

THE INHERENTLY SELF-DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF SOCIALIST
REALISM

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

KYLE KOVEL

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs
& Academic Scholarships
Texas A&M University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE
RESEARCH FELLOWS

April 2001

Group: History & Cultural Studies

THE INHERENTLY SELF-DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF SOCIALIST
REALISM

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

KYLE KOVEL

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs
& Academic Scholarships
Texas A&M University
In partial fulfillment for the designation of

UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE
RESEARCH FELLOW

Approved as to style and content by:


Roger Reese
(Fellows Advisor)


Edward Funkhouser
(Executive Director)

April 2001

Group: History and Cultural Studies

ABSTRACT

The Inherently Self-Destructive Nature of Socialist Realism. (April 2001)

Kyle Kovel
Department of English and History
Texas A&M University

Fellows Advisor: Dr. Roger Reese
Department of History

From the years 1932 – 1987, the Soviet Union imposed the artistic style of Socialist Realism upon its artists. Paintings of this era have little to show of the dynamics of Russian art until they are analyzed in terms of the social and political forces that dominated the style's creation.

Looking at its origins, we see Socialist Realism born of a struggle between realist and avant-garde artists. This struggle first saw the avant-garde establish a near monopoly on state commissions and then lose its position as a result of realist complaints and party intervention. It is this realist-supported intervention that instituted the restrictions on form that became the foundation for Socialist Realism and came to signify 50 years of formal restrictions. These restrictions resulted in the alienation of artists beginning with the avant-garde and moving to encompass a majority of artists. By 1946, the effects of this alienation were so great that it produced an artistic theory entitled The Theory of Conflictlessness. Here artists produced work they knew would not cause any question as to whether they were following Socialist Realist principles. It was not until after the death of

Stalin that artists began a significant push to remove their restraints. Their accomplishments were few and far between however, until the Brezhnev era when conflict with artists was kept to a minimum. Artists, even with these reductions in party intervention, continued to fear for their safety and limited the extent of their work. Only after the policies of glasnost and perestroika were artists able to strongly assert themselves and bring an end to their repression.

Socialist Realism, as such, must be seen in terms of the social and political forces that dominated its very existence. For without party intervention, Socialist Realism would not have been the form that has become synonymous with Soviet art.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II ORIGINS.....	2
III THE REVOLUTION.....	8
IV SOCIALIST REALISM.....	13
V CONCLUSION.....	26
REFERENCES.....	28
VITA.....	29

I. INTRODUCTION

In reading the scholarship on Socialist Realist painting in the former Soviet Union, one does not find it hard to pick out the major theme of artistic dictation by the party to the point of the creation of a state propaganda machine. The repression placed upon artists of the period has been enough that numerous volumes of material have been written on the subject. The truly interesting questions that arise from this material though are how did the artists find themselves in such a situation, how did they work their way out of it, and were there links between the two points? In asking these questions, I have found Socialist Realism's creation and destruction to be a product of the tensions between three main groups: realist artists, artists of the left (those artists who utilize non-realist formal techniques) and the party. In the next three sections of this paper, I will trace these conflicts from their pre-revolutionary roots through the end of Socialist Realism in order to establish that the fall of Socialist Realism was manifest in its own creation.

This thesis follows the style and format of *The Russian Review*.

II. ORIGINS

In our examination of Socialist Realism it is necessary to retreat 54 years from the Bolshevik seizure of power in order to gain access to the influences that shaped both the artistic climate and the theoretical foundation for the political intervention that saw the destruction of the artistic left and the establishment of Socialist Realism as the official line on Soviet art. The 1860s mark what can be seen as the staging point for our analysis because it saw, with the Wanderers, the first artistic movement away from the monolithic Academy of art that dominated Russian art since the time of Peter the Great. It also saw the emergence of Nikolai Chernishevsky, the author whose works came to be strongly influential upon the Soviet view of the theoretical basis for art.

With their secession from the Academy in 1863, the group of artists that would call themselves the Wanderers began an attempt to 'bring art to the people' by taking travelling exhibitions throughout the countryside. Accompanying them on their journeys were their easels, which they took out of the studio in order to paint scenes from everyday life. This fascination with contemporary society was accompanied with a high level of awareness for social conflict, which led the Wanderers to depict both the good and the bad in their paintings in the hope of bringing about democratic reforms in favor of the previously ignored classes. Ilya Repin's painting *Barge Haulers on the Volga (1870-1873)* illustrates these ideas

in its use of the barge haulers as a metaphor for the attempt to break free from slavery.

Connecting their art with society put the Wanderers at odds with the Academy, which identified with the idea of 'art for art's sake,' and aligned them with the radical critic Nikolai Chernishevsky who wrote that "the true function of art is to explain life and comment on it."¹ Chernishevsky's insistence that "only content is able to refute the accusation that art is an empty diversion..." served to legitimize art for both the Wanderers and future Russian Marxists and place a painting's idea over its form.²

The inevitable reaction that was to come against the Wanderers arose in 1890s with the World of Art movement. The World of Art rejected the utilitarian view of art espoused by Chernishevsky and the Wanderers in favor of a view that saw art as "an instrument for the salvation of mankind, the artists as dedicated priest, and his art as the medium of eternal truth and beauty."³ To reduce it to its more common description, the World of Art was a movement of 'art for art's sake' and would have a strong influence upon the revolutionary avant-garde.

The World of Art was not only a movement restricted to the visual arts, but consisted of a society, exhibiting organization and magazine. As described by Alexander Benios,

¹ Chernishevsky, Nicholas. *Esteticheskie otnosheniya iskusstva k deistvitelnosti*, cited by Gray, Camilla. *The Russian Experiment in Art* (New York, 1962), 10.

² Chernishevsky, Nicholas, *Esteticheskie otnosheniya iskusstva k deistvitelnosti*, cited by Gray, 10.

³ Gray, 37.

The 'World of Art' should not be understood as any one of these three things separately, but all in one; more accurately as a kind of community which lived its own life, with its own peculiar interests and problems and which tried in a number of ways to influence society and to inspire in it a desirable attitude to art – art understood in its broader sense, that is to say including literature and music.⁴

It was through these separate organs that the World of Art attempted to achieve their primary aim of reestablishing contact with the West and bringing Russia into the forefront of European culture. The ideas of the Impressionists and the works of Van Gogh, Cezanne and Matisse were all introduced, for the first time, to a sizeable Russian audience. With the introduction of the post-impressionists in 1903, the magazine closed down seeing its mission to bring Russia into the world of international culture accomplished.

Following the closing of the World of Art, numerous publications such as *The New Way* and *Apollon* appeared and maintained the World of Art's conception of "art as a unity, of a basic inter-relationship and common source of

⁴ Benois, Alexandre, *Vozniknovenie 'Mira Iskusstva'* (Leningrad, 1928) cited by Gray, Camilla, *The Russian Experiment in Art* (New York, 1962), 37.

all inspiration regardless of the medium of expression.”⁵ A newly forming buying public also came onto the scene looking towards these publications for exhibition reviews in order to build their own personal collections. Individuals such as Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morosov accumulated extensive collections of European avant-garde art, which allowed Russian artists to see first hand the current development of art in the West. This direct access to Western avant-garde pieces, along with the availability of the published material opened Russian artists to the influence of Western art, which we will soon see helped to expand the divide between realist and avant-garde painters within Russia.

Of the Western influences, Italian Futurism was to have the most influence upon the Russian avant-garde. This new aesthetic first took hold with the Russian Primitivists who looked outside of the high art of the academy towards traditional folk art. As this form merged with the forward-looking ideals of Futurism, painters began a search for a formal synthesis. Kazimir Malevich’s “*Taking in of the Harvest*” (1912-13) exemplifies this synthesis with its industrial like depiction of peasants working the harvest. The simplified geometric constructions and metallic character of the work brings forth a new representation of simple peasant life in terms of the modern Russian experience. This conception of Futurism differed much from the Italian, which saw the machine as mastering man as opposed to the Russian, which saw the machine as a tool for the transformation of reality.

⁵ Gray, 65.

Breaking from its Primitivist roots, Russian Futurism took a turn with Mikhail Larionov who developed the Rayonist method in which the rays of light reflecting off an object are painted rather than whole forms. Formal innovation quickly progressed and reached its apex of detachment for the art of the past by way of Suprematism. It was in this movement that the painters established their greatest divide between canvas and reality. Kazimir Malevich described a new mystical element being present in the style, which added a sense of infinity, due to the complete lack of human measure in the space created. Of man's position in the works, he said, "Nature created her own landscape...in contrast to the form of man. The canvas of a creator-painter is a place where he builds a world of his own intuition."⁶

Working concurrently with, but separately from Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin used a similar idea of form in creating his Constructivist works. Tatlin made a movement away from the two-dimensional canvas in order to deal with "real materials in real space."⁷ By way of materials such as wood, iron and glass in three-dimensional constructs, Tatlin hoped to lift the restriction of frame and background that he felt limited a work of art and create works on an 'eternal plane.'

With Tatlin and Malevich, the divide between the realist and avant-garde artists extends to its greatest point. The realists, now working in either the tradition of the academy or that of the Wanderers continue to privilege idea over

⁶ Malevich, Kazimir, *O novikh sistemakh v iskusstve* (Vitebsk, 1920) cited by Gray, 200.

form, reflecting reality in their works. The avant-garde, now associated with Futurist, Suprematist and Constructivist ideals broke from reality in order to create a new formal sphere. Linked with the world of international art, the avant-garde, at home, found itself distanced from the average person, whose conception of art fit with the traditional realist form.

⁷ Gray, 180.

III. THE REVOLUTION

With the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II the divisions within the art world took a back seat to new ambitions. Artists of both camps called for the elimination of the old artistic structures and the reorganization of the art community, in which the old divisions between schools would be eliminated. The uniting point was the idea that art should be made accessible to the people and should participate in their ordinary lives. The Union of Artist-Painters, in Moscow, was the first organization to succeed in this attempt. It divided artists into three sections: the right, consisting mostly of academicians; the center, whose majority exhibited with the World of Art group; and the left, comprising of the avant-garde.⁸ The atmosphere created by this organization and others like it was one in which artists of formerly hostile schools exhibited their works together.

On 26 October 1917, the Bolsheviks formed their government and placed Anatoli Lunacharski in charge of the People's Commissariat for Popular Enlightenment (NarKomPros). This branch was in charge of art and education for the state and as its head, Lunacharski was in position to wean it in the direction of his choosing. Lunacharski's leanings were in fact a derivation from the traditional Marxist line of materialism. Building from Greorgi Plekhanov's aesthetic thought, which drew heavily upon that of Chernishevsky, Lunacharski added elements of Ernst Mach, Richard Avenarius, Friedrich Nietzsche and

⁸ Bown, Matthew, *Socialist Realist Painting*, (New Haven, 1998), 39.

Herbert Spencer. This combination resulted in a philosophy, which attempted to overcome the dichotomy between materialism and idealism by viewing man as a 'living' factory and thus pointing to man's bio-mechanical nature as a key factor in aesthetics. In looking for artists to appoint to positions in NarKomPros, Lunacharski began with his most qualified and trusted associate, his brother-in-law Aleksandr Bogdanov. Bogdanov turned him down and Lunacharski issued a call for applications to the Union of Art Activists in Petrograd because they, "embrace artists of all tendencies and disciplines."⁹ His call was received most quickly and exuberantly by the avant-garde painters. Lunacharski commented that they, "were the first to come to the aid of the revolution, they turned out to be the closest and most responsive to it of all the intelligentsia."¹⁰ This exuberance exhibited for the revolution by artists of the left put them in prime position within the world of Soviet art. In 1918, a decision was made to begin purchasing works for a network of Museums of Painterly Culture. Izo, the visual arts department of NarKomPros, was put in charge of purchasing paintings of living artists. This decision thrust the left into the forefront of Soviet painting as the head of Izo, David Shterenberg, was described by Lunacharski as a "left rebel" and a "decided modernist." The position claimed by the left thus became both the dispenser of state commissions in a non-market economy and the redeemer of these commissions.

⁹ Shlcev, *Revolutsiya izborazitelnoe Iskusstva*, 220, cited by Bown, 44.

¹⁰ *Iskusstvo Kommuny*, no.4, 29.xii. (1918), 1, cited by Bown, 44.

The avant-garde's new position resulted in both a reaction by realist artists against avant-garde power and a boom of artistic innovation by the avant-garde, which culminated in 1918 May Day celebration. Here the Futurist Mayakovsky's statement that, "the streets are our brushes, the squares our palettes", came to fruition as buildings in Moscow became huge canvases for abstract paintings and the trees along the Kremlin were painted red, blue, violet and crimson.¹¹ Shocked at the decorative style of the event, citizens expressed their disgust and an article was written calling the spectacle, "mad ornaments on a house about to collapse or as the foundations of another kind of structure never yet seen even in creative dreams."¹² As a result of the uproar, Lenin called on the Commissar of Enlightenment to place limits on the strength of the artistic left. The left was in fact a minority within the art world and with the amount of state resources they claimed, the larger traditional groups faced considerable difficulty. In the press, attacks began to mount against the left as Pravda published an article arguing that the avant-garde art was non-proletarian. It called on NarKomPros to reduce the influence of these forms and ultimately resulted in Shterenberg's official recognition that the policy of Izo was, "equal rights of all currents in the field of art"¹³ This hit taken by the left was in 1921 compounded by Lenin's shift to a more totalitarian stance on art. In May of 1921, Lenin wrote to Lunacharski's

¹¹ Taylor, Brandon. *Art and Literature Under the Bolsheviks. Volume One: The Crisis of Renewal 1917-1924*, (London, 1991), 65.

¹² Lincoln, Bruce, *Between Heaven and Hell: The Story of a Thousand Years of Artistic Life In Russia*, (New York, 1998), 323.

¹³ *Khudozhestvennaya zhizn*, (January – February 1920), 2, cited by Bown, 53.

deputy Pokrovski complaining of Lunacharski's printing of Futurist literature: "Can't we find any reliable anti-Futurists?"¹⁴ As the years went on, the push for a more traditional stance on art continued. In 1922, a decree of the central committee decided to exile abroad "hostile groups of the intelligentsia." Over 200 individuals were estimated to have been exiled by the state and many artists unhappy with or fearful of the regime decided to leave the country. Included in this number were such well-known artists as Kandinski and Puni.

With Lenin's absence in 1922, chief spokespersonship for culture questions was put in the hands of Lunacharski, Trotski and Bukharin. This created a strange atmosphere where the official line on art that had been taken in the past year was put in the hands of men whose beliefs ran contrary to it. Lunacharski's conflict with Lenin on the issue was well known and Trotski and Bukharin took similar positions. Trotski believed that art was not a field where "the party should be called on to give directions," and Bukharin had stated that, "the best means of ruining a proletarian literature... is the rejection of the principle of free, anarchic competition"¹⁵ (p. 66). Being in the hands of these men, during the political conditions that existed, there was little hope of a single line being imposed upon the arts. What did occur, in 1925, was the division of artists into two camps: those who wholeheartedly fought to further the revolution through explicit propaganda for the state and the people; and so-called fellow travelers, who did

¹⁴ *Khudozhnik*, no. 4 (1974), 36, cited by Bown, 63.

¹⁵ *Voprosy Kultury pri Diktature Proletariata*, (Moscow and Leningrad, 1925), 83-4, cited by Bown, 66.

not agitate against the revolution, but did not fully work towards its aims. Just as NEP men were seen as a necessary part of creating socialism, these tolerated artists functioned to build a bridge to a proletarian art. The stage had now been set for a strict line to be drawn by the state with the division of artists into those who were for the revolution, those against the revolution and those who were necessary and tolerated in order for the revolution to occur.

IV. SOCIALIST REALISM

With the loss of Trotsky and Bukharin's political defeat, pluralism was in peril. Increased emphasis became placed upon social and political content causing narrative structure, reminiscent of traditional Russian *kartina* painting, to flourish. By the end of the 1920s, realism seems to have triumphed in Soviet art. The left issued letters to Lunacharski calling for the continuation of pluralism and received his support, but in 1929, Lunacharski was effectively driven from his post and the policy of allowing fellow travelers was unofficially ended. From this point, a distinct shift in the alienation of artists from the state can be seen. Having the choice of either correspondence to the official line, exile, or even death, artists found whatever refuge they could in order to maintain their art.

Fellow travelers found refuge in the form of VseKoKhudozhnik, which dispensed commissions in an even-handed and oftentimes charitable way. Painters of the extreme left however, were under extreme pressure and were not allowed to exhibit their work. Shows were cancelled and artists arrested in order to destroy what was seen as anti-revolutionary activity. In 1932 the party took further steps to control the art world as a central committee called for the creation of artist unions to which all artists were required to belong. This resulted in the merging of previously hostile groups into one organization, which was overseen by party bosses. The Moscow section of this all artists' union, MSSKh, was created that same year and became the leading artists' organization in the Soviet

Union. MSSKh ultimately had two results: first, it secured the realist artists' philosophy as the sole position in Soviet art allowing Socialist Realism to become the law of the artistic land; and second, it resulted in the alienation of many artists within the union through the party's strong intervention into artistic matters. The party's intervention into the art world was all encompassing. It controlled the two major art magazines, *Iskusstvo* and *Tvorchestvo*, and being that nearly all Soviet works of art in the thirties revolved around official commissions of one kind or another, they also controlled the artists' economic base.¹⁶ Art education was also intervened upon as the party called for its reorganization along conservative lines bringing back strong training in traditional technique. With this consolidation of power, the party found itself in position to dictate both the formal and ideological output of the arts. That same year, the term Socialist Realism was finally settled upon. The term, defined by Aleksandr Gerasimov as, "realist in form, socialist in content," signaled a deal between two dialectically opposite positions. The party would support realism as the only current in Soviet painting and the artists would refashion their view of realism from a reflection of reality to a reflection of utopian socialist goals. Art, in all mediums

was to make no attempt to reflect or to know reality
as it is but to show whither it presumably is moving,

¹⁶ Bown, 136.

to see today in the light of the known tomorrow.

There was no place for the open-ended, the ambiguous, or the unresolved. The universe became a known quantity; the present nothing but a prelude and preparation for an already examined future.¹⁷

In 1935, MSSKh proposed an exhibition which was intended "to reflect, in artistic works by the best masters of fine art, the successes of socialist industrialization in the Soviet land." Named the *Industry of Socialism*, the exhibition strove to "show the transformation of the 'backward, impoverished, powerless old Russian Empire' into 'the leading industrial, flourishing, powerful, and joyful Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.'"¹⁸ The exhibition, which after years of delays, took place in 1939 restricted its artists to the tenants of Socialist Realism and helped to define the style to the Russia people.

Following the creation of Socialist Realism, the fight against the left was transformed into a fight against formalism. With the earlier rejection of abstract art, this change in opponents was not much more than a change in semantics. The formalist was considered to allow "his or her subject view – vagaries of drawing

¹⁷ Bullitt, Margaret. "Toward a Marxist Theory of Aesthetics: The Development of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union." *The Russian Review* 35 (1976): 71-2.

¹⁸ Reid, Susan. "Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The *Industry of Socialism* Art Exhibition, 1935-41" *The Russian Review* 60 (2001): 157.

style, taste in color, love of paint for its own sake – to distort the reflection of reality.”¹⁹ This was in fact the distinction previously made between realists and the left and as such, artists of the left became known in the 1930s as formalists. The war against formalism began in 1936 with an article in *Pravda* attacking Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. The article caused a stir in the art world prompting MSSKh to organize a meeting to discuss the topic. At the meeting, there was but one man that spoke out against the attacks, the others, for fear of retaliation, remained silent. Being accused of formalism now meant arrest and in attacking the policy against formalism, one could count on receiving accusations himself.

For many painters unhappy with Socialist Realism and the resulting war against formalism, refuge could be found in the form of landscape, peasant themes and still life. Artists such as Sergei Gerasimov and Arkadi Plastov used such genres to escape official ideology and gain a painterly freedom that was unseen in other genres at the time. Gerasimov was at times criticized for his “distortion of the image of Soviet man” and for a “weakness for impressionism,” but the restrictive nature of his genre allowed him such leeway. Other artists not associated with these genres tried to link their work to Vladimir Mayakovsky, the one figure of the cultural left to remain in favor under Stalin. The majority of painters associated with the left however, repented in hopes of avoiding arrest. This approach of repentance was taken as a very serious and necessary action as

¹⁹ Bown, 190.

seen when Osip Brik published an article in the *Literary Newspaper* defending painters such as Aleksandr Drevin, Nadezhda Udaltsova and Konstantin Istomin. Each of these artists quickly disassociated themselves from his defense in hopes of protecting their own lives. Throughout 1937 many artists were arrested. Aleksandr Drevin, after distancing himself from Brik's defense of his work, was finally arrested and sentenced to 10 years without the right of correspondence (a euphemism for death).

Official policy in the 1940s strengthened its attacks on formalism. The artists Aleksandr Deineka, praised for his work in the thirties had his work repudiated in the pages of *Soviet Art*. A firm decision was also made on impressionism, which in the 1930s had taken a beating by the critics, but had been quietly supported by most artists, was at last made when Osip Beskin, an advocate of impressionism, was removed as editor of *Iskusstvo* and *Tvorchestvo*. In the first issue of *Iskusstvo* following his removal, his replacement Petr Sysoev printed an article, which strongly condemned "modernism, Cézannism, Futurism and Suprematism."²⁰ The accumulation of these actions caused artists to repress their own work for fear of offense.

In April of 1946, an attempt was made to combat the attacks on formalism. The critic Nikolii Punin, in a lecture to the Leningrad artists' union, attempted to create an impressionist base for Soviet painting. In doing so, he rejected many of the entrenched principles of Socialist Realism and warned that a

²⁰ *Iskusstvo*, no 6 (19400), 3, cited by cited by Bown, 194.

return to renaissance values would mean a step backwards. His lecture caused much debate and led to two discussions within the artists' union. In each of these discussions, Punin received broad support from the audience along with that of well-known painters such as Pakulin and Traugot. The party responded to these discussions in late 1946 with three successive decrees, which allowed no doubt as to whether Socialist Realism would remain in tact. Following this decision, the fear of condemnation was so widespread that it developed its own aesthetic theory called the Theory of Conflictlessness in which artists produced work that they knew would not cause any question as to whether they were following Socialist Realist principles.

At this point, artist alienation reached such a point that the majority of paintings being produced were landscapes. Most notably in this group of artists was Nikolai Romadin, a well-known painter of political subjects in the 1930s who switched to landscape because of his disenchantment with the political regime. In making this move, many of these painters tried to hide their detachment from ideology by titling their paintings with names such as, "Nikitski Boulevard: The Place Where the Red Guard Fought in 1917" and leaving out any visual link to ideology. The title therefore became their sole attachment to ideology and kept them within the bounds of Socialist Realism (p. 259).

In the years immediately preceding Stalin's death artist alienation caused a new round of complaints against the Soviet policy on art. At meetings of the artist unions, large numbers of artists began to complain about the removal of

paintings from exhibitions and the insistence on a high finish on paintings that had been imposed by the party in the 1940s. In early 1952, an article was published in which the Arts Committee was chastised for attempting to force ready made products onto artists. The Theory of Conflictlessness was also attacked in a series of articles by A. Chlenov and in September of 1952, *Pravda* published an article criticizing the theory. Finally, at the 19th party congress in October of 1952, the central committee put an end to the Theory of Conflictlessness. In a speech by Georgi Malenkov, the theory was refuted and Socialist Realism was opened to satire, conflict and contradiction. From this point on, it was possible to see social conflict, in restrained and subliminal terms.

Following the death of Stalin in 1953, attacks on Socialist Realism increased. An editorial in *Pravda* in November of 1954 denounced the “‘pseudo-monumental, self-consciously pompous compositions,’ the ‘garnish’ colors and ‘lifeless figures’ of the great rhetorical canvases devoted to the glorification of state power in Stalin’s time” (p. 306). This rhetoric compounded with Khrushchev’s destalinization plans resulted in the reorganization of the art world. The Arts Committee, the organization responsible for Stalinist artistic policy, and VseKoKhudozhnik, the state commissioning agency, were both closed down and their responsibilities moved to the USSR Ministry of Culture and the USSR Art fund respectively. The most dramatic step taken on behalf of the state occurred in February of 1957 with the inaugural congress of the Union of Artists of the USSR. In an open letter to the congress, the central committee called for artists to

accomplish “bold, creative initiatives, the further enrichment of forms and styles, of types and genres of the art of Socialist Realism.”²¹ The letter was seen as a step towards more artistic freedom and in January of 1954, a young artist exhibition opened in Moscow, which displayed some 500 works without the high finish encouraged in the Stalin years. Some elements of color and composition were now separated from the formalist classification allowing artists to paint works they would not have dared to create just years earlier. Individual style and outlook was also championed causing conflict from 1956 onward between the artist’s view and that of the party. Emerging from these extensions of artistic freedom was the creation of a new style in Socialist Realist painting, the severe style. The severe style presented to its view an unvarnished picture of life. It rejected the traditional narrative nature of Soviet painting creating works that looked inward upon the subject.

These reforms signaled the beginning of the end for Socialist Realism. The deal between the party and realist artists that had cemented Socialist Realism as the sole Soviet style in the 1930s had been based upon the party’s ability to crush opposing artistic philosophies. Since its inception however, the party had repeatedly alienated these artists moving them to the conclusion that the party’s intervention created more problems than did the opposing philosophies. The hostility of these individuals, along with that of the former members of the left created an art community waiting for its chance to break its chains. As the party

²¹ Bown, 306.

loosened its restrictions, artists took as much as they could in order to follow their own artistic paths rather than those imposed by the party.

The inevitable conflict between the artists and the loosening party came in 1962 at an exhibition commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the Moscow artists union. The exhibition was a historical survey of Soviet art. Its organizer chose to present a revisionist view in which artists such as Robert Falk and members of the Jack of Diamonds, who had almost been written out of official art history, were represented. Contemporary stylistic trends were also given space, while officially well-respected Stalinist artists such as Grekov and Nesterov had but one painting in the exhibit. To compound the radical nature of this exhibit, members of the unofficial art movement were also given space. Just 48 hours after the unofficial art was put on display, Khrushchev and a delegation of party officials visited the exhibition. Khrushchev's response was one of outright anger. He was said to have described works with such terms as "muck", "shit," and "a daub."²² The Soviet press reported that upon viewing the severe style painting *Geologists* by Nikonov, Khrushchev lost his temper.

Following Khrushchev's visit, an Ideological Commission was set up and meetings were held between its members and the artistic community. Khrushchev accused the organizers of the exhibition of liberalism and in a speech on 8 March 1963, he pointed out that the slogans of peaceful coexistence did not extend to the arts. Warnings were issued against any work that, as Nikonov's *Geologists*,

²² Bown, 407.

contained socially critical subject matter. More directly, leaders of the Moscow Union that had taken a liberal stance were ousted and critics who had taken a positive view of the new liberalism in art were made to write letters of repentance to the Second Congress of Artists. The youth commission, which had been set up to work with sever style artists was dissolved and replaced with an “ideological-creative commission.” What these new attacks had accomplished was nothing more than the further alienation of the art community.

As the Brezhnev years arrived, a new opponent to Socialist Realism came into being. This “thinking intelligentsia” provided a new strain of thought in the Soviet art world and produced unofficial exhibitions hosted in the homes of its members. While working in a number of styles, these artists were under constant threat of arrest. Their troubles were compounded as many of their numbers were not officially recognized artists and had troubles in areas such as procuring supplies to create their work. Some, if not concurrently working within the official realm of Soviet art, had been reduced to painting on burlap sacks or scraps of wood.

Within Socialist Realism itself, a drastic new turn in its very nature took hold. Under Brezhnev, the notion of utopia as being just around the next bend was replaced with a fear of rocking the boat. With the utopian outlook of Socialist Realism removed, what remained was a form considered by many to be more closely related to that of traditional realism. The majority of these paintings revolved around three main topics; the tragic effects of the second world war,

traditional country life and private life. The war paintings of this period, in contrast to traditional Soviet war paintings, focused on the death and suffering of Soviet troops. They created a humanizing effect that had not been present in Soviet war paintings of the past. The paintings that focused on country life were a reflection of the artists' affinity to the idea traditional country life. It represented a glorification of the past and an outlet from Soviet ideology. The artist's withdrawal into depicting scenes from private life was an effect of the failing of the severe style to transform Socialist Realism into a tool of social conscience.²³ The move into private life was a step away from attempts at meaning and social engagement. What it accomplished, along with the other topics of the period, was the rejection of many of the traditional tenants of Socialist Realism. The obligatory optimism, the proletarian emphasis and the command ethic were all absent in these paintings. Individually this would not have been a great achievement, but together, they represent the decline of the movement as a means of political and social indoctrination.²⁴

With the decline in Soviet coercion, artists were no longer guided by a strict set of official guidelines. This allowed for artists to focus on individual concerns creating new artistic divergences that were as of yet unable to form. In one case, a new theme arose depicting people from behind. This served as a device to reduce the humanity of the subject thus reducing the subject to nothing more than another form within the work. The influence of icon painting and

²³ Bown, 425.

frescos was also prevalent among many of the artists of this period. The party's response to these questions of form was one more of trying to stem the tide rather than to halt the divergences. It did seem as if Socialist Realism was truly on the defensive as its most basic tenant, the theory of reflection came under sustained assault from Soviet structuralists. Their theories destroyed the inherent relationship between the signifier (a word or image) and the signified (concrete object) and reduced it to a conventional relationship. In doing so, convention was placed between concrete objects and their painted or written form thus legitimized abstraction.

It wasn't until 1972 that a significant change came about in the art world. In this year notable exhibitions were held in which, for the first time, the artists interpretation was given prominent importance. There was a turning away from society towards an introspection of the artists own self. Elements within the painting came to signify points of speculation of the artist's own persona.

Although incredible headway was made on the official side of the art world, unofficial artists remained under attack. In one case, after sending a letter party leaders calling for more artistic freedom, the painter Alla Gorskaya was murdered, most likely by the KGB, and her husband convicted of the crime and sent to a labor camp. Abstract artists were finally allowed to show their work at small, out of the way galleries after an international outcry following the bulldozing of an open-air exhibition in 1974.

²⁴ Bown, 429.

Under Gorbachev, many of the traditional realist paintings contained a melancholy mood. These paintings presented a bleak picture and evoked sympathy for the subject. During the “thaw,” there was a rise in the number of paintings of critical or social engagement. Expressionists painted, with ironic tone, individual surveys of Soviet life. It was not until 1986 however, that artists truly began to assert themselves. Abstract art was finally reinstated along with its contemporary movements and an exhibition of avant-garde art was held at the Tretyakov gallery. In 1987, the Hermitage association held a series of shows devoted to unofficial art. Socialist Realism was now for all intents and purposes dead.

V. CONCLUSION

In tracing Socialist Realism from its influences in the 1860s to its fall in the 1980s, it is possible to see the elements of the style's destruction inherent in its own creation. The distinction between realist and avant-garde artists that formed in the period leading up to the revolution produced two separate and opposed subjects that, when placed in a state controlled economy formed diametrically opposed powers vying for power mediated only by the party. In a push for maximal control, the party was in a position to aid the dominated majority of realist artists in order to inject the art with its own ideology and formal restrictions. What came of this was an art akin to sheer propaganda and the alienation of the artists that helped set up the restrictions that they themselves came to resent. Following the death of Stalin, we see this alienation taking form in expressions against the system, but only with *perestroika* and *glasnost*, do we see the relief from state persecution necessary for Socialist Realism to fall.

What then can we learn from this analysis? Looking at the period following the Bolshevik seizure of power, we see limits of political homogeneity placed upon artists. Formal restrictions were not put into place at the time however and artistic innovation and fervency flourished. As the avant-garde found itself under attack and formal restrictions were put into place, innovation and fervency took a downward turn. Artists became alienated and art became, with *The Theory of Conflictlessness*, little more than formulaic craftsmanship.

The question that now arises is what mechanisms are to be put into place in a state controlled economy that could prevent such problems. I propose a comparative study of Soviet Socialist Realism with other state dominated artistic periods, such as Chinese Socialist Realism and the art produced in the 1930s in the United States. Only by analyzing these artistic structures in such a form might we prevent the oppression and stagnancy that pervaded throughout Soviet Socialist Realism.

REFERENCES

- Bown, Matthew. Socialist Realist Painting. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
- Bullitt, Margaret. "Toward a Marxist Theory of Aesthetics: The Development of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union." *The Russian Review* 35 (1976): 53-76.
- Gray, Camilla. The Russian Experiment in Art. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1962.
- Groys, Boris. "The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Grade." The Culture of the Stalin Period. Günther, Hans ed., New York, St. Martins Press, 1990. 122-148.
- Lincoln, Bruce. Between Heaven and Hell: The Story of a Thousand Years of Artistic Life In Russia. New York: Viking, 1998.
- O'Connor, Timothy. The Politics of Soviet Culture: Anatolii Lunacharskii. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980.
- Reid, Susan. "Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The *Industry of Socialism* Art Exhibition, 1935-41" *The Russian Review* 60 (2001): 153-184.
- Solomon, Maynard. ed., Marxism and Art. Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1979.
- Taylor, Brandon. Art and Literature Under the Bolsheviks. Volume One: The Crisis of Renewal 1917-1924. London: Pluto Press, 1991.

Vita

Name: Kyle Kovel

Date: 11 April 2001

Address: 3231 Windridge CT
Midlothian, TX 76065

Educational Experience:

Since 1996 I have been attending Texas A&M University. I began as a computer science major and after two years I changed to history. My reasons for making the change centered on the nature of the fields. History allowed me to focus my thought on real social problems and make a move away from what I considered a trade. I have focused on Intellectual and Russian history but since have added an English major, which I see as allowing for a greater focus on the individual. My focus in English is currently twentieth century French and American literature. After graduating I intend to pursue a doctoral degree in this field.

At university, I have been on the dean's list and have been accepted as a University Undergraduate Research Fellow. During the summer of 2000, I was awarded a scholarship by the Fellows Program to travel to Russia in order to personally view the works that I am speaking about in this paper.