

# **"By thinking in images the artist cognizes the world in order to change it"**

## Remarks by Frederick Choate, translator of Art as the Cognition of Life, at New York City book signing

**29 September 1998**

*In his opening remarks at the Friday, September 25 book signing at the Borders Book Shop at the World Trade Center Frederick Choate said, in part:*

Over the past few decades, literary criticism has largely been dominated by structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-modernism, and what borders on a cult around Bakhtin. Even if one considers Marxist literary criticism, the names most often mentioned are Lukacs, Adorno (and others from the Frankfurt school), Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton or Fredric Jameson. It is strange that Soviet literary critics are seldom given serious attention in the West; for that reason I hope that this anthology of essays by Aleksandr Voronsky comes as a pleasant surprise.

It is no accident that little is known about Voronsky. Since he belonged to the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky, Voronsky was executed in 1937 and erased from official Soviet history. His books were removed from libraries and it became increasingly difficult to obtain reliable information about his life and the evolution of his views on literature. We did know that Voronsky was editor of the major Soviet literary journal of the 1920s, and in one relatively brief window of time, 1921-27, was able to write a series of brilliant articles before being silenced as a literary critic by Stalinism.

To better understand the significance of his writings, I would like to give an overview of Voronsky's life. Born in 1884 in the province of Tambov. Voronsky joined the Bolshevik Party in 1904 while studying to become a priest. In 1905 he led a student rebellion and was expelled from the Tambov seminary. Not long

afterwards, he took part in the Revolution of 1905 in Petersburg. He was arrested in 1906, spent one year in prison, was rearrested in October 1907 and sent into exile for two years. In 1912, Voronsky attended the Prague Conference where he met Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Ordzhonikidze and other leading Bolsheviks. Soon after returning to Russia, he was rearrested and sent into exile.

After the February Revolution of 1917, he played a leading role in the Minsk Council of Soldiers' Deputies, then in establishing Soviet power in Odessa. When Odessa fell to the Germans in 1918, Voronsky transferred to Ivanovo, a major textile center and Bolshevik stronghold. There he led the party's city committee and edited the newspaper *Workers Land*. From 1918 to 1920 Voronsky wrote over 400 articles for this paper, which gained the reputation as the best provincial newspaper in Russia. Summoned to Moscow in 1921, he met with Lenin, Krupskaya and Gorky to discuss the founding of a 'thick' literary journal, *Red Virgin Soil*.

As editor of this journal, Voronsky published Gorky, Esenin, Mayakovsky, Pilniak, Ivanov and many other writers who would comprise the literary canon of the early Soviet period. Yet he was bitterly opposed by many (often young and poorly educated) communists in the 'Proletarian Culture' movement. The Proletcultists claimed that a new, proletarian culture would have to be created by the new ruling class which emerged during the socialist revolution, much like a new culture had been created by the bourgeoisie in the wake of the great bourgeois revolutions.

Trotsky had criticized the Proletcultists in a series of

articles in 1922 and 1923 which later would be published as *Literature and Revolution*. He explained that the next decades would be a cruel period of wars and revolutions, and by the time the proletariat had conquered power on a world scale, it would begin to wither away as a class; in other words, the new culture would be based on universal human principles of solidarity and equality in the new, classless society. Having been denied access to culture during bourgeois rule, the proletariat would not have time to develop a new culture before losing its class identity. Hence there never had been and never would be a truly 'proletarian culture.' Voronsky defended these views in a number of essays in this anthology.

In 1923, Voronsky signed the 'Letter of 46' in support of Trotsky's criticism of the increased bureaucratization of the Communist Party. From that time, Voronsky's position ran parallel to Trotsky's. When Trotsky was removed as Commissar of War in January 1925, Voronsky was removed as editor of *Red Virgin Soil*. When Gorky and Esenin threatened to stop publishing in Soviet journals, Voronsky was reinstated. Not long after signing the 'Declaration of the 83,' in the summer of 1927, Voronsky was expelled from the party in February 1928. He was not arrested until January 1929, when he was sent into exile to Lipetsk. As Nadezhda Joffe writes in her memoirs, *Back in Time*, 'arrivals' at that time were regulated by 'departures.' Voronsky was allowed to return to Moscow in the fall of 1929 because he signed a letter stating that he had departed from the Left Opposition. He was readmitted to the party in May 1930.

There is considerable evidence that Voronsky remained in the Opposition at least through 1932, although intense police surveillance made any open oppositional activity impossible. He was not allowed to publish as a literary critic, but was permitted to work as an editor at the State Publishing House. Soon after the Kirov assassination in December 1934, Voronsky was expelled again from the party, for the last time. He was arrested on February 1, 1937, given a 20-minute trial on August 13, and executed immediately after. He was one of a whole generation of Marxists whom Stalin exterminated in the Great Terror of 1936-38.

I cannot do justice to the many themes covered in Voronsky's articles, but I will mention a few. Following Belinsky and Plekhanov, Voronsky stressed that art is a

means of cognition; by thinking in images the artist cognizes the world in order to change it. In art, however, an enormous role is played by intuition and the subconscious. Because of these views, Voronsky was accused of being a Bergsonian and Freudian (he was neither). He stressed that the task of the critic is to evaluate both the sociological and aesthetic moments in a work of art. Here, the first element is relatively clear (the class viewpoint of the artist).

The second element is more difficult to determine, for it involves the relationship of beauty to truth (for instance, Voronsky echoed Plekhanov's idea that a false idea cannot find beautiful form, or only in a very limited sense). Voronsky turned ever increasingly to the psychology of the creative process, examining the relationship of the subjective to the objective, and of the social to the individual. In all these areas, many of Voronsky's ideas remain unfinished--we do not know where he would have gone if he had not been silenced by Stalinism. One thing is clear: he was not the progenitor of socialist realism, which was codified at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934 and became a means of policing Soviet literature. Although invited to attend this congress, Voronsky refused.

When he was shot in 1937, Voronsky was not quite 53 years old. He was officially 'rehabilitated' in 1957, and several heavily censored anthologies were published in the Soviet Union. The cuts made in many of his major articles have been restored in this English edition. Much remains to be written and said about Voronsky, and I invite you to raise any questions you might have about this remarkable Marxist literary critic and his equally remarkable writings.

*See also:*

New York City events introduce Aleksandr Voronsky's Art as the Cognition of Life



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