

Arts editor David Walsh speaks on the centenary of the October Revolution

# What the Russian Revolution meant for modern art and culture

David Walsh  
28 February 2018

*We post here a talk given by WSWS arts editor David Walsh to several college audiences in December and January, to mark the centenary of the October Revolution.*

**“But the new art, which will lay out new landmarks, and which will expand the channel of creative art, can be created only by those who are at one with their epoch...”**

—Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*

The October Revolution in Russia in 1917 was the greatest event in modern history, the first stage of the world socialist revolution, the completion of which it is our task to carry out.

The working class and the rural poor in Russia, under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky, rose up 100 years ago, took power and established their rule in the face of a ferocious counter-revolution and the intervention of all the great powers.

This past year, our international movement has marked the anniversary in a series of meetings, as well as extensive discussions of the events and personalities on our website, the *World Socialist Web Site*. No other political movement has paid one-tenth, perhaps one-hundredth the attention we have to the Russian Revolution, because we begin from the urgency of the present conditions, the massive crisis of capitalism, threatening poverty, dictatorship and war for the mass of the world's population.

We are once again approaching social upheavals, and the experience of the greatest revolutionary events in history is vital to us and to the working class as a whole. While other so-called “left” movements circling in the orbit of the Democratic Party are caught up in the anti-Russian campaign or the hysteria over allegations of sexual misconduct, along with our other interventions in the working class and among young people we have been studying and learning a great deal from the October Revolution.

Our discussion this evening centers on what this enormous event meant—and continues to mean—for art and culture, which has at least two sides to it: where the revolution and its implications *directed* or *oriented* art, as it were, and where modern art actually went. This report will deal principally with the first point. I hope it will encourage you to investigate further.

I want to emphasize that we are not only speaking of the development of the Soviet Union, although I will concentrate on that, but of global developments. What did the opening up of an epoch of world social revolution, with its perspective of doing away with exploitation and class society and creating a society based on solidarity, mean for the cultural life of humanity as a whole?

In fact, once that reality had come to pass in October 1917, nothing

would ever be the same. All subsequent cultural and artistic trends and problems would have to be seen in relation to the fate of the revolution, including “negatively,” in periods of defeat and reaction.

In his Introduction to *Literature and Revolution*, written in the early 1920s, Leon Trotsky, a leading member of the revolutionary workers' government in the Soviet Union, wrote:

“There are decades of struggle ahead of us, in Europe and in America. Not only the men and women of our generation, but of the coming one, will be its participants, its heroes and its victims. The art of this epoch will be entirely under the influence of revolution.”

I believe this argument, despite superficial appearances to the contrary, is profoundly true and gives us the most accurate picture of—and challenges to—art and culture in our time.

This, if you like, is a central theme of this evening's discussion. The greatest achievements, both in terms of the cultural advancement of wide layers of the population in the Soviet Union and in terms of artistic work internationally, came as a result of *conscious* efforts to align culture and artistic thinking with this understanding *or intuition* to some extent, that the Russian Revolution had opened up a new era, that human society was proceeding to a higher stage. This viewpoint provided the most productive and truthful starting point for intellectual and social life. It provided the most fruitful approach to treating the contradictions of contemporary reality in art.

Further, we would argue, to the extent that the influence of social revolution and the understanding—or, again, intuition in part—of the importance of this influence have receded, for complex historical reasons—above all, the crimes of Stalinism and the defeats suffered by the working class—this helps explain the weakening of artistic life in recent decades and, in fact, its tremendous crisis. I will return to this.

Because the Russian Revolution was the first successful, long-term taking of power by the working class, it is hated and reviled by the establishment in every capitalist country. The artistic and cultural achievements of the Revolution, including its profound influence on significant artists everywhere in the world, are also subjects for attack.

However, because the artistic and cultural accomplishments in the Soviet Union were so considerable and so undeniable, the attack often involves the effort to separate the Revolution from the art, to argue that the artistic development had nothing to do with the Revolution, that the

artists themselves were naïve or “utopian,” dreamers, or dupes, and that Stalinist repression in the 1930s revealed the true face of Bolshevism and Communism.

In the centenary year of 2017, there were relatively few major exhibitions held and books published on Russian Revolutionary art. There was an exhibition in New York, at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) early in the year, and later, a larger one at the Royal Academy in London, and there were others, including one at the Art Institute of Chicago last fall. Predictably, these shows brought out a combination of anxiety and anti-communist venom. None of the exhibitions or new books about early Soviet art dealt in any serious way, often in any way at all, with the role and legacy of Trotsky and the socialist opposition to Stalinism. They all took the line that Stalinism was the inevitable outcome of the revolution.

This is one of the nervous comments, a response to the MoMA exhibition, in the business publication, *Forbes*:

“The terrible fate of the Russian avant-garde is of more than historical interest in this time of political tumult. As artists strive to present radical alternatives to a reactionary incoming [Trump] administration, there’s a strong urge to organize in alignment with the popular political opposition. One lesson to be learned from the Soviet experience is that meaningful art is incompatible with political rhetoric. Another lesson is that populism of any persuasion has scant tolerance for independent thinking.”

Jonathon Keats, “MoMA’s New Exhibition of Russian Revolutionary Art Calls Out to the Present Political Moment,” *Forbes*, January 19, 2017

What does it mean to say that “meaningful art is incompatible with political rhetoric”? Political rhetoric reflects, for better or worse, the passions, disputes, conflicting interests, and—taken as a whole—the ideas and spirit of a given historical period. To say that art is “incompatible” with political rhetoric, without elaboration and clarification, can be taken to mean that art has nothing to do with the passions, problems and ideas of its time. Of what possible value is such art?

One might say, legitimately, that art cannot *merely* be a mirror image of political rhetoric. It must take a critical (and, ideally, revolutionary) attitude to the rhetoric of the times, hostile if necessary, supportive if possible, but always seeking to strengthen, intellectually and emotionally, that which is genuinely humane and progressive.

As for the second “lesson”—that “all populism” is intolerant of “independent thinking—this reflects a truly contemptuous attitude toward the strivings of the suffering and oppressed. Keats expresses the outlook of the complacent, well-to-do middle class.

Here is a slanderous comment, from an ex-leftist, in regard to the Royal Academy exhibition in London:

“The way we glibly admire Russian art from the age of Lenin sentimentalises one of the most murderous chapters in human history. If the Royal Academy put on a huge exhibition of art from Hitler’s Germany there would rightly be an outcry. Yet the art of the Russian revolution is just as mired in the mass slaughters of the 20th century.”

Jonathan Jones, “We cannot celebrate revolutionary Russian art—it is brutal propaganda,” *Guardian*, February 1, 2017, in a review of *Revolution: Russian Art 1917-1932*

should defame or distort the history of the Russian Revolution. It’s disgusting, but not surprising. The Revolution remains alive today, a threat, a specter.

So these continue to be highly disputed, ferociously fought-over questions. Art is very much of this world, whatever the artist or critic might imagine. Writers, filmmakers, playwrights, poets, musicians and painters are regularly rounded up by repressive governments and thrown in jail, sometimes killed, when the authorities don’t like what the artists are saying and doing. This was the experience of the twentieth century. This is the case in many countries today, and it is certainly what Donald Trump and the Democrats too would like to do here. This is the meaning—in an effort only in its initial stages—of the censorship by Google of left-wing websites, the phony “anti-Russian” campaign and the attacks on so-called “fake news.” They are gearing up for full-scale repression in this country.

The concerns of the authorities have a basis in reality. Artists contributed to the downfall of the Russian tsar in 1917. Over the course of the previous century, Russian novelists, poets, playwrights and others had criticized the society for its poverty, backwardness and cruelty, sensitized the population, helped prepare the most advanced elements for socialist ideas, although they were not socialists themselves.

The list is long: Pushkin, Lermontov, Nekrasov, Gogol, Goncharov, Uspensky, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Ostrovsky, along with social and literary critics like Herzen, Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and others. This was Trotsky’s attitude, for example, toward the great novelist, Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Resurrection*:

“Tolstoy did not consider himself a revolutionary and was not one. But he passionately sought the truth and, having found it, was not afraid to proclaim it. ... Everything that Tolstoy stated publicly: about the senselessness of rule by the czar, about the criminality of military service, about the dishonesty of landed property, about the lies of the church—in thousands of ways all this seeped into the minds of the laboring masses... Although not a revolutionary, Tolstoy nurtured the revolutionary element with his words of genius. In the book about the great storm of [the] 1905 [Revolution] an honorable chapter will be dedicated to Tolstoy.”

Leon Trotsky, “On Tolstoy’s Death” (1910)

As I noted, one of the most widely repeated arguments made by contemporary critics of Russian Revolutionary art is that the Revolution and its art were “utopian”—i.e., that they represented at best a fantastic, unrealizable ideal, as the subsequent fate of the Revolution under Stalin demonstrated.

A recent work about the Soviet Union, edited by three individuals, is titled *Utopian Reality* (2013), and it is based on a conference along the same lines in 2011. In the introduction, the three authors write:

“Marxism was clearly utopian in proposing that a political revolution would lead to a centralised structure and an improvement in human behavior, which in turn would reverberate throughout society, resulting in the achievement of socialism and the ultimate withering away of the coercive state apparatus.”

Introduction, “Utopia and Dystopia: The Impulse of History,” *Utopian Reality* (2013), edited by Christina Lodder, Maria Kakkori and Maria Mileeva

It is not surprising that journalists who are paid to defend this system

It can be established quite clearly that the Russian Revolution was the

least utopian popular rising or revolution to that point in history. Taken at face value, the aspirations of Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution of the 1640s for “godly, righteous” government; of Thomas Jefferson and the American Revolution to create a society on the basis of the right to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”; and of Robespierre and the French Revolution for France to be animated by “liberty, equality and fraternity” have all proven “utopian,” given the historical limitations of the times and considering the present realities in those countries, all of which are ruled by corrupt thieves and enemies of democracy.

In fact, Marxism emerged in a struggle, in part, against utopianism—as its opposite. This was Marx early on:

“We develop new principles for the world out of the world’s own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it *has to* acquire, even if it does not want to.”

Karl Marx, Letter to Arnold Ruge, September 1843

The Bolsheviks based themselves on the global development of the productive forces and the fact that those productive forces had “outgrown the limits of the nation and state,” explosively expressed in World War I, in which the great powers bloodily fought to divide the world among themselves. The Russian Revolution, in short, was the most rationally planned mass event in history, systematically discussed and prepared over the course of decades and carried out by the most conscious and advanced sections of the working class and intelligentsia.

It is a particularly loathsome symptom of the decline of intellectual and cultural life that the proposition that human society could be rationally and scientifically organized to satisfy elementary wants and eliminate starvation, poverty and war, and build a humane world, is considered a wild-eyed, “utopian” ideal.

Then you get this sort of combination of academic jargon, ignorance and class prejudice, in the introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition that opened in Chicago in late October at the Art Institute, *Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test*:

“When the Bolshevik Revolution convulsed Russia in October 1917, it was not clear whose cause it served. [Yes, it was—world socialist revolution.] Although Communist Party propaganda [It wasn’t even named the Communist Party yet] was unequivocal about the identity of its addressee—the proletariat—this political entity was anything but evident. [It was very evident, especially throughout 1917.] First, the industrial working class was scarce in this largely agrarian country and became even more endangered as a result of the civil war that ravaged Russia’s economy over the next five years [What does the latter point have to do with the situation in 1917?] .... What is more, from the perspective of Marxist theory, the proletariat was technically not a class at all [This is novel!] but rather the social force that abolishes class affiliation as such to establish for the first time in history the condition for a truly universal subjectivity. [A genuine dialectician!] A universal subject, however, can have no inherent identity [?]. As a result, one could neither define the beneficiary of the Bolshevik Revolution theoretically nor manifest it empirically.” [Absurd.]

Devin Fore and Matthew S. Witkovsky, Introduction, *Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test* (2017)

In any event, none of the so-called experts can explain how it is that this act of political and intellectual madness, the Russian Revolution, produced some of the greatest achievements in artistic culture, as well as taking gigantic strides in industry, science and popular culture. The arguments are not coherent ones, but few people, aside from ourselves, challenge them.

The degeneration of the Russian Revolution under Stalin was not the result of its delusional, “impractical” objectives, but came about because of the isolation of the Soviet Union resulting from the defeats or betrayals of revolutionary opportunities in Europe and Asia and the terrible Russian backwardness and poverty that the Bolsheviks inherited from tsarist Russia.

And this brings us to a central issue. The great question in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution was the extension of the revolution, so that the advanced technology and industry of Germany, for example, could be shared with the Soviet Union and its enormously difficult economic situation could be relieved. There was a revolutionary situation in Germany in the autumn of 1923, but that opportunity was squandered for reasons that lie outside this talk.

Given then the temporary but prolonged isolation of the USSR, a great deal depended on the correct approach to economic and cultural life. Russia’s backwardness created an immense pressure on the workers’ regime, encouraging selfishness, acquisitiveness and corruption.

Lenin, Trotsky, Aleksandr Voronsky, Anatoly Lunacharsky and others tirelessly promoted the cultural welfare of the population, in its most elementary aspects (literacy, family relations, alcoholism, “cultured speech,” punctuality, etc.), as well as in its most complex.

In December 1917, the Bolshevik government issued a decree on education that stated in part:

“Every genuinely democratic power must, in the domain of education, in a country where illiteracy and ignorance reign supreme, make its first aim in the struggle against this darkness. It must acquire in the shortest time universal literacy, by organizing a network of schools answering to the demands of modern pedagogics: it must introduce universal, obligatory, and free tuition for all.”

“On Popular Education,” December 1917, a decree signed by A.V. Lunacharsky, People’s Commissar of Education

Around the turn of the twentieth century in Russia, fewer than half the male population could read and only one-eighth of the female population. Lenin argued, “The illiterate person stands outside politics. First it is necessary to teach him the alphabet. Without it there are only rumors, fairy tales and prejudices—but not politics.” A famous poster illustrated the argument: the illiterate man is like a blind man.

In December 1919, Lenin signed a nine-point decree on illiteracy. These are a few of the relevant passages:

“For the purpose of giving the entire population of the Republic the opportunity for conscious participation in the country’s political life, the Council of People’s Commissars has decreed:

1. Everyone in the Republic from ages 8 to 50 who is unable to read or write is obligated to learn how to read and write in Russian, or in their native language, according to their choice...

3. The People’s Commissariat of Education and its local organs are given the right to recruit, for teaching the illiterate, the country’s entire literate population...as a labor responsibility...

5. For those learning to read and write who are working at hourly

wages...the work day is abbreviated by two hours for instruction, with the same wages.”

In 1920, the Bolshevik government established a special commission to attack the problem of illiteracy. It recruited more than 100,000 literate party members as teachers, the majority of them from the Bolshevik youth organization. The commission set up around 30,000 literacy schools, as well as 33,000 libraries or reading rooms. The Bolsheviks also printed more than 6 million textbooks to support their literacy programs.

By the end of the Second World War, 90 percent of the Soviet population was able to read and write.

This lifting up of the entire population was the only genuine basis for culture and art of a new character.

“When Lenin spoke of the cultural revolution, he saw its basic content as raising the cultural level of the masses. ... Without generalizing thought and without art, human life would be bare and poverty-stricken. But after all, that, to a large degree, is how life is now for millions of people. The cultural revolution must consist in opening up the possibility that they can truly gain access to culture, and not just its leftover stubs. But this is impossible without creating the greatest material preconditions. That is why a machine which automatically produces bottles is for us at the present moment a first-rate factor in the cultural revolution, while an heroic poem is only a tenth-rate factor. ...

“Only this kind of cultural revolution deserves the name. Only on its foundations will a new philosophy and a new art begin to flourish.”

Leon Trotsky, “Culture and Socialism” (1927)

This fight for long-term cultural growth and nourishment went hand in hand with the struggle against the false conception of “proletarian culture”—in the first days of the Russian Revolution a “utopian-idealist” theory of a working class culture developed in a laboratory apart from the general transformation of world and Soviet conditions. Later, in the hands of the Stalinists, the theory of “proletarian culture” became part of the argument in favor of “socialism in a single country” and “a system of bureaucratic command over art and a way of impoverishing it.” (Trotsky)

Here are merely a handful of examples of the artistic and cultural developments in the Soviet Union, which included free arts education.

“The other journal to debut in 1926 was *Sovetskoe foto* [Soviet photography]. It was aimed at a general audience of amateur photographers and photojournalists. Every grade school, institution of higher learning, and business enterprise had a photography club, so the magazine’s circulation increased from 10,000 to 16,000 in 1935-36.”

Alexander Lavrentiev, “Soviet Photography of the 1920s and 1930s in Its Cultural Context—The Photo Landscape of the Period,” in *The Power of Pictures: Early Soviet Photography, Early Soviet Film* (2015)

The “freshness and vigor” of Soviet films, in Trotsky’s phrase, caught the imagination of the entire world. The number of Soviet feature films increased from 9 in 1921 to 123 by 1924. “Movie-going in the Soviet Union was obviously popular. In 1928, 300 million tickets were sold. An average film was seen by 2.5 million people.” (Jens Hoffman, “Film Is

Conflict,” in *The Power of Pictures: Early Soviet Photography, Early Soviet Film*, 2015)

There were many important Soviet films in the 1920s and early 1930s. To name a few:

Lev Kuleshov, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, 1924

Yakov Protazanov, *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, 1924

Sergei Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925; *October: Ten Days That Shook the World*, 1927

Grigory Kozintsev, *The Overcoat*, 1926

Vsevolod Pudovkin, *Mother*, 1926; *Storm over Asia*, 1928

Boris Barnet, *The House on Trubnaya*, 1928

Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929

Alexander Dovzhenko, *Earth*, 1930

One of the most remarkable developments was the emergence of filmmaking in Soviet Central Asia, in regions where prior to the October Revolution the population was nomadic and living, through no fault of their own, in the most backward and primitive economic conditions, pre-capitalist conditions.

“In a pattern repeated throughout much of the Soviet Union and reflective of the national filmmaking boom of the 1920s, Central Asian republics began to establish their own production studios...”

“At the height of productivity, Central Asian studios collectively produced over 20 feature films, 40-60 shorts and over 100 documentaries annually, and are estimated to have produced up to 800 full-length films through to the end of the Soviet Union.”

Barry Mowell, “Political, economic and historical foundations of Central Asian cinema,” in *Social and Cultural Change in Central Asia: The Soviet Legacy*, edited by Sevet Akyildiz, Richard Carlson

Classical music played an immense role in Soviet society until the end. Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev were internationally renowned composers.

Prokofiev was, of course, one of the greatest of twentieth century composers. But it must be noted that he returned to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. He had already established a world reputation. However, it can be argued that his greatest music was composed after his return, despite—or perhaps because of—all the terrible difficulties confronting artists. One thing is certain: Prokofiev was deeply engaged, as was Shostakovich, with his times. Both composers managed to identify with the Soviet experience and, I believe, support the revolution and condemn its betrayal.

Performers like Emil Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter drew large audiences all across the Soviet Union. Major concerts were major events, the subject of considerable discussion and controversy.

“Poets were sometimes treated like rock stars. Tens of thousands of people used to flock to Moscow’s Luzhniki stadium for poetry readings,” writes one commentator.

I would like to discuss briefly some of the individual artists, especially those known as the Soviet avant-garde artists, including Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky, Lyubov Popova among her students, Vladimir Mayakovsky and others. However, presenting them raises quite important questions.

It is sometimes said rather superficially that these artists were, so to speak, the artistic expression or equivalent of Bolshevism. And we have probably said that kind of thing too, a little lazily, at times.

“October 1917 brought radical cultural change. ... Initially, most avant-garde artists welcomed the revolution because Lenin’s idea of a political avant-garde as an agent for social change legitimised their own calls for radical action to combat conservative attitudes to art and society. For Marxists like [Vladimir] Tatlin, here was an opportunity to make real and meaningful change. He recalled: ‘To accept or not accept the October Revolution. There was no such question for me. I organically merged into active creative, social and pedagogical life.’ ”

Christine Lindey, “Art and the Bolshevik Revolution,” 2015

Lindey is a visual arts critic for the *Morning Star*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of Britain.

The relationship between the Marxist party, the party of the working class, and the artists is much more complex and problematic than this suggests.

As a matter of fact, Tatlin was an anarchist before the revolution, and his initial attitude, along with the entire group of avant-garde artists, was not especially friendly toward the October Revolution. There’s no need to invent “left” fairy-tales to make everyone feel good.

In fact, artistic circles in the pre-World War I period, in Russia and elsewhere in Europe and America, were not generally sympathetic to Marxism and the struggle of Marxists to build parties in the working class.

Artistic circles were far more influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and various forms of irrationalism and subjectivism, if the truth be told.

Nietzsche was a German thinker who was very hostile to socialism and democracy. He sharply criticized contemporary capitalist society and culture, but from the right, from essentially an elitist and aristocratic point of view. He argued that the enslavement of the working class was necessary, so the great intellects, the “highest individuals,” the “heroes,” the “free spirits,” could be allowed to attain their fullest development.

This is a typical remark:

“Here we must think through to the fundamentals and push away all sentimental weakness: living itself is *essentially* appropriation from and wounding and overpowering strangers and weaker men, oppression, hardness, imposing one’s own forms, annexing, and at the very least, in its mildest actions, exploitation.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)

These are not attractive views. So why was Nietzsche appealing to many, many artists, including intelligent, progressive figures such as Heinrich and Thomas Mann, George Bernard Shaw, Jack London and many of the Russian artists I’ve mentioned?

Nietzsche was a subtle and intelligent writer. He wrote scathingly about bourgeois mediocrity and complacency, he criticized religion and Christian piety and slavishness. He appeared to many as a “hyper-revolutionary” figure, destructive, apparently anti-establishment, anarchistic. He stood for the “liberation of the instincts,” spontaneity, egoism. “Nothing is true, everything is permitted,” Nietzsche declared. He privileged chaos, incoherence, subjectivity, “intoxication.” ...

This was more tempting to many artists than facing up to life as it was in a period of enormous transformation, examining reality, and it was certainly more alluring and apparently “poetic” than looking at the difficult, often harsh, often tedious conditions of the working class.

Artistic circles on the eve of World War I were strongly colored with irrationalism, they were also dominated by nationalism, patriotism. It is another myth to believe that there was a large body of radical, anti-war

artists who rejected in August 1914 the nationalism and chauvinism of the various ruling elites in the name of the broad interests of humanity at the outset of the war. The artists, in this regard, responded to the patriotic appeals like much of the petty bourgeoisie as a whole, with initial enthusiasm. It cost many painters and poets their lives. Many others, of course, became deeply disillusioned, radicalized.

The Italian Futurists were among the most belligerent. A number of their leading figures later went over to Mussolini and fascism. This is from their *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909):

1. We want to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and rashness...

3. Literature has up to now magnified pensive immobility, ecstasy and slumber. We want to exalt movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist...

7. Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. Poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man. ...

9. We want to glorify war—the only cure for the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman.

10. We want to demolish museums and libraries...

The Italians may have been the most bellicose, but there were many German, Austrian, British and French artists, Expressionists, Fauvists, Cubists, Vorticists and more, under the influence of Nietzsche and other retrograde philosophers, who welcomed the war as a massive act of social hygiene that would purify Europe and wipe away all the rotteness and stagnation in a burst of flame.

Malevich and Mayakovsky, two of the future Soviet avant-garde artists I mentioned, produced Russian patriotic propaganda. The horrors of the war, as I say, subsequently disillusioned many.

The October Revolution itself came as a shock to the artists, even the most radical. It would be wrong to think that iconoclastic extremes and a fondness for intellectual or other kinds of “intoxication” prepare one for the spectacle of the mass of the oppressed intervening and having the audacity to declare themselves the new rulers of the country.

The avant-garde artists’ infatuation with the “future” and the need to reject the “bourgeois” past, Trotsky noted, had more in common with a “bohemian nihilism” than a “proletarian revolutionism.” In fact, despite the verbal radicalism of many poets and painters, the 1917 Revolution, Trotsky continued, “appeared to the intelligentsia, including its literary left wing, as a complete destruction of its known world, of that very world from which it broke away from time to time, for the purpose of creating new schools, and to which it invariably returned.”

In other words, between the Bolsheviks, the revolutionary party, and the artists, even the most sympathetic, there were inevitable differences, contradictions, frictions.

“The ousting of the Provisional Government and the Bolshevik takeover gave most intellectuals outside the radical leftist parties such a shock that they remained silent for several months or passively boycotted the new rulers.”

Hubertus Gassner, “The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization,” in *The Great Utopia* (1992)

In fact, when People’s Commissar of Education Anatoly Lunacharsky

extended a well-publicized invitation to Petrograd artists to come to the Smolny Institute to discuss prospective cooperation a few days after the revolutionary insurrection, only six persons showed up: the poet Aleksandr Blok, the publicist Larisa Reisner, painters David Shterenberg and Nathan Altman, theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky.

The bourgeois intelligentsia in Russia as a whole was hostile to the socialist revolution, that is, the bulk of the academics, lawyers, engineers, bank workers, professionals of many sorts, even the teachers. (Teaching was obviously a narrower, more privileged profession in tsarist Russia.) Lunacharsky issued a sharply worded appeal in May-June 1918, calling on teachers to stop their boycott of the workers' government.

"In Russia for the first time the masses came out independently with their own program, and the desire to take the government into their own hands. And how did the Intelligentsia meet the heroic attempt of the proletariat to create on the brink of destruction, a strong government of the people—the attempt to organize the country, to put an end to the war? It met this attempt with hatred. It not only refused all help to the proletariat, but it rejoiced in every conspiracy against it."

Anatoly Lunacharsky, "To All Who Teach," May-June 1918

Speaking specifically of the visual artists again, it is remarkable—in light of their political histories (many of them were anarchists, Nietzscheans and subjectivists) and sometimes strident comments—that over the course of 1918-1919 virtually all of the significant "left" artists, including Malevich, Tatlin and Rodchenko, agreed to cooperate or work directly for one or more of the new revolutionary state's institutions.

This came about above all because the Bolshevik government showed its seriousness to defend the workers' state with great determination and even ruthlessness, in the face not only of foreign imperialist attack, but attacks from within by various petty bourgeois, anarchist and pseudo-revolutionary "leftists." Trotsky commented: "The law of social attraction (towards the ruling class) which, in the last analysis, determines the creative work of the intelligentsia, is now operating to our advantage." That is, the petty bourgeoisie was being drawn to the class that acted strongly and decisively.

Having been won, with whatever hesitations and vacillations, to the side of the Bolsheviks, the most far-seeing artists threw themselves into a variety of activities, under conditions of extreme privation.

Poet Vladimir Mayakovsky painted and supplied verse for more than 2,000 posters put out by ROSTA (the Russian Telegraph Agency). The posters were designed to raise the political consciousness of the workers and peasants during the Civil War. His subjects ranged from the simplest—how to clean one's rifle, how to sew on buttons—to the most complex—how to destroy the forces of the White generals, how to build socialism.

El Lissitzky designed "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge," a famous 1919 lithographic Soviet propaganda poster. Vladimir Tatlin became one of the leaders of the Moscow Board of the Visual Arts Section of the People's Commissariat of Education. In 1919-1920, he designed his famous Monument to the Third International, the international organization of Communist Parties, whose goal was world revolution.

Varvara Stepanova carried out her ideal of engaging with industrial production in the following year when she, with Lyubov Popova, became designer of textiles at the First State Textile Factory near Moscow. Rodchenko turned to photography.

The emergence of the Stalinist bureaucracy, with its nationalist, reactionary and ultimately counter-revolutionary policies, stamped out the

creative atmosphere, as it did even more ruthlessly the democratic political life of the working class.

As Trotsky commented in 1936, "The most eminent artists either commit suicide, or find their material in the remote past, or become silent." (*The Revolution Betrayed*, 1936)

There is a remarkable photograph from the late 1920s of composer Dmitri Shostakovich, theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and artist-designer-photographer Alexander Rodchenko. Shostakovich, because of his international fame, survived, but the fates of the others illustrate Trotsky's point: Mayakovsky committed suicide, Meyerhold died in the purges, Rodchenko "became silent."

Four artistic geniuses. There is a deeply tragic element to the fate of the Russian Revolution and its participants and supporters, almost unimaginably so.

Mayakovsky was hounded toward the end of his life by the "artistic" representatives of the new bureaucratic caste. He was repelled by the officialdom, as Trotsky put it, "even though he was not able to understand it theoretically and therefore could not find the way to overcome it." The poet spoke of himself as one who was "not for hire." These are a few lines from one of his last major poems, "At the Top of My Voice."

My most respected  
comrades of posterity!  
Rummaging among  
these days'  
petrified crap,  
exploring the twilight of our times,  
you,  
possibly,  
will inquire about me too. ...  
Agitprop [Agitation-propaganda]  
sticks  
in my teeth too,  
and I'd rather  
compose  
romances for you -  
more profit in it  
and more charm.  
But I  
subdued  
myself,  
setting my heel  
on the throat  
of my own song. ...  
The enemy  
of the massed working class  
is my enemy too  
inveterate and of long standing.  
Years of trial  
and days of hunger  
ordered us  
to march  
under the red flag.  
We opened  
each volume  
of Marx  
as we would open  
the shutters  
in our own house;  
but we did not have to read  
to make up our minds  
which side to join,  
which side to fight on.

Our dialectics  
 were not learned  
 from Hegel.  
 In the roar of battle  
 it erupted into verse,  
 when,  
 under fire,  
 the bourgeois decamped  
 as once we ourselves  
 had fled  
 from them. ...  
 I don't care a spit  
 for tons of bronze;  
 I don't care a spit  
 for slimy marble.  
 We're men of a kind,  
 we'll come to terms about our fame;  
 let our  
 common monument be  
 socialism  
 built  
 in battle.  
 Men of posterity  
 examine the flotsam of dictionaries:  
 out of Lethe  
 will bob up  
 the debris of such words  
 as "prostitution,"  
 "tuberculosis,"  
 "blockade."  
 For you,  
 who are now  
 healthy and agile,  
 the poet  
 with the rough tongue  
 of his posters,  
 has licked away consumptives' spittle.  
 With the tail of my years behind me,  
 I begin to resemble  
 those monsters,  
 excavated dinosaurs. ...  
 Comrade life,  
 let us  
 march faster,  
 march  
 faster through what's left  
 of the five-year plan.  
 My verse  
 has brought me  
 no rubles to spare:  
 no craftsmen have made  
 mahogany chairs for my house.  
 In all conscience,  
 I need nothing  
 except  
 a freshly laundered shirt.  
 When I appear  
 before the CCC [Central Control Commission]  
 of the coming  
 bright years,  
 by way of my Bolshevik party card,  
 I'll raise

above the heads  
 of a gang of self-seeking  
 poets and rogues,  
 all the hundred volumes  
 of my  
 communist-committed books.

Mayakovsky shot himself on April 14, 1930, two years after Trotsky was sent into exile by the Stalinist regime. They met a number of times, and also corresponded. Trotsky sought out Mayakovsky's views when he was writing his chapter on Futurism in *Literature and Revolution*. The poet praised Trotsky's work.

It could not be the primary subject of this discussion, but the influence of the Russian Revolution and the epoch it opened up transformed international artistic life, in fact formed the basis for the most important and ground-breaking work in the twentieth century.

The number of artists who responded, in one way or another, to the October Revolution or to the existence of the Soviet Union, which is not of course the same thing, is very great. How could it not be? The Russian Revolution pointed the way out of the bloody violence, poverty and oppression offered by capitalism.

Just to take the example of the United States, supposedly a hotbed of anti-communism.

Many black artists, poets and novelists in US saw the struggle against racism as part of the fight against capitalism.

"Every Negro who lays claim to leadership should make a study of Bolshevism and explain its meaning to the coloured masses. It is the greatest and most scientific idea afloat in the world today," declared Claude McKay in 1919, a black writer who attended the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922.

In 1932, novelist Richard Wright (*Native Son*) began attending meetings of the John Reed Club, a Communist Party-sponsored literary group. He later wrote: "The revolutionary words leaped from the page and struck me with tremendous force. My attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role." Wright later turned sharply to the right, but his important writing was accomplished under the influence of the Russian Revolution.

Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and Lorraine Hansberry all supported or joined the Communist Party at one point or another because of the influence of the October Revolution.

Theodore Dreiser, never a socialist, nonetheless visited the Soviet Union and toward the end of his life joined the Communist Party. F. Scott Fitzgerald followed the development and degeneration of the Soviet Union with great interest and, ultimately, dismay. In the period 1932-1935, he considered joining the Communist Party. He met with members of the Stalinist party and was not favorably impressed. Ernest Hemingway was one of the Popular Front artists and a "friend of the Soviet Union" for a time, especially during the period of the Spanish Civil War.

Edmund Wilson, the leading American literary critic and a friend of Fitzgerald, was propelled to the left by the Depression, toward the Communist Party and eventually toward Trotsky in the late 1930s. Novelist and critic Mary McCarthy too was attracted for a time by Trotsky's ideas and defended him against the Stalinist slanders in the late 1930s.

Three of the leading figures in American postwar literary life, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, all passed through the periphery of the Trotskyist movement.

To one extent or another, each of these writers was deeply influenced by the Russian Revolution, the Communist Party, Stalinism or Trotsky's

fight against Stalinism.

This same exercise could be repeated in every country with a significant cultural life in the twentieth century.

Of course, the relationship between the artists and October Revolution was complex and often problematic, as we have seen in the case of the “left” Russian artists themselves, and many were more attracted to the stability of the Soviet Union and Stalinism than they had been to the workers taking power in 1917. Nonetheless, it is impossible to treat culture in the last century without placing the Revolution at the center of it.

This leads us to the concluding point. In our view, art is not merely a matter of self-expression, or the individual creative imagination, although it is impossible without the latter. Art is one of the ways human beings struggle to discover and communicate to one another the truth about life and reality, in the form of concrete images.

Art is not merely form. The artist is not an empty machine for producing pleasing or complex form, nor the reader or viewer a machine for consuming it. Each is a social being, with an outlook and psychology shaped by social and historical conditions.

In the final analysis, form does not speak to the viewer or reader deeply as a thing in itself, it speaks to us to the degree that it conveys or vibrates with important ideas and feelings about the world. Great artists like Tolstoy and van Gogh disdained talk about “technique.” They were obsessed with unveiling life and reality, bringing out its essence. Of course, they developed extraordinary technique and form, but that was always a subordinate element.

The development of art follows the development of the world. The social revolution is the great question of our day, it overshadows every other one. The Russian Revolution showed the way forward, but the revolution was thrown back, for decades. But it remains the only way out of the crisis of human society.

The artists had to grapple with this question, because it was the central human question. Those who avoided it, or rejected it, would simply have less and less to say to their readers or viewers. This was not a “command” of the Marxists, it was simply a historical, moral reality. How could art remain indifferent to the convulsions of the epoch? And, as I indicated before, what would be the value of art that was indifferent to those convulsions?

This does not mean that the social revolution is the only possible subject. Of course not. But the strength of a love poem too comes ultimately from an urgency about life, often from a protest against a world that makes one’s love difficult or even impossible. Postmodern cynicism, social indifference, the view that human beings are basically rotten and that nothing can be done about the way the world is—any or all of those positions make a poor basis for creating a personal lyric, or anything else.

Trotsky, speaking to the post-revolutionary artists in the Soviet Union, urged them to assimilate and absorb the character and characteristics of the revolutionary epoch into their bone and marrow.

“But the new art, which will lay out new landmarks, and which will expand the channel of creative art, can be created only by those who are at one with their epoch. ...

“The Revolution is reflected in art, for the time being only partially so, to the extent to which the artist ceases to regard it as an external catastrophe, and to the extent to which the guild of new and old poets and artists becomes a part of the living tissue of the Revolution and learns to see it from within and not from without.”

Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*

“And yet Trotsky was one of those who laid the foundations for the Soviet tradition of valuing artistic works for their political and not for their aesthetic value: an approach which would have consequences that were devastating for Russian literature and fatal for its practitioners.”

Bengt Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky: A Biography* (2014)

“He [Trotsky] praised and condemned according to the work’s relationship to the revolution, not by a set of purely artistic criteria.”

Ian D. Thatcher, *Trotsky* (2003)

Art is part of human social development, not something outside of it. There is a relationship between the truth and power of the artist’s ideas and feelings and the ability of his or her work to move, influence and endure.

To speak of “purely artistic criteria” is a symptom of intellectual decline. As the nineteenth century Russian critic Belinsky once observed, an artist is great and enduring only because he or she is the organ and mouthpiece of the times, the society, and, consequently, humanity as a whole.

Art has to speak to life and its great challenges, or it withers and dies. This is our criticism of contemporary art. The declining influence of social revolution and a lack of concern with the fate of wide layers of the population in particular have damaged and weakened artistic life.

“What are we to understand under the term realism? ... A definite and important feeling for the world. It consists in a feeling for life as it is, in an artistic acceptance of reality, and not in a shrinking from it, in an active interest in the concrete stability and mobility of life. It is a striving either to picture life as it is or to idealize it, either to justify or to condemn it, either to photograph it or generalize and symbolize it. But it is always a preoccupation with our life of three dimensions as a sufficient and invaluable theme for art. In this large philosophic sense, and not in the narrow sense of a literary school, one may say with certainty that the new art will be realistic.”

Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*

This is our perspective, the struggle for art and cultural life centrally oriented to the reality and the biggest problems of our time, to the human situation in its totality. This “totality” in our time, is worldwide in scope. The greatest art will give expression to the international and, therefore, truly universal character of the struggle for world socialism. Such art will reject every form of anachronistic narrowness, which divides the human species into the reactionary categories of present-day gender and race politics. This demands an intense, even obsessive concern with the great mass of humanity, suffering and under attack everywhere, by every government and every major party, threatened by war and dictatorship. The artists must not shun “political rhetoric,” but engage him- or herself, actively and critically, with the conflicts of the age.

The most important single factor in reviving art in our period will be a mass movement against capitalism in which the working class comes forward as an independent political force. This will transform the atmosphere in artistic circles. We are dedicated to the development of that movement.



Of course, we have in opposition to this:





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