is a crucial primary source because it marks an institutional turning point in Soviet cultural policy. The decree recognized the development of Soviet literature and art since the Revolution but also argued that existing artistic organizations had become too narrow and had begun to impede the broader political tasks of socialist construction. The decree therefore illustrates the state's movement from tolerating a variety of competing artistic organizations toward a more centralized cultural system. In this paper, it serves as evidence that the suppression of artistic pluralism was connected to Stalin's consolidation of political power. The reorganization of cultural institutions was consequently part of a wide process of political centralization instead of an isolated decision.

George Orwell, *1984* (1949). Orwell's *1984* is used in the paper primarily as a conceptual source for defining and illustrating characteristics associated with totalitarianism. Orwell describes a political system characterized by pervasive surveillance, the cult of leadership, and the constant construction of internal and external enemies. While *1984* is not a historical study of the Soviet Union, its conceptualization of totalitarian power provides a useful framework for understanding why a regime might seek to control artistic production. My use of Orwell is therefore primarily interpretive: art becomes significant because totalitarian power is concerned with shaping the beliefs and collective understandings of reality.

Karl Marx, *Capital*. Marx's *Capital* appears in the bibliography as a theoretical foundation for the paper's discussion of various Marxist approaches to society and culture. Although Marx does not provide an analysis of Stalinist cultural policy in the paper, his sharp critique of capitalism and class society provides part of the intellectual background against which the Bolsheviks understood the transformation of society. The paper particularly draws on this source when explaining the avant-garde's rejection of bourgeois artistic institutions and the Constructivists' hostility toward the commodification of art. Marx's presence in the bibliography is therefore primarily contextual: the paper uses Marxist concepts to explain why revolutionary artists and Bolshevik politicians could initially share an opposition to bourgeois cultural institutions, even though they eventually developed very different opinions around artistic freedom.

Ilya Repin, "Barge Haulers on the Volga" (1870–1873). Repin's *Barge Haulers on the Volga* is used as an artistic example. The painting represents the realist tradition associated with the Wanderers and illustrates their interest in portraying the harsh social conditions of ordinary Russians. Its importance to the paper lies in establishing a historical contrast with Socialist Realism. Both traditions used recognizable

representations of ordinary people, but their political purposes were different: the Wanderers used realism to criticize existing conditions, whereas Socialist Realism used realism to idealize Soviet society. Repin's work therefore provides a useful visual for demonstrating that similarity in form does not necessarily imply similarity in purpose.

THE ROOTS OF THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

In the late 19th century, several avant-garde movements in Russia were emerging and co-existing. They were all linked and feeding off each other during these years, when the evolving society was trying to break from its traditions to explore new ways of being. Under the rule of the more liberal tsar Alexander II (1855-1881), Russia experienced a series of reforms that were part of a greater humanitarian movement. The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 deconstructed much of the social and economic hierarchies that had defined tsarist Russia for centuries, while a softening of the censorship rules in 1858 allowed criticism of the establishment to circulate more freely. Paralleling these social and political movements, progressive thinking took hold of the artistic world as well.

The Wanderers And The Rise Of Realism

The first avant-garde movement, the Wanderers, emerged against this backdrop. As liberal ideas spread across the upper echelon, many students of the Imperial Academy of Arts began to question the conservative restrictions of the monarchist institution. Furthermore, the styles propagated by the Academy's teachings were in conflict with realism, the art style that many modern painters of that era saw as the best tool for portraying how they both saw the world and believed it should be portrayed, in accordance with the increasingly materialist philosophy being adopted by many commoners and intellectuals alike.

The Wanderers' goal was two-fold: to make art accessible while promoting a greater understanding of it, and to represent the diversity and daily realities of the Russian population, regardless of social and economic class. Rather than focusing their artistic attention on the aristocracy and inaccessible images of Greek mythology, the artists in this group presented a profoundly humanistic view of the true Russian life, in all its beauty and hardship. Their paintings exposed the social injustice in daily life in a realist form. A typical example of this movement is *The Barge Haulers on the Volga* [1]. This oil on canvas depicts eleven men hauling a barge along the banks of the Volga River. They are close to collapse from exhaustion, oppressed by humid and hot weather. Their torn clothes and disheveled appearance, all in dark colors, emphasize the difficulty of their condition. In an effort to bring their art, which illustrated the contemporary life of the people from Moscow and Saint Petersburg to the provinces, the group arranged forty-eight mobile exhibitions in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov, Kazan, Oryol, Riga, Odessa,

[1] Repin, Ilya. *Barge Haulers on the Volga*. Oil on Canvas, 1870, https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/19_20/zh_4056/?lang=en. State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

and other cities. These exhibitions, which reached a wider audience than the traditional aristocracy, had the additional effect of helping to spread revolutionary ideas such as the need for a different society. During the 1880s and 1890s, the Wanderers gradually evolved from a counter-cultural group to the mainstream, as some members were offered teaching positions at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture.

Suprematism: Art Beyond Representation

The seeds of freedom and artistic experimentation had been planted, and by the early 1910s, an even more radical contestation of the status quo was emerging with Kazimir Malevich and his theory of suprematism. Malevich developed the style as cubism and futurism were emerging in Western Europe, attempting to emulate the instability and rapid societal shifts introduced by mechanization, industrialization, and warfare. His goal was to reject all representation, arguing that his revolutionary abstraction equated better to modern times. The supremacy of feelings could better be reached by simple primary forms and colors. In 1915, he exhibited his famous *Black Square* [2], which consisted of a black square on a white background. It was a complete revolution against bourgeois art, and it helped spread conversation about the goal of art. According to him, suprematism embodied a completely anti-materialist, anti-utilitarian philosophy. In his 1927 book, *The Non-Objective World* [3], he states, "Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion, it no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners, it wants to have nothing further to do with the object, as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without things." Suprematism places individual feelings at the center of art. This position of "art for the sake of art" is extremely powerful for the freedom of expression, but it makes it very difficult for art to align with a political movement. This would lead to its downfall in the 1930s, when the party would require art to serve political purposes.

Constructivism: Art In The Service Of Society

Still using the same geometric shapes, bold lines, and limited color palette, but philosophically at the opposite end of the spectrum, the constructivist movement emerged in the 1920s. A group of artists, including Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Tatlin and theorist Aleksei Gan were working and meeting regularly at the Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow, where a series of debates from 1920 to 1922 helped shape the theory of constructivism. As a result, in 1922, Gan published *Constructivism* [4], the movement manifesto that rejected traditional art for functional design to build a new communist society. It defines the movement's core principles—tectonics, faktura, and construction—and recasts artists as "constructors" who fuse art with everyday life, influencing graphics, architecture, film, and theater. He declared, "The end has come to pure and applied [art]. A time of social expediency has begun," thus clearly tying the movement to the service of a political goal. Art must serve a function in

[2] Malevich, Kazimir. *Black Square*. Oil on Canvas, 1915, https://my.tretyakov.ru/app/masterpiece/8403?lang=en. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia.

[3] Malevič, Kazimir S. *The Non-Objective World*. Lars Muller Publishers, 2021.

[4] Aleksei Gan. *Constructivism.* Editorial Tenov S.L, 2014.

society, and it should help bring about the new socialist era. Using a compass, ruler, and plywood—the materials and tools of architects and engineers—Rodchenko created a series of spatial constructions, meant to hang suspended from the ceiling. With these circular structures, he abandoned the premises of traditional sculpture in favor of open volumes made from everyday materials like wire and plywood. The movement favored the industrial assemblage of materials, while flourish and decorations were considered superfluous and distracting.

REVOLUTION AND THE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF RUSSIA

In the arts, as well as in the political field, there was a broad push towards socialist revolution during the first two decades of the 20th century. Several groups were competing, with wildly different ideas about how to bring about political change and what the new society should be.

The Russian Revolution actually covers two main events and that's why we often talk about two revolutions: the February Revolution and the October Revolution. The heavy losses and economic struggles during WWI had pushed famine and desperation to new heights. In this context, protests and riots erupted in Saint-Petersburg to request the end of the war and food distribution. This brought about the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and the creation of a temporary government, led by parliament. As the temporary government did not end the war, discontent continued to grow and soviets (local councils composed of workers, peasants and soldiers) developed into opposing political forces. Several political organizations were competing for influence within the government and soviets: Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, Anarchists, and the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks were promising to end the war, solve the famine, and distribute the land, which helped them gain popularity. Their leader, Vladimir Lenin, was also an impressive tactician and he maneuvered his opponents to gain the upper hand. The October Revolution, a Bolshevik-led armed insurrection overthrew the provisional government. The Bolsheviks seized power, with the goal of practicing soviet democracy and ended the war with Germany in March 1918, but this was not the end of violence and war for the Russian people. One part of the Russian population refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Bolshevik government, resulting in a bloody civil war. The civil war ended in 1922 with the victory of the Bolshevik Party. With their enemies defeated, they finally had the opportunity to implement the socialist society that they had been pushing for. However, even inside the Bolshevik Party, there were factions, headed by powerful revolutionary figures who had philosophical disagreements on what the revolution should be and, coincidentally, which role art and artists should play. The three key political figures who emerged from the Bolshevik Revolution were Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and Leon Trotsky, each with their own conception of the role of the arts in revolutions and politics.

Lenin And The Political Role Of Art

Lenin, the patriarch of the revolution, viewed art primarily as a functional tool for communist propaganda and agitation, believing that "art belongs to the people" and must serve the proletariat by educating and unifying them. His most detailed writing on art is his 1905 article *Party Organization and Party*

Literature[5], released during a key year of change in Russia. Against the backdrop of the Russia-Japan war and Russia's subsequent defeat, the contestation of the tsarist autocracy gained ground. That year saw the obtention of new civil and political rights and the introduction of a Russian parliament. The gains also affected the arts as censorship rules changed. Revolutionary ideas would not have to be restricted to underground literature anymore, meaning that the Party's relationship with literature and, by extension, all the arts, had to be defined—the exact topic of Lenin's famous article. True to his Marxist heritage, Lenin did not trust the market, so the idea that art should compete in a marketplace of ideas and for public attention was completely unacceptable to him. At the same time, he did not think the people were capable of making their own choices concerning art and literature. For Lenin, not abstract ideas of beauty, nor individual self-expression, nor popular interest should characterize the Bolshevik attitude toward art:

> [L]iterature cannot be a means of enriching individuals or groups: it cannot, in fact, be an individual undertaking, independent of the common cause of the proletariat [...] Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, "a cog and a screw" of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organised, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work.

In these few sentences, Lenin plants the seeds for a party-controlled literature, whose sole purpose should be to serve socialist ideals. In that same article, he also dismisses objections about the violation of free speech and artistic independence as false, bourgeois concepts, alien to the true freedom of party literature. He rails against "bourgeois individualists" whose "talk about absolute freedom is sheer hypocrisy." He continues:

> For, [t]here can be no real and effective "freedom" in a society based on the power of money, in a society in which the masses of working people live in poverty and the handful of rich live like parasites. . . . This absolute freedom is a bourgeois […] phrase […] One cannot live in society and be free from society. The freedom of the bourgeois writer, artist or actress is simply masked (or hypocritically masked) dependence on the money-bag, on corruption, on prostitution.

While asserting this, he also recognizes that literature cannot be mechanically constructed and produced and that there must be greater latitude for individual initiative than in other areas; he insists that literature must become an element of the Party work, inseparably bound up with the other elements: "There is no question that literature is least of all subject to· mechanical adjustment or levelling, to the rule of the majority over the minority. There is no question, either, that in this field greater scope must undoubtedly be allowed for personal initiative, individual inclination, thought and fantasy, form and content." Lenin exposes the tension between the need for creative freedom and his will for art and literature to serve socialist goals. This tension would be resolved in the first years of the revolution by disconnecting form and substance. The constructivist movement is an example of this freedom of form, with means of

[5] Vladimir Lenin, 1905. "Party Organisation and Party Literature." *Marxists.Org* . Accessed November 2025. https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/nov/13.htm.

expression completely left in the hands of the artists, while the group intentionally declared the goal of their artworks to serve revolutionary ideals. Lenin's stance played a role in the effervescence and greater freedom of the early post-revolutionary years, but his death in 1924, would give way to the rivalries and power struggles that would ultimately lead to Stalin's rise.

The Struggle Between Stalin And Trotsky

In 1922, Lenin suffered several strokes and his health significantly deteriorated. Stalin took the opportunity of a weakened Lenin to start building the bureaucracy and install a network of loyal political figures in key positions. At the time of Lenin's death, in 1924, he was ready to outmaneuver his opponents and seize control of the Party. His opposition with Trotsky was political, ideological and a clash of personalities. Their main divergences were on revolution theory and on governance. Stalin wanted to focus socialism on the USSR, while Trotsky was a fervent proponent of extending it worldwide. Stalin installed bureaucracy and authoritarianism, while Trotsky advocated for more democracy and internal debate. In addition to these fundamental differences, they also had very different views on art.

Trotsky was a firm believer in absolute creative freedom, arguing that art must remain independent of state control to be truly revolutionary. He argued that art is a unique expression of human consciousness that cannot be commanded, insisting that while art should serve the revolution, it must obey its own rules. In his 1938 *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art* [6], co-authored with French surrealist André Breton, and published under Diego Rivera's name for political reasons, Trotsky argued for an anarchist regime in art: "The independence of art—for the revolution. The revolution—for the complete liberation of art." Trotsky rejected the idea of a "proletarian culture" enforced by the state. He pleaded that the new culture would be socialist rather than proletarian, emerging from a long, transitional period rather than being created immediately by decree. He believed true art is a protest against reality, which gives expression to the contradictions of class society. Trotsky believed that artistic creativity inherently "lags behind" political and social changes. Art cannot be forced to match the speed of political changes without becoming artificial and losing its quality. This completely opposed Stalin's views on art, which dictated that art must be "national in form, socialist in content." It required realistic, easily understood depictions of Soviet life that glorified workers and the Communist Party, serving as state propaganda to educate citizens. Artists were termed "engineers of the soul," with strict conformity enforced by the state.The USSR leader who emerged from the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky would shape the relationship between art and politics for decades to come.

After several purges and shifted alliances, Stalin was able to exclude Trotsky from all his official positions between 1925 and 1927. He sent him to an internment camp in 1928 and exiled him in 1929. Once Trotsky was out of the way, Stalin continued to tighten his grip on the Party. He organized the bureaucracy and apparatus to consolidate his rule. This iron grip on power would have a lasting impact on art and artists, as we will see now.

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[6] Diego Rivera, and André Breton, 1938. "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" *Marxists.Org. Accessed December 2025*. https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/works/rivera/manifesto.htm

THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE EARLY SOVIET STATE

As explained by Christine Lindey in *Art and the Bolshevik Revolution* [7], "Initially, most avant-garde artists welcomed the revolution because Lenin's idea of a political avant-garde as an agent for social change legitimized their own calls for radical action to combat conservative attitudes to art and society." Marxist artists like Tatlin, viewed the political shift as a way to improve daily life for the Russian people. In fact, Tatlin even believed that the creative breakthroughs he and his group initiated starting in 1914 paved the way for the political events of 1917. Other famous artists, such as worldwide renowned abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky, disagreed with Bolshevik politics but still valued the newfound creative liberty of the era. Ultimately, regardless of their political beliefs, all of these artists struggled to find basic supplies due to the harsh realities of wartime shortages.

Despite these material difficulties, which pushed a significant number of painters to stop working on canvas, it was an exciting period for them, as for the first time ever, avant-garde artists actually ran major art institutions. They wanted to totally change the way schools selected their students and taught them, to redesign museums, and to use art to give creators a new role in public life. Tatlin was named head of the visual arts section of the People's Commissariat for Education. He then entrusted Kandinsky with a major task: rewriting how people teach art and setting up museums. Kandinsky was already famous and widely respected around the world as a pioneer of pure abstraction. Because he chose to return home and help Russia after World War I, he made the new government's art programs look highly credentialed. He teamed up with Rodchenko to bring modern art to everyday people outside the big cities. Together, they started 22 local museums and filled them with important collections of new Russian art.

As Lindey notes, "Tatlin, Malevich, Kandinsky, Chagall, Popova, Stepanova, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, and other famous avant-garde artists taught at the newly created art schools, where they pioneered innovative teaching methods." They all belonged to different movements and had diverse conceptions about the role of art in society. For Malevich and his group, art only made sense if the innovations that the artists were experimenting with would later find a practical use in architecture and design. They even proposed to burn all paintings and exhibit their ashes in museums, so that people would only look forward and not to works of art of the past. This idea was not applied, however, and the young Soviet government tried its best to protect existing art collections. For others, like Marc Chagall, the famous early modernist associated with the École de Paris, there was no need for art to serve a specific function outside itself. He continued to produce highly personal poetic paintings, with little political meaning. Similarly, Kandinsky continued with color, line, and form. Neither of them was very interested in politics, and they favored their art over societal considerations.

Agit-Prop And Politically Engaged Art

Other artists were more politically engaged and condemned art for itself as inherently "bourgeois". They believed in the slogan "the streets are our brushes, the squares our palettes,." popularized by Vladimir

[7] Lindey, Christine. 2015. "Art and the Bolshevik Revolution – Culture Matters." *Culturematters.Org.Uk*. https://www.culturematters.org.uk/art-and-the-bolshevik-revolution/.

Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky, was a poet, playwright, and actor who claimed artists should be involved in agitation and propaganda, also known as agit-prop art, by decorating trains and boats, designing street posters, and organizing public events. One such example of this kind of event is the 1920 Saint-Petersburg's re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace, which included over 2,000 participants, and decorating buildings covered in gigantic abstract banners, and the use of factory sirens and arc lights.

Constructivism And "Art Into Production"

Meanwhile, the constructivists, led by Tatlin and Rodchenko, continued their call for the abolition of standalone art objects. For them, traditional artworks were a symbol of the art market and the influence of money on the work of artists. They expected artists to take an active part in building a new society and to collaborate with other workers by putting art at the service of the revolution. They put the experiments conducted in the new art schools to practical use by designing posters, books, ceramics, theatre sets, and so on, for the masses.

Under the slogan "'Art into Production,'" artists were to go into the factories to create modernist, mass-produced designs because the new social order demanded new materials and new forms. For example, constructivist artists Lyubov Popova and Stepanova, designed textiles printed with the abstract motifs of modernity: the zigzag of electricity, the whirl of airplane propellers, the cogs and wheels of trains and tractors. Popova, who had begun her life as a painter, declared "No artistic success has given me such satisfaction as the sight of a peasant or a worker buying a length of material designed by me.". At the same time, artists such as Aleksander Deineka argued that modernism was inaccessible to the masses, as these new art forms were complex to understand and decipher for the uneducated proletariat. No less committed to the revolution, they pushed for a representational art that would carry revolutionary messages. Seen as reactionary by the constructivists, they were displaying the premises of Socialist Realism, which would later become the official art doctrine of the state.

THE TURN TOWARD STATE CONTROL

While in the early years of the Bolshevik Revolution, artistic freedom and ebullition were animating the cultural scene, by the early 1930s, this unprecedented freedom would go away, as the politicians would take over and create a new system. What happened and what was at play there?

The 1932 Decree And The Reorganization Of Art

The years 1932 to 1934 marked a crucial turning point with two major milestones: the Central Committee decree of April 23, 1932 [8], and the First Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934. In the decree, the

[8] "Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations | Seventeen Moments in Soviet History." 2026. *Msu.Edu*. https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1934/writers-congress/writers-congress-texts/reconstruction-of-literary-and-artistic-organizations/.

Central Committee recognizes the successes that the new state has accumulated in literature and the arts. It proclaims considerable growth in the quantity and quality of artwork since the early days of the revolution, but it also states that there has been "a strong influence of alien elements … when the cadres of proletarian literature were still weak." It recognizes that the Party has helped the creation of organizations to push for the development of proletarian writers and artists, but it declares that these organizations have become inadequate to the current situation, with the Russian Civil War won and Stalin's tightening grip on power, after purging his most prominent adversaries, including Trotsky:

> … [these organizations are] becoming too narrow and impeding the serious development of artistic creation. This situation creates the danger of transforming these organizations from a means of mobilizing Soviet writers and artists around the tasks of socialist construction into a means of cultivating group insulation as well as isolation from the political tasks of the day and from large groups of writers and artists who sympathize with socialist construction.

By this declaration, the state is really taking back the helm, making sure that all artistic pursuits will serve the revolution and promote the creation of a new Soviet man. Art should exalt this "new man" work, requiring exertion, austerity, and selflessness. This was seemingly the triumph of constructivism, until, in addition to the theme and purposes, the state later dictated the form of acceptable works of art.

The First Congress Of Soviet Writers, 1934

Two years later, the First Congress of Soviet Writers convened on August 8, 1934, presided over by Maksim Gorky. In his speech [9], he told delegates, "The Party and the Government are taking away from us the right to order one another what to do, offering us in return the right to teach one another. To teach, meaning to share with one another our experience." The Union of Soviet Writers created a model for state literature. As they controlled publishing and diffusion, only their members could have their work printed and earn a living. As the Party controlled all the means of producing and distributing art, they effectively had absolute decisional power of what could exist as a work of art.

In the same speech, in addition to describing the structure of the union, Gorky also developed the idea that literature should portray the ideal of the "new Soviet man", described by Lenin in his 1920 article *From the Destruction of the Old Social System to the Creation of the New* [10]: "A new type of man is springing up in the Soviet Union. He possesses faith in the organizing power of reason … He is conscious of being the builder of a new world, and although his conditions of life are still arduous, he knows that it is his aim and the purpose of his rational will to create different conditions, and he has no grounds for pessimism." The president of the Congress had not only given all writers who wanted to work in the USSR a strict framework within the Union, but he had also delimited the topics they should write about.

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[9] "Maxim Gorky: Soviet Literature." n.d. *Www.Marxists.Org*. Accessed January, 2026. https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1934/soviet-literature.htm.
[10] Vladimir Lenin, 1920. "From The Destruction Of The Old Social System To The Creation Of The New." *Marxists.Org*. *Accessed November 2025*. https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/apr/11.htm.

Going even further, Andrei Zhdanov, a secretary of the Central Committee, responsible for ideology and culture, made clear that socialist realism was the official style of Soviet culture [11]. He also insisted that the goal of all art was "to depict reality in its revolutionary development." Quoting his leader and friend Stalin, he declared that artists were meant to be "engineers of the human soul."

SOCIALIST REALISM BECOMES THE OFFICIAL DOCTRINE

With this Congress, the Party had effectively closed the loop on artistic creation, and in a full circle moment had gone back to the realist form promoted by the Wanderers group at the end of the 19th century. The goal of socialist realism is different, though, as it is consciously promoting the regime's ideals, while the Wanderers were denouncing the social injustice of the then-regime.

Repression And The Consequences For Artists

Socialist realism had become the only acceptable art movement. From that point on, artists were forced to create works that glorified the Party and its leaders, while opposing voices were silenced. The Stalinist system appropriated artistic codes to produce a global vision of reality, effectively using art as a tool for ideological dissemination and political control. Literature, architecture, film, and popular culture were all subject to direction from the state, politicizing art to reinforce the power and ideology of the regime. Artists had to demonstrate political reliability. This resulted in a significant loss of creative freedom and had a tragic impact on the lives of artists who refused to comply.

For example, the poet Osip Mandelstam was arrested and sent to the Gulag for his satire denouncing Stalin. He died in the camp in 1939. The famous writer Isaac Babel was similarly persecuted, arrested during the Great Purge in 1939 and executed in 1940. The Soviet regime even tried to erase his existence, removing his name from literary dictionaries and school and university curricula. Even Dmitri Shostakovich, a seemingly harmless composer, faced censorship and denunciation, living under constant threat of arrest. These are only a few names, but innumerable artists suffered from this severe repression. Any deviation from the approved socialist realist style or any perceived criticism of the regime resulted in censorship, imprisonment, or execution. As totalitarian regimes' power relied so much on art to control their people's hearts and minds, they could not accept even the slightest deviation from their approved official line.

To promote socialist principles and values, all works of art had to serve the ideological objectives of the state by depicting the Soviet reality in an idealized form. The state dictated that acceptable artworks should focus on the glorification of the proletariat and the heroism of everyday labor. This rigid state doctrine obliged all art to be realistic in form and socialist in content, serving the goals of the regime rather than letting artists express themselves by choosing their style and theme. This politicization of the arts meant that artistic production was closely monitored and regulated by the state, with severe consequences for those who deviated from the prescribed norms. By establishing the official cultural

[11] Andrei Zhdanov "Soviet Writers Congress 1934 ." n.d. *www.Marxists.Org*. Accessed January, 2026. https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zdhanov.htm.

policy, Stalin's Cultural Revolution aimed to combat bourgeois influence by promoting folk culture as the foundation of socialist art.

The socialist realism doctrine became a powerful instrument in shaping both art and society in the Soviet Union, as it demanded that all artistic and cultural production adhere to the prescribed norms that glorified the socialist state and its leaders. This approach ensured that art was used as a tool of political propaganda, reinforcing the regime's control over public consciousness and fostering a unified, state-sanctioned cultural identity. Artists were obliged to produce work that was realistic, optimistic, and supportive of state policies, celebrating the labor movement and the envisioned utopia of the socialist state. As a result, prominent Soviet artists were forced to adapt or face censorship and persecution for their nonconformity.

The Suppression Of Malevich and Rodchenko

Artists like Malevich and Rodchenko, who were initially praised in the Soviet Union for their ground-breaking avant-garde contributions, which aligned with the revolutionary spirit of the early post-revolutionary era, encountered increasing repression as Stalin's administration solidified power in the 1930s. Malevich's suprematism, for example, with its simple geometric forms and limited color palette, was considered too radical and bold, in opposition to the traditional forms now favored by the state. As such, it was deemed inappropriate and subversive. Socialist realism, as the state-mandated style, ultimately suffocated all forms of expression that did not emphasize realistic and optimistic depictions of socialist life and glorify the state's achievements. By the mid-1930s, Malevich's career in the Soviet Union was effectively stifled; he was forbidden from exhibiting his work and lost his teaching position, living his final years forgotten and in poverty. Rodchenko, whose artistic media included painting, graphic design, photography, and architecture, was an equally innovative artist and a pioneer of constructivism. His avant-garde creations, which placed a strong emphasis on industrial materials and utility, initially seemed like a perfect match for the glorification of the proletarian revolution. However, with the imposition of socialist realism, Rodchenko's experimental abstract approach fell out of favor. The regime's demand for art that was accessible to the masses, portraying unambiguous themes and conveying didactic messages, left little room for Rodchenko's avant-garde techniques.

In his *Under the flag of the Soviets, Under the Flag of Socialism* speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, Aleksei Stetsky [12], head of the Central Committee Department of Culture and Propaganda, described the ideal form that writers should use, taking the example of Gorky's work: "His works are all so fashioned that the mass reader can understand them excellently. Here every word and every phrase is sharpened, here every image is carefully finished off, and everything is directed towards making the work find an echo in the heart of the reader. This is just what every genuine artist ought to strive for." The artwork pushed by the regime had to be second to the messaging, and the form had to be easily understood by the masses, without any room for personal interpretation. Consequently, Rodchenko was forced to adapt his style and largely withdrew from fine art, shifting his focus to photojournalism and

[12] Aleksei Stetsky "Under the flag of the Soviets, Under the Flag of Socialism - delivered at the Soviet Writers Congress 1934 ." n.d. *www.Marxists.Org*. Accessed January, 2026. https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/stetsky.htm

design projects that aligned with state regulations. The marginalization of avant-garde artists like Malevich and the suppression of divergent styles like Rodchenko's reflect the larger repression of innovative and original art during Stalin's rule. By enforcing socialist realism, the Soviet government sought to eradicate creative innovations and artistic experimentation, imposing a uniform style that could be used as a tool for ideological indoctrination.

WHY DID SOVIET ART POLICY CHANGE ?

To understand what prompted this seemingly complete change of direction in the 1930s, we must return to the chronology of the Bolshevik Revolution. After the Bolshevik insurrection in October 1917, a devastating civil war raged in Russia between the Bolsheviks and tsarists. During this time, all efforts were geared towards winning the war, and the Bolsheviks were happy to get any support they could from the artists. Once they won the civil war, they found themselves in a profound economic crisis and dangerous famine. To help private trade recover from war, Lenin adapted his strategy and introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP), a temporary, mixed economy. This policy lasted until 1928, when Stalin took over and effectively utilized the debate over ending the NEP to outmaneuver political opponents. Once he became the uncontested leader, Stalin began the implementation of a totalitarian regime.

From that perspective, the relative freedom and creative effervescence of the period from 1917 to the early 1930s in the art sphere can be viewed as the equivalent of the NEP in the economic one. These years can be considered a temporary fix to allow society to recover from the war, before the state and the Party could organize the production of arts and goods. It seems like, similarly to the NEP, the new attitudes of the regime towards art are more a return to the original ideas of Marx and Lenin, and that the brief period of freedom was never intended to last; rather, it was more a result of the need to make do with a country at war and a society where institutions had collapsed for a few years. Indeed, for Lenin, art was useful only as a propaganda tool, which meant it had to convey a message, and it had to be easily understandable by the masses: "The art of any propagandist and agitator consists in his ability to find the best means of influencing any given audience, by presenting a definite truth, in such a way as to make it most convincing, most easy to digest, most graphic, and most strongly impressive." [13]

CONCLUSION

The study of the links between politics and art during the Russian Revolution reveals a complicated relationship. From the joyful and creative effervescence of the early years to socialist realism's controlling doctrine on topic and form, artists have been propagandists and agents of change. The ones who did not comply were crushed by a system that they had contributed to establishing, fulfilling the promise from

[13] Vladimir Lenin, 1911. "The Slogans and Organisation of Social-Democratic Work Inside and Outside the Duma ." *Marxists.Org. Accessed November 2025.* https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1911/dec/08.htm.

Lenin: "Art for me is just an appendage, and when its use as propaganda – which we need at the moment – is over, we'll cut it out as useless." Once Stalin saw the revolutionary power of art, he made sure to completely control it, not to have another revolution, against his now totalitarian regime.

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