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Art as a Mirror in National Socialism and Early Socialist Realism

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.”
— Vladimir Mayakovsky or Bertolt Brecht

While the relationship between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union is often defined through opposition, the central role art played in both of these regimes is no coincidence. It is telling that the U.S. press and government officials used the term “Communazi” throughout World War II, despite the fact that the Soviet Union was a U.S. ally. Alexander Stephan writes that those in the U.S. “trying to define the concept of ‘totalitarianism’ saw no objection to the term ‘Communazi.’”

1 U.S. opposition to both Nazi and Soviet political systems was not the only link between the two authoritarian regimes: they were strikingly similar in the amount of control that their respective governments exerted over all parts of society. The totalitarian structures of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany help explain why these two countries’ governments paid so much attention to art. Art was seen as a powerful tool that could shape public opinion, and, for this reason, the state controlled and used art to influence and support its political system. By comparing critiques of art as well as the confrontations and resolutions of policy issues through official state art in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, this paper exposes how power mechanisms functioned in both regimes.

The idea that art plays an important role in shaping new societies originated in the modern art movements, which the Soviet Union and Third Reich would eventually combat. In fact, the phrase, “[a]rt is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it,” is attributed to two artists: Vladimir Mayakovsky, a Russian and Soviet poet and playwright who

1 Stephen.
was a part of the Constructivist movement; and Bertolt Brecht, a German poet and playwright who fled Germany after Hitler assumed power. Both artists belonged to movements that would come under the scrutiny of Nazi and Soviet art critics. Mayakovsky became a supporter of Stalinism, but his later disillusionment may have played a role in his suicide. Brecht, who was not only a modernist but also a Jew with socialist ideals, lived in exile until returning to Eastern Germany in 1950, where he received the Stalin Peace Prize in 1954.

The ideas of the modern art movements highlighted the value of art to those who assumed power in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. As Igor Golomstock writes, “Russia and Germany . . . were to be the scene of a fierce battle for art, now seen by both right and left, by Communists and Nazis, by Hitler and Stalin, as a convenient instrument for catching human souls.” Each political system took full control of the creation and direction of art while also waging war on modern art. The cases of Brecht and Mayakovsky illustrate that the two countries took slightly different approaches to total control through art. Germany’s policy was unyielding, while the Soviet Union co-opted what it could from the modern art movement before using direct negation and other strategies to undermine it.

Germany waged a swift and total campaign against all modern and avant-garde movements, branding them “decadent” or “degenerate.” The concept of degenerate art is originally described in Max Nordau’s 1895 work *Degeneration*. In his dedication, Nordau writes:

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists . . . Some among these degenerates in literature, music, and painting have in recent years come into extraordinary prominence, and are revered by numerous admirers as creators of a new art, and heralds of the coming centuries…I have undertaken the work of

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2 Golomstock, 68
investigating the tendencies of the fashions in art and literature; of proving that they have their source in the degeneracy of their authors, and that the enthusiasm of their admirers is for manifestations of more or less pronounced moral insanity, imbecility, and dementia.³

Nordau claimed that modern and avant-garde art movements reflect society’s sickness, within both the artist who creates it and the public that approves of it. Nordau, a German Jew, believed that the “assimilated Jew was unstable and, inwardly sick.” For this reason, he supported Zionism as a solution to what he saw as the failure of assimilation. His ideas on Judaism and degeneration suggest that he may have seen degenerate art as a cause of anti-Semitism.

It is not difficult to imagine how Nordau’s notion of degenerate art could integrate into the Nazi ideology of racial cleansing, of ridding German society and culture of its “sickness.” Stephanie Barron concludes that, “The avant-garde artist was equated to the insane, who in turn was synonymous with the Jew.”⁴ The Nazi campaign against degenerate art involved a complete purge and condemnation of modern art, including: confiscation, destruction and selling of art; the firing of artists in teaching positions, curators and museum directors; and, most famously, the Entarte Kunst (Degenerate Art) exhibition.⁵ The exhibition was created to inform the German public about why degenerate art was unacceptable in the Third Reich. One painter whose work was featured in the exhibition was Paula Modershon-Becker, a German expressionist painter. Her 1905 work, “Old Peasant Woman Praying,” depicts an elderly woman with bulging eyes, sallow cheeks and a sad, contemplative expression sitting with her arms crossed over her hunched body (see Appendix). This work exemplifies the qualities of expressionism and modern art that were condemned in the Third Reich as degenerate and sickly. Though Goebbels tried to uphold expressionism as a valuable art that found its roots in German culture and represented the

³ Nordau.
⁴ Barron, 11.
⁵ Barron, 9.
new German spirit, Hitler rejected it entirely. The subject’s physical distortion in the painting and her sickly complexion only partly explain why this work, and others like it, were denounced. German expressionism focused on the emotion and subjectivity of the individual. “The expressionists aspired to the renewal not so much of humanity as of the individual man, to a renewal that was spiritual rather than social.” The portrayal of the old woman sitting alone presents the artist’s subjective point of view and highlights individual expression and feeling, allowing for an individualized response from the viewer. This clashes with the Nazi ideals of mass accessibility and collective feeling.

Another modern art movement that flourished during the Weimar Republic was that of the Berlin Dadaists, who were closely aligned with the radical communism of the Soviet avant-garde. Hitler’s regime associated these art movements with elitism because their experimental nature required a critical viewership. Official Nazi art needed to be accessible; it had to explain ideology in a way that could be understood by the masses. The ‘problematic’ aspects of different contemporary movements led to the unilateral slandering of modern art as degenerate, Bolshevist, elitist, and un-German, among other things. While the Nazis condemned modern art as a “tool of Marxist Propaganda,” the Soviets blamed modern art for the rise of the Hitler.

Criticism of modern art in the Soviet Union developed more gradually and was not as rigid or definitive as the Nazi critique of decadent art. This is largely due to the role that avant-garde art played in the early stages of communism: from the Revolution through the 1920s, new artistic movements and artistic experimentation flourished in the Soviet Union. Some of the

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6 Barron, 12; Golomstock, 17.
7 Golomstock, 58.
8 Golomstock, 59.
9 Golomstock, 55–56; Barron, 9.
10 Quoted in Golomstock, 79; Rakitin, 22.
prominent art movements from the time include agitprop, cubism, montage, abstract art, Suprematism, Productivism, and, especially, Constructivism. As one historian writes, “Progressive Russian artists viewed the Bolshevik Revolution as an opportunity to expand art beyond antiquated notions of representation. Many artists believed art should serve the regime and voluntarily joined state-run organizations where, for a time, they enjoyed artistic freedom.”

These organizations explored new styles of art, focusing on how different modern art forms could serve the state and support communist ideology.

Kazimir Malevich, the founder of Suprematism, experiments with formalism in his 1911 painting, “Morning in the Country After Rain” (see Appendix). The painting depicts a group of peasant women as they walk through the countryside, surrounded by houses and trees; the women are almost lost in the abstract geometric shapes and colors used to portray them. In his Suprematist Manifesto, Malevich lays out the ideological basis of Suprematism, emphasizing that art should serve solely as a demonstration of pure un-objective emotion. Art must move away from any sort of material objectivism and, most certainly, away from any role in the formation of the state. His work inspired other avant-garde movements. Malevich utilizes elements of cubism, formalism and abstraction that would influence and characterize formalist styles in Suprematism’s ideological antagonist, Constructivism.

While the geometric shapes and colors found in Suprematism influenced Constructivists, they used these elements to a different end. Constructivists emphasized the material quality of objects and embraced active participation in constructing the new communist state. The revolutionary posters of both Constructivists and Futurists reflect the early Soviet aesthetic.

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11 Heller, 132.
12 Malevich.
13 Heller, 134.
Futurism, Constructivism and Productivism share the same goals: namely, “the refashioning of the world through art, the construction of the material environment of the society of the future and . . . a clearing of space . . . by means of the destruction of all traditional forms of culture.”

Although Constructivism and Suprematism are theoretically opposed to each other, and although Constructivism, along with other movements, was theoretically complementary to the state, all would be criticized under the umbrella of formalism because they were all stylistically incompatible with the totalitarian system that developed under Stalin. The complex historical and ideological presence of these modern art movements in the early stages of Communism lead to the greater challenge facing the Soviet system: how to respond to problems generated by modern art once the state acquired total control over artistic policy and production.

Despite the intentions of modern art, it was eventually deemed incompatible with Soviet ideology and was denounced and censured. Lenin opposed modern art from the beginning because he felt it was too bourgeois; instead, he favored art rooted in realism as well as Monumentalism. But it was not until Stalin’s regime gained control over official art organizations that the state took a serious role in dictating artistic style. At this point, the state opposed formalism and favored Socialist Realism. Malevich had denounced Socialist Realism to Lenin in the 1920s and had worked in the Leningrad Institute of Artistic Culture until 1926, when the institute, “considered un-soviet and unneeded by the Soviet government, was closed.”

Malevich’s death in 1935 only made it easier for the Soviet regime to censor Suprematism.

Though seemingly compatible with Soviet ideology, Constructivism was lumped together with Suprematism and other formalisms and thus came under attack. “Constructivism and

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14 Golomstock, 16.
15 Heller, 163.
16 Rakitin, 24.
17 Rakitin, 25.
Suprematism were censured as too ambiguous to serve as tools of state propaganda.”¹⁸ As early as 1919 the dangers that avant-garde art posed to the Soviet system (notwithstanding some of these movements’ active support of communism) were decried by Zinoviev, one of Lenin’s favored advisors:

At one time we allowed the most nonsensical futurism to get a reputation almost as the official school of Communist art . . . It is time to put an end to this… Dear comrades, my wishes to you are that we should bring more proletarian simplicity into our art.¹⁹

Formalism and modern art in the Soviet Union would be condemned for many of the same reasons that they were condemned in Hitler’s Germany. Modern art was too ambiguous and subjective to demonstrate state ideology, and it was inaccessible to the common man. The abstract shapes and nearly indecipherable figures in Malevich’s paintings could not sufficiently buttress the spirit of Communist society to the masses.

At the Soviet Writers Congress of 1934, Zhdanov spoke out against literature that reveals the “decadence” and “decay” of capitalist society:

Those representatives of bourgeois literature who feel the state of things more acutely are absorbed in pessimism, doubt in the morrow, eulogy of darkness, extolment of pessimism as the theory and practice of art. And only a small section the most honest and farsighted writers are trying to find a way out along other paths, in other directions, to link their destiny with the proletariat and its revolutionary struggle.²⁰

While Zhdanov is speaking about literature, his vocabulary suggests that he also had in mind visual art. Furthermore, his allusions to decadence, decay, and pessimism echo Hitler’s criticisms of modern art. Golomstock describes the different reactions to war that were reflected in two currents of modernist art: “One apocalyptic, alien and terrible . . . the other utopian, magnificent

¹⁸ Heller, 151.
¹⁹ Qtd. in Golomstock, 30.
²⁰ Zhdanov.
and monumental, as in the *chef-d’oeuvres* of the court artists of Hitler and Stalin.”\(^{21}\) Clearly, Zhdanov alludes to the first kind of modernist current in his criticism.

Currents in modernist art that focused on the utopian and magnificent (like Constructivism and Futurism) were criticized more circuitously, as this direction would be overtaken by Socialist Realist and National Socialist art. Zhdanov states that socialist literature has the advantage of employing different “genres, styles, form and methods” in order to construct the most advanced form of literature and art: Socialist Realism. However, he precedes this with certain conditions: “[t]o be an engineer of human souls means standing with both feet firmly planted on the basis of real life.”\(^{22}\) Serving the state through art meant serving the state through a Socialist Realist aesthetic. With this pre-condition, Zhdanov turns the very ideology of Constructivism and Futurism against itself. He acknowledges the importance of other movements and at the same time diminishes their significance by portraying them as mere aesthetic or literary tools to be utilized within Socialist Realism. By appropriating certain forms of modern art and simultaneously undermining them in this way, Soviet critics rejected formalism while incorporating certain revolutionary elements into a new Socialist Realism. This contrasts with the purely critical approach to degenerate art in Nazi Germany. In the case of the latter, policy dealing with art was not an attempt to create a new artistic movement. Instead, it was a negation of modern art and a revamping of the past in direct response to the unsavory modern styles.

The ambiguousness of the Soviet critique of modern art is manifest in the way the Soviet Union gradually devalued formalism:

In the 1930’s the country had already become an empire, socialist in form and

\(^{21}\) Golomstock, 60.  
\(^{22}\) Zhdanov.
slaveholding in content. Many of the avant-garde artists were still alive at the time and continued to work. But only one-sided conclusions can be drawn from the fact of their physical presence. We are always reassured that nothing terrible happened.\(^\text{23}\)

Despite the Soviet Union’s ambiguous approach to formalism, public criticism strengthened throughout the 1930’s. Osip Beskin’s booklet *On Formalism in Painting* divided art into “pure” and “impure” categories, thereby dissolving any notion that Socialist Realism and formalism could both support the Soviet system.\(^\text{24}\) Between its opening in 1932 and 1933, the exhibition “Artists of the RSFSR; 15 Years” severely reduced the space allotted to “left” art. Works in the space it did provide were hung next to critical explanatory plaques, much as was done in the Nazi “Degenerate Art” exhibition. To capitalize on artists who were in other formalist movements, the state employed a strategy whereby it inverted the meaning of certain formalist movements and appropriated them. Some artists were accepted into Socialist Realism if they could demonstrate their faithfulness to Stalinist ideology and their total break with their past. Mayakovsky’s “tragic evolution from rebel, avant-garde poet and revolutionary to Orthodox agitator and propagandist of the spirit of Stalinism” exemplifies this change within the Soviet system.\(^\text{25}\)

Perhaps the greatest distinction between the Nazi and the Soviet critiques of art is how these criticisms played out in the public sphere. While Hitler often spoke out against decadent and degenerate art, criticism of modern art in the Soviet Union and principles of Socialist Realism and art policy were crystalized behind closed doors, among selective groups in the upper echelons of the party apparatus. “Stalin himself never spoke publicly on matters of art and

\(^{23}\) Rakitin, 22.
\(^{24}\) Rakitin, 20.
\(^{25}\) Rakitin, 21.
culture.”\textsuperscript{26} The Soviet newspaper \textit{Pravda} came out against formalism in 1936, though policy against formalism was already long underway.\textsuperscript{27} In other words, from the time of the creation of modern art there were concerns about its dangers to the Soviet system. Public policy and criticism, however, evolved over time as Stalin consolidated power. This is a markedly different approach from the total, open opposition that characterized the German critique. Despite these differences, Soviet modern art would come to suffer the same fate as German modern art. Beginning in the 1930’s and lasting through Stalin’s death in 1953, it was repressed, attacked, and destroyed under Stalinism.

The critiques of modern art in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were different approaches to the same problem, namely, the problem of dangerous modern art. Both the Third Reich and the USSR desired to create and celebrate a new and distinct culture, which led some to believe initially that modern art could be used to support the state. For example, Goebbels suggested that German expressionism could serve as the official style of National Socialism. Meanwhile, in Russia, modern art movements like Constructivism were self-proclaimed supporters of the Socialist state, even going so far so as to consider themselves the embodiment of a new Communist style. Still, the modern and avant-garde movements were doomed under both totalitarian regimes: they were inaccessible to the masses and too obscure to relay simple party ideology. While Hitler waged public war on modern art, the Soviet Union was less direct in its battle against the avant-garde. Policy was developed and implemented privately within the systems of power. It was challenged in the public arena years later, not only through condemnation but through appropriation and inversion of meaning and style.

These regimes, facing the same underlying problems with respect to the aesthetics of

\textsuperscript{26} Golomstock, 85.
\textsuperscript{27} Rakitin, 20.
modern art, tried to resolve those problems with the aid of comparable content and a realist style in official art. “In the thirties, Stalinist Socialist Realism would become indistinguishable both in theory and practice from art of the Third Reich.”

Official forms of art in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were both distinct and similar in terms of style. While differences between Socialist Realist and National Socialist art can be attributed to ideology, similarities emerge from the overlapping ideologies and shared cultural principles.

Both Socialist Realist and National Socialist art were based on an important national tradition of genre painting . . . Both cultures saw this as the most important value in their artistic heritage and believed that they themselves were developing it to a new and higher level.

Another similarity is that both saw the folk and peasantry as an important component of cultural identity. Few glorified the peasantry more than Russia’s own literary hero, Leo Tolstoy, who asserted that folk art, folk culture, and the folk way of life embody the spirit of Russia. In Germany, “Volk was one of the key words of National Socialist philosophy, meaning ‘folk and folkdom,’ representing the totality of the German people and the German race.” The peasant was seen as the incarnation of the true German. These overlapping values explain why depictions of peasants were important in both German and Russian art. The remainder of this paper will focus on one segment of genre paintings that depicts the life of peasantry in Socialist Realism and National Socialist art as a basis for comparison.

Artistic representations of peasant life converge in Nazi and Soviet ideology. Under National Socialism, art referenced ideals pulled from the Christian tradition; emphasized the family unit as the building block of the social structure; and, on the whole, ignored technological

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28 Golomstock, 20.
29 Golomstock, 254.
30 Adam, 9.
31 Adam, 132.
advancements in favor of depicting a more eternal and natural state. While Nazi ideology was not explicitly connected to Christianity, the Nazis used symbolism and traditional values associated with Christianity in their art to cater to a society rooted in the Christian tradition. Socialist Realism, in contrast, did not link itself with any religious doctrine but, rather, focused on depicting the collective group over the family unit and glorifying modern technology as a material symbol of progress.

In National Socialist art, the life of the peasant is linked with Christian values of “simplicity” and “honesty” as well as with Christian ideals of the family.  

![Image](image_url)

"The Eugenic concept of ‘family’ in its deepest essence is synonymous with the Christian concept of a ‘religious moral family.’”  

"The family of the farmer in particular was seen as the nucleus of the nation. The National socialists hoped that the farm family’s renewed popularity would lead to an earthly paradise."  

Adolf Wissel’s paintings “Farming Family from Kahlenberg” and “Peasant Woman” demonstrate the traditional family structure (see Appendix). In the “Farming Family from Kahlenberg,” Wissel presents the ideal Aryan family unit: a mother and a father sit with their three children and a grandmother. Likewise, Sepp Hilz’s painting "Das Fuellhorn" depicts a large group of peasants divided into male/female couples (see Appendix).

In “Peasant Woman” an elderly woman sits alone with her arms crossed and her wedding band clearly exhibited. The cleanliness of her simple clothing, as well as that of the “Farming family from Kahlenberg,” suggest the Christian values of simplicity and purity. The woman’s short white sleeves expose tan lines on her arm that suggest her health and ability to work outside, despite her age. This peasant woman seems to respond to and refute Modershon-

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32 Adam, 97, 138.
33 Adam, 134.
34 Adam, 138.
Becker’s “Old Peasant Woman Praying.” A comparison of these two paintings reveals how National Socialist art was largely defined by its response to modernist works. While National Socialism focused on negating the problems it saw in modern art, Socialist Realist art made more of an attempt to push forward and create something new.

Socialist Realist paintings of peasantry did not overtly reference Christianity. The religion of society was Communist ideology. Soviet writer Leonid Leonov explains that “‘[a] world that we can imagine more material and better suited to human needs than Christian Paradise’—thus was Communism defined.” So, whereas National Socialism focused on the Christian family unit, Socialist Realism focused on the collective group in peasantry. In fact, the family unit was hardly ever depicted in Socialist Realist art during the 1930’s and 40’s.

Revolutionary Marxism initially considered [the family] a bourgeois institution doomed to extinction in the conditions of socialist society. The whole previous system of human relations was to be destroyed in the name of a new collective way of life . . . If one were to judge by art alone, one might well come to the conclusion that Soviet man never lived at home or spent time with his family, but instead passed his entire existence in factories, on the fields of collective farms . . .

Sergei Gerasimov’s "Collective Farm Harvest Festival" displays this view of the collective in rural society (see Appendix). The group of people are represented as equals.

Another prevalent element in Socialist Realist paintings of rural life is the presence of technology and machines. Compared to the absence of machinery in Nazi paintings this element demonstrates ideological differences that governed Nazi and Socialist Realist art. “In Nazi art the peasant was usually portrayed against an idyllic background of the timeless life of the people . . . however, Soviet paintings . . . swarmed with tractors threshing-machines and combine

35 Quoted in Terts, 28–29.
36 Golomstock, 260.
37 Golomstock, 259–260.
harvesters.” 38 Nazi paintings “left out...any sign of the increased mechanization of agriculture.” 39 Despite their realistic style, Nazis rejected the idea that their paintings had to do with “realism” or “materialism” because artists in Germany were creating for eternity. 40 The Nazis desired to “overshadow the horrors of reality” and to show only “the idea of the destiny of a people.” 41 As evidenced by its very name, Socialist Realism expressed the insistent proclamation of the Soviet regime that it should correctly capture the reality of utopian Communism, or, “[t]he truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development.” 42

Differences between Nazi and Socialist art manifest themselves largely in terms of content; stylistically speaking, the paintings remain conspicuously similar. The ideological differences expressed through content show how official art turned the “raw material of dry ideology into the fuel of images and myths intended for general consumption,” and this merely “lends a specific flavor to a final product that is identical.” 43 Even though the Nazis and the Soviets did not agree on whether official art was based on Socialist Realism or Materialism, artists from both camps use comparable methods. Both systems use paintings of peasantry to express their versions of the ideal utopian state and to mask what was lacking in actual society. For example, while tractors were scarce in rural areas of the Soviet Union in the 1930’s, modern technology and industrialization had been encroaching on peasant areas in Germany. 44 Both systems delivered their message in a way that was accessible to the public, so that the meaning of

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38 Golomstock, 259.
39 Adam, 133.
40 Adam, 138–139.
41 Adam, 162.
42 Terts, 26.
43 Golomstock, xxii.
44 Golomstock, 259.
art could be easily and universally understood. Art was for the masses, and because of this, artistic style was limited to realism that illustrated the utopian ideal.

At the same time, the Nazi and Soviet regimes considered it their role to construct a culture “of a new type,” which should be reflected in their art by a new aesthetic personality. Even as Hitler sought to create art that would transcend history and therefore openly linked the style of Nazi art with classical art of antiquity, he acknowledged the need for Nazi art to be something new. “Hitler knew that no culture could succeed which was based entirely in the forms of the past . . . National Socialist culture had in some sense to be new.”

Socialist Realist art required an even greater revolutionary character in order to embody the Soviet regime’s ideology. Soviet ideology focused on moving forward into the future and breaking with the past. In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Milan Kundera describes how under the Soviet bloc one marches into the future, forgetting the past. One of his characters explains:

The first step in liquidating a people . . . [i]s to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was.

Party emphasis on breaking with the past and moving into the future allowed for a more contemporary style in Socialist realism. Because of the Soviet regime’s history with modern art movements, its policy allowed art to incorporate more modernist techniques. The rewriting of history Kundera describes demonstrates how the Soviet Union was able to incorporate avant-garde art into its historical narrative. In the 1960’s and 70’s the avant-garde was rehabilitated in

45 Golomstock, ix.
46 Adam, 24-26.
47 Tayler and Van der Will, 135.
48 Kundera, Laughter, 159.
Soviet art history by being adapted so that it could would fit into the mainstream line of growth propagated by the state.\(^4^9\) The Soviet system, having lasted decades longer than the Third Reich, certainly had more time to evolve its policies. This contributed to its ability to incorporate modern ideas into art, as well as to make art a more fully integrated part of the political system.

The ability of Socialist Realism to incorporate modern techniques into its style demonstrates a resourcefulness that National Socialist painting did not possess:

The style of Soviet artists was not so much a stylistic borrowing from the past as a translation of the abstract language of the avant-garde into the language of representational forms. This is the reason for the greater freedom of the Soviet painters in their approach to the subject, the more realistic and contemporary spirit of their work, and their closer approach to a total identification between art and life.\(^5^0\)

Techniques of modernism could be used as long as the works still followed the principles of Socialist Realism. Nikolai Ippolitovich Obrynba’s “Before the Storm” and Gerasimov’s “Collective Farm Harvest Festival” (see Appendix) exhibit modernist qualities. In “The Collective Farm Harvest Festival” light is depicted in an impressionistic style, while in “Before the Storm” the piles of wheat are depicted in almost cubist, abstract shapes. Both are characterized by brightly colored brush strokes. The moderate artistic freedom in Socialist Realist art enabled it to mask its dry ideological and conventional character to a better degree than National Socialist art.

Evidence of the aesthetic shortcomings of National Socialist art can be found in Hitler’s own disappointment. Hitler expressed concerns over the mediocre quality of contemporary German painting. Though he bought many works to encourage production, he hardly displayed

\(^4^9\) Rakitin, 21.  
\(^5^0\) Golomstock, 45–56.
any of them in his private collection.\textsuperscript{51} Third Reich paintings were an imitation of the past, “a form of cultural camouflage and a lie . . . produced in a vacuum. Form and content were in contradiction.”\textsuperscript{52} The image of the utopian state could not be achieved in Nazi painting, because it could not synthesize a supposedly fresh, young and vibrant culture in its tired classical imitations and repetitive stereotypes.

In the Soviet regime, art was more fully engrained into society than in Nazi Germany. “The comparison between Soviet and Fascist art . . . was seen as unfavorable to the latter” because it “showed how much further Soviet art had progressed along the path of service to the Party and State, how much more controlled and disciplined it had grown, how… it was now an inseparable part of its political system.”\textsuperscript{53} The Soviet Union infused a utopian image of itself into almost every aspect of culture and society. Its strength lay in its ability not only to repress and negate dissident art but also to absorb and reproduce some of those aesthetics when useful. Socialist Realism was not so deeply defined by its antagonist, as was the case in Nazi art. The Soviet regime directed more effort towards creating something new. If the success of National Socialist or Socialist Realist painting is based on the style’s ability to support its own totalitarian system, then Socialist Realism was more successful than National Socialism.

The way these regimes chose to critique and resolve issues surrounding art demonstrates how similarly the underlying mechanisms of power worked in these systems. The Third Reich’s complete and total purge of all forms of modern art “demonstrates that the new German art had the elimination of part of the human race written into its very concept.”\textsuperscript{54} Not only is art a way to translate the state’s ideology, but the state’s policy toward art serves as a model of how other

\textsuperscript{51} Adam, 68.
\textsuperscript{52} Adam, 140.
\textsuperscript{53} Golomstock, 52.
\textsuperscript{54} Adam, 15.
issues are dealt with by the government. In the Soviet Union, real criticisms of modern art took place within the mechanisms of power, behind closed doors. Art policy was implemented more circuitously, not only through negation but also appropriation and reversal of meaning. This characterizes the mechanisms of power that worked behind the Soviet system to support its ideology.

Despite their open ideological hostility towards one another, the Nazis and the Soviets betray their similar totalitarian structure through their rejection of modernist art and the similarity of the official art they promoted. “Totalitarian aesthetics teaches that art is a mirror which reflects reality; in this mirror the two systems betrayed their inner likeness and reached a near absolute identity of style.”\(^{55}\) Both Nazi and Soviet leaders focused intently on art policy, incorporating art into the state based on the idea that “art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.” “It is impossible for us not to see a reflection of Stalin’s totalitarianism in classical Socialist Realism” and the same totalitarianism reflected in National Socialist art.\(^{56}\)

The overall aesthetic character reflected in these seemingly different systems is kitsch. The origins of this aesthetic can be traced back to common features in both regimes. Art was an instrument of the state used to indoctrinate citizens with ideology. Each regime saw art as a means to express their vision of what the utopian system, their system, looked like and to do so in a way that captured the regional spirit. Kitsch is defined in Milan Kundera’s novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as “the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word.”\(^{57}\) Depicting utopian society necessarily means denying the existence of

\(^{55}\) Golomstock, vii.

\(^{56}\) Rakitin, 22

\(^{57}\) Kundera, *Unbearable*, 248.
imperfections in the world. While the Soviets denied that their works purposely excluded the horrors of reality and while the Nazis acknowledged this intention, the overall message of the official art in both regimes was essentially the same. When political institutions can consolidate power enough to control and use art as a tool, the art “enters the realm of totalitarian kitsch . . . mean[ing] that everything that infringes on kitsch must be banished for life.”58 Herein Kundera not only explains the official art in the Third Reich and Soviet Union, but also delivers an explanation for both regimes’ critiques of modern art.

Art’s ability to capture souls and indoctrinate citizens rested above all on its being easily understood by the masses, in a way so as to unite them together in simple and common feeling. This feeling, no matter what the content, character, genre or medium used, was always the same. The essence of kitsch lies in its cultivation of a feeling rather than an explicit technique. The formula to achieve this feeling can be slightly altered, but the result is the same. Kundera explains the specific feeling art tried to generate. He describes the reaction of a senator to a scene of children running and playing on a grassy hill, a scene the senator described as the definition of happiness:

The senator had only one argument in his favor: his feeling. When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme . . . Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running in the grass! It is the second tier that makes kitsch kitsch. The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of Kitsch.59

And here Kundera captures the essential feeling of kitsch. It is a feeling that generates not only joy and love of the utopian society but also happiness resulting from sharing this sentiment with the community of common man. This second order of feeling explains the way official art used

58 Kundera, Unbearable, 251–252.
59 Kundera, 250–251.
kitsch in an attempt to unite the nation and to hold society together under totalitarianism. As Adam explains in regards to Nazi art, “[t]he collective aim was the only reason for art . . . to absorb people in a communal experience.”

Yet in order for art to evoke a communal feeling, it must be streamlined in a way that forces it to lose its originality and to become tasteless. Taste is what uncovers the true similarity between National Socialist and Socialist Realist art. It causes a gut reaction of uneasiness and discomfort at the dishonesty of a utopian world presented as reality. In trying to unite all viewers together, the art reveals its own shallowness. At the highest level of government, even officials like Hitler and Goebbels felt disappointment with Nazi art. Terts acknowledges that Socialist Realism required a sacrifice of taste and was even considered by some to be “the death of all art.” The word kitsch is believed to have originated in Munich markets from the word “verkitschen” meaning “to make cheap.”“Kitsch is artistic rubbish, a low art that apes the effects of past fine art styles and in the process vulgarizes them.” Ultimately, the weakness and failure of official art in the Third Reich and Soviet Union is inherent. Because of this it fails to be good or tasteful art, if it is considered art at all.

Works Cited


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60 Adam, 16.
61 Adam, 68.
62 Terts, 88.
63 Walker.
64 Walker.


Appendix


5. Sepp Hilz, "Das Fuellhorn."