1934a

At the First All Union Congress of Writers, Andrei Zhdanov lays down the doctrine of Soviet Socialist Realism.

1930–1939

Soviet Socialist Realism emerged as a historically and geopolitically specific variant of the universally prevailing antimodernist tendencies of the late twenties and thirties: the *rappel à l'ordre* in France, Neue Sachlichkeit in Germany, Nazi painting in the Third Reich, fascist neoclassicism in Mussolini's ▲ Italy, and the various forms of social realism in the United States. The terror regime of Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) not only provided the ideological and political framework, but also the pragmatic demands, for extraordinary propagandistic efforts by the ideological state apparatus. Accordingly, Stalin's hagiographers even credited him with having invented the term "Socialist Realism," claiming that during a secret meeting of writers in Maksim Gorky's (1868–1936) flat on October 26, 1932, Stalin supposedly stated the following:

> *If the artist is going to depict life correctly, he cannot fail to observe and point out what is leading towards Socialism. So this will be Socialist art. It will be Socialist Realism.*

The first documented *public* usage of the term "Socialist Realism," however, had already appeared in an article in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Literary Gazette), for May 25, 1932, defining it—in the tautological language typical of ideology—as an art of "honesty, truthfulness, and as revolutionary in the representation of the proletarian revolution."

Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948), Stalin's chief cultural commissar and Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, gave a programmatic definition of Socialist Realism at the First All Union Congress of Writers in August 1934. Quoting Stalin's (in)famous exhortation that artists and writers should become "the engineers of human souls," Zhdanov (and Stalin) actually echoed the theory of the prerevolutionary aesthetician Aleksandr Bogdanov, who had spoken of literature as a practice that should "organize workers and the oppressed in the struggle for the final destruction of all kinds of exploitation."

Zhdanov's normative aesthetics was paradoxical, requesting that Socialist Realism should engage in "revolutionary romanticism," but also that it should also stand with "both feet on the ground of real life and its materialist foundation." It stated that artists should "depict reality in its revolutionary development" but that they should also educate the worker in the utopian spirit of Communism. From January to March 1936—the year of the show trials and of the final elimination of the last remnants of modernism in the Soviet Union—Zhdanov published a series of articles in the Party's newspaper *Pravda* (The Truth) which denounced formalism in all of the arts. These publications, acquiring the status of prescriptions and prohibitions, introduced the period known as the *zhdanovschchina*, not only establishing the Party's total control of culture, but also the hegemony of Socialist Realism as the exclusive and official culture of authoritarian State Socialism.

Socialist Realism attempted to fuse the legacies of agitprop and ▲ the documentary projects of the twenties with heroicizing narratives that now—in the era of an intensely centralized Party control and its correlative ideology of authoritarian populism—had to be delivered in the manner of premodernist, nineteenth-century genre painting. This emphasis on narrative and figurative representation not only conflicted profoundly with the already existing practices of the • Soviet avant-garde, from the Constructivists to the artists of the *proletkult* and the LEF group (all of whose practices would soon be eliminated), but it proved to be incompatible even with the crucial legacies of nineteenth-century modernism. While the art of Jacques-Louis David and Eugène Delacroix, or of Honoré Daumier, François Millet, Gustave Courbet, and Adolph Menzel, would be celebrated either as art of revolutionary fervor or as art of the people, Impressionism and Postimpressionism—notably the work of Paul ■ Cézanne—now became the subject of endless debates, since they threatened Socialist Realism's fraudulent iconography and its false stylistic homogeneity. The notion of painting as a self-reflexive critical project had to be dismantled: Socialist Realism was to enforce the most banal forms of illusionistic depiction, foregrounding its purely mimetic functions and artisanal skills while claiming access to painting's putative transhistorical monumentality.

Reflection as a process

Georgy Plekhanov (1856–1918), one of the founders of Russian Marxism, was among the first to criticize the Impressionists, juxtaposing their work with that of a group of Russian nineteenth-century artists who were now presented as the really autochthonous predecessors of Socialist Realism, namely the Peredvizhniki ("Wanderers

▲ 1919, 1925b, 1927c, 1936, 1937a ▲ 1920 • 1921 ■ 1906

or "Itinerants"). This group had been founded in 1870 to break away from the St. Petersburg Academy, to diversify patronage by organizing traveling exhibitions throughout Russia (and by charging entrance fees), and to provide a realistic—sometimes politically critical—picture of Russia. On the occasion of the forty-seventh exhibition of the Wanderers in 1922, they published a declaration which reads like an early definition of the tasks of Socialist Realism:

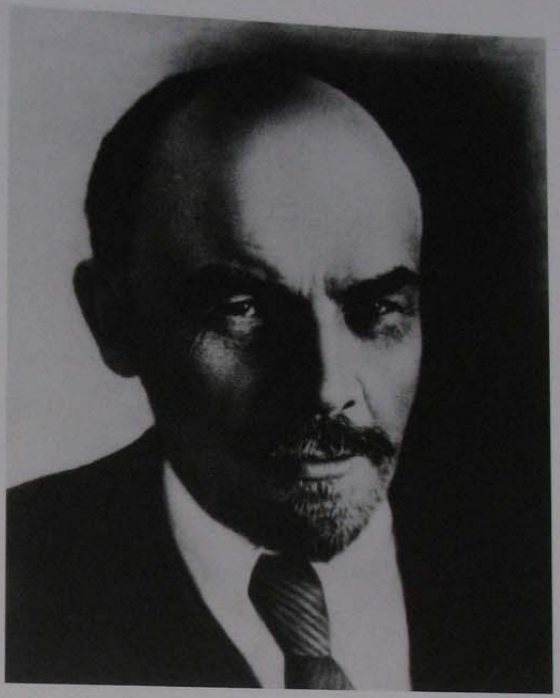
> *We want to reflect with documentary truthfulness in genre, portrait, and landscape the life of contemporary Russia and the full range of its diverse ethnicities and their lives deeply devoted to labor.... While remaining faithful to Realistic painting, we want to seek those devices that are closest to the masses of people ... to help the masses, in formally finished works of painting, become aware of and remember the great historic process taking place.*

Vladimir I. Lenin (1870–1924) and Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), but most importantly Joseph Stalin, disliked modernism intensely, in particular its recent Soviet avant-garde incarnations, and all three men favored the Peredvizhniki. Lenin's *Materialism and Empirico-Criticism* argued against the prevailing nineteenth-century theories of perception (by implication, against Impressionism and Post-impressionism) by stating that optical sensations were not—as the Russian followers of Austrian physiologist Ernst Mach (including Aleksandr Bogdanov [1873–1928] and, in his early writings, ▲ the aesthetic theorist Anatoly Lunacharsky) had suggested—real elements within the experience of the world, but rather that they were mere *reflections* of the real things.

Thus Lenin [**1**] referred back to German socialist Friedrich Engels's (1820–95) famous statement that "copies, photographs, images are mirror reflections of things." Yet Lenin defined *reflection* as no longer a mere mirror-image but rather as a *process* by which consciousness actively appropriates and transforms the world; this condition of *praxis* would now become the criterion of philosophical truth. Consequently, a *Theory of Reflection* emerges as one of the foundational theoretical programs of Socialist Realism, developed most notably in the early thirties during the Moscow sojourn of György Lukács, the Hungarian-German philosopher who was Marxism's foremost literary theoretician at the time.

Among painters, Impressionism remained a subject of continuous discussion. As late as 1939, Aleksandr Gerasimov (1881–1963) and his artistic colleagues in power (such aš Boris Ioganson [1893–1973] and Igor Grabar [1871–1960]) could still call for the "all-sided illumination of Impressionism which was a very great contribution to the treasury of art." But less than ten years later, he would be among those condemning Impressionism in favor of a highly finished painterly style. As Matthew Cullerne Bown argues:

> *The Impressionist concentration on light, color and freedom of brushmark were all viewed negatively as tending towards the dissolution of solid, academically modelled forms in painting ... (Impressionism) was felt to be antagonistic to Socialist Realist painting which was intent on revealing the essences of events from the point of view of the party, the working class and the "laws" of historical development.*



1 • Moïsei Nappelbaum, *Photograph of V. I. Lenin*, 1918
Vintage silver-gelatin print

From the mid-twenties onward, it became increasingly evident that the Constructivist avant-garde had failed to produce a culture for the new industrial and rural proletarian masses. There continued to be fervent debates about the renewed or remaining functions of painting in this historical moment, ranging from calls for the return to representational traditionalism and narratives in the manner of the Peredvizhniki (such as the emerging program of AKhRR) to the more complex models incorporating revolutionary poster design and the cinematic forms of montage and temporality, such as the paintings of the OST (the Society of Easel Painters.) Anatoly Lunacharsky, whom Lenin had reluctantly appointed in 1917 as the first head of Narkompros (People's Commissariat for Enlightenment), initially remained loyal to the avant-garde artists whom he had championed and endowed with institutional power. But now, presumably under Party pressure, he too argued for an urgent revival of narrative and figuration in painting, stating in a speech on May 9, 1923, entitled "Art and the Working Class" that "the main thing is to conquer the aversion to subject matter." Not surprisingly, in 1925 Lunacharsky claimed the Peredvizhniki as the equally true historical predecessors of a populist Socialist art of the present, and he reintroduced one of their key concepts, the *kartina*—the Russian for "picture"—into artistic debates. However, the term would now define not only the obligatory pictorial *narrative* (preferably a

▲ 1921

dramatic scene that "realism" had to enact on the stage of painting) but also more specifically the cheap mass reproduction and distribution of that image in the tradition of the *lubki* woodcuts. In a speech of that year, Lunacharsky explicitly associated the concept of the *kartina* with the needs of the proletariat: "The proletariat needs the *kartina*. The *kartina* is understood as a social act."

▲ Thus, AKhRR (the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia), the group that considered itself to be the legitimate heir of the Peredvizhniki, laid the foundations of Socialist Realism, claiming that its members isolated "ideological content as the sign of the truthfulness of a work of art." AKhRR was officially founded at a meeting on March 1, 1922, and Yevgeny Katsman (1890–1976), one of the founders—ironically the brother-in-law of Kazimir Malevich—initially defined their project as "heroic realism."

Two major figures of Soviet Socialist Realism

By the end of 1925, AKhRR's membership numbered about one thousand artists, between them representing a broad range of the painterly positions that would soon define Socialist Realism: from the neoclassical academicism of Katsman and the sharp-focus photographic realism of Isaak Izraelevich Brodsky (1884–1939) to the more painterly approaches of the Moscow artists Ioganson, Gerasimov [2], and Il'ya Mashkov (1881–1944). To others, though, it was evident that the task of constructing representations for a newly industrialized society could not be achieved by the deployment of those conventional painting practices that suggested that reality and its objects were merely emerging from the unchanging, originary forces of nature. Rather, the new society required a new type of painting, if any, in which contradictory social relations and their transformation could be articulated. Thus, the critique of the AKhRR painters was already formulated by the late twenties, most vociferously by the exiled German theoretician Alfred Kurella, who had become director of the Fine Arts Division (IZO) at Narkompros:

> *If one hears the definition of art voiced by AKhRR, and if one sees their works (especially the paintings by Brodski, Jakolev, Kacman, et al.) one cannot help but ask the question: why don't they just take photographs?... The artists of AKhRR have totally forgotten the difference between painting and photography.... In our century of artistic photography the purely documentary side of art is bound to perish.*

Partially in opposition to the reactionary ideas of AKhRR, the OST was formed in 1924, counting among its members Aleksandr Deineka (1899–1969), Yury Pimenov (1903–77), Kilment Redko (1881–1948), David Shterenberg (1881–1948; its chairman), and Aleksandr Tyshler (1898–1980). Some of these painters were former students of the avant-garde institutes Inkhuk and • Vkhutemas that had become the center of discussions between the Constructivists, the Productivists, and the Stankovists, that is, those painters who now closed ranks to maintain painting as a space of relative autonomy from either agitprop propaganda (such as photomontage and poster projects) or the production of utilitarian objects as advocated by the Productivists.

2 • Aleksandr Gerasimov, *Lenin on the Tribune*, 1929
Oil on canvas, 288 x 177 (113 x 70)

The central figure of OST—and undoubtedly the most important artist of the historical chapter of Socialist Realism—Aleksandr Deineka attempted to fuse the legacies of the Soviet poster and film culture with the traditions of easel painting, emphasizing that temporality had to become an integral element of painting if it was to attempt to articulate the historico-political processes of change and dialectical transformation. Conceiving a model of painterly montage, Deineka wanted to translate the dynamics of revolution and industrialization into a painterly and compositional dynamics by using rapidly altering spatial perspectives, cinematic points of view and shifting modes of painterly execution.

Both AKhRR artists and OST artists (along with members of other groups) contributed to an exhibition organized in 1928, celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Red Army (which had by now become the most important patron of portraits of its own heroic warriors and scenes of its victories). Deineka's painting *The Defense of Petrograd* was widely praised by the critics, partly because it opposed not only the model of nineteenth-century war paintings that served as the point of departure for most AKhRR painters, but also the photonaturalism of paintings such as Brodsky's *The Session of the Revolutionary War Council* (1928) and *Lenin in the Smolny Palace* [4]. Deineka's painting, by contrast, depicted the civil war not as a heroic episode of the past but as a process of collective transformation continuing in

▲ 1921 • 1921

3 • Aleksandr Deineka, *Building New Factories*, 1926
Oil on canvas, 209 x 200 (82 x 79)

1930–1939

the present. As the critic Chvojnik stated in his review of the exhibition, "The simplicity of the painting's well-articulated rhythm gives a clear account of the endless stream and indefatigable will of the revolutionary proletariat." Deineka's compositional conception followed a pictorial principle that Ferdinand Hodler had developed earlier, in the first decade, with correlating positive figures and negative ground in a frieze of almost temporally structured alternating shapes passing across the surface of the painting. While Deineka's peculiar and masterly synthesis of Soviet modernism and a more traditional definition of public and monumental mural painting could be called one of the most successful projects inside the perimeters of Socialist Realism, his work also bears clear resemblances to the dilemma of ▲ Neue Sachlichkeit in Germany, which had equally attempted to fuse the reality of new industrial technologies with the apparent obsolescence of pictorial means and subject matter. His painting *Building New Factories* [**3**] embodies all these contradictions. While Deineka equates the new industrial architecture with the modular picture grid, he repositions the latter within receding perspectival space. And in the construction of the figures, he gives us the most detailed modeling of the female bodies, yet their faces follow the rules of typecasting the anonymous Socialist subject.

The second major figure of Socialist Realism—and in many ways Deineka's opposite—was Isaak Brodsky, who had joined AKhRR in 1923. His work and his biography exemplify the contradictions that governed the politics and the aesthetics of Socialist Realism. Brodsky had met Lunacharsky in Petrograd in the company of Maksim Gorky in late 1917 or early 1918, and Lunacharsky had endorsed him in a letter to Lenin: "From an ethical and political point of view the artist Brodsky merits complete trust." Before Stalin's final consolidation of power, however, Brodsky was subjected to severe criticism within the Association by the younger generation of artists and was excluded from AKhRR at its conference in May 1928 for his "extreme photonaturalism"—his *Brodskyism*, as the edict of exclusion called his sharp-focus neoclassical realism.

But the calls of the early plan years for a new, revolutionary, nonacademically based proletarian art that had denied the continuing validity of the realist easel picture, were soon to be extinguished. Brodsky reemerged, to become Stalin's favorite artist and a personal friend of Marshal Voroshilov, Stalin's commissar for defence. In 1934 he was appointed as rector of the Leningrad Academy of Art, where he enforced a return to the strictest rules of traditional academic art education, subsequently becoming the first artist to be awarded the Order of Lenin. Apparently Brodsky met Stalin on at least one occasion in 1933, when—in the company of Gerasimov and Katsman—Stalin advocated that they should paint "pictures that were comprehensible to the masses, and portraits that did not require you to guess who was portrayed."

One of Brodsky's most successful paintings—among his industrious production of portraits of Soviet heroes in oil and lithographs—was *Lenin in the Smolny Palace* [**4**]. Although it was

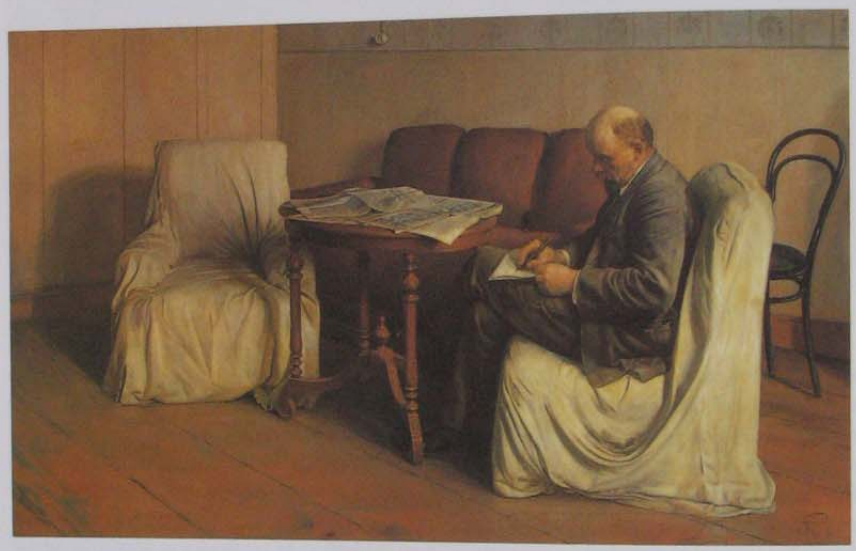
▲ 1925b

manifestly the result of a photographic projection after a photograph by Moïsei Nappelbaum, Brodsky nevertheless tried to disavow his photomechanical sources. In fact, he claimed to have produced this astonishing likeness from a number of sketches of Lenin that he made at the Third Comintern Congress; Brodsky even staged photographs that showed him producing these preparatory sketches. Thus, Leah Dickerman convincingly argues that:

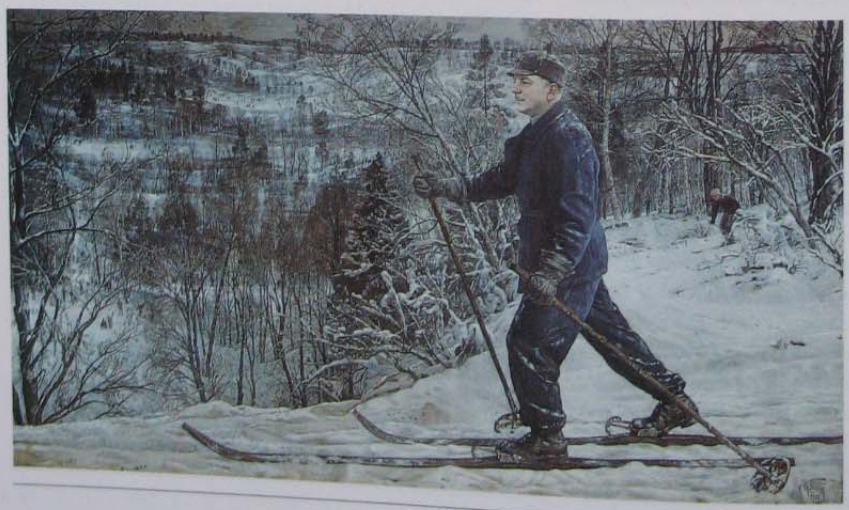
> *The simultaneous dependence on and masking of photography that lies at the heart of socialist realist practice offer a structure of ambivalence. On the one hand, socialist realism's use of (and even more its insistent fidelity to) a photographic source speaks of desire for the photographic. On the other, the erasure of the image's mechanical origins speaks of fear of the photographic.*

Brodsky's portrait of Marshal Voroshilov [**5**], one of the most avid patrons of Socialist Realism, is a masterpiece of naturalizing ideology. It situates the chief of the most powerful military state apparatus, the Red Army, in a perfect fusion of peaceful leisure and the most detailed nature of a Russian landscape. That naturalist account, however, results from the concealed technical apparatus of photographic reproduction.

While the last major retrospective of "Artists of the Russian Federation over Fifteen Years" could still include a significant segment of works by the Soviet avant-garde when first exhibited at the Russian Museum in Leningrad in 1932, that proportion had already had to be excised in favor of Socialist Realism when the exhibition traveled to Moscow in June 1933. Ossip Beskin, editor of *Iskusstvo* (Art)—the Union's newly founded official journal



4 • Isaak Brodsky, *Lenin in the Smolny Palace*, 1930
Oil on canvas, 190 x 287 (74¾ x 113)



5 • Isaak Brodsky, *The People's Commissar for Defense, Marshal of the Soviet Union, K. E. Voroshilov, out skiing*, 1937
Oil on canvas, 210 x 365 (83 x 144)

(all other magazines having been abolished)—announced the final battle against the avant-garde with the publication of his book *Formalism in Painting* (1932).

This battle against modernism would culminate in the total liquidation of Soviet avant-garde culture during 1932 and 1933. A decree from the Central Committee of the Communist Party abolished all independent artistic groupings and established a nationwide Union of Soviet Artists, the *orgkomitet*. MOSSKh, the Moscow section of this envisaged union, was formed in 1932 and became the leading organization in the country, displacing or absorbing all the other groups (AKhRR, OST, OMKh, RAPHk, etc.).

Aleksandr Gerasimov had now emerged as the third key figure of Socialist Realism. He typically moved from one powerful position to the next, regardless of the fact that the political situation in general had become increasingly unmanageable for most intellectuals and artists after 1936. Thus, Gerasimov came to be elected chair of MOSSKh, and in a speech in 1939 he defined Socialist Realism as "an art realist in form and socialist in content," an art that would celebrate the construction of Socialism and heroicize those who toiled on its behalf. Fashioning himself as a man of the Russian people, he enjoyed the company and support of the party elite, devoting much of his energy to official commissions of portraits of Lenin, Stalin, and Voroshilov, executed in a glazed style that imbued the faces of authoritarian state socialism with a double sheen: that of an affirmation of their authenticity through photographic presence and that of a transposition to their heroic status within a timeless past of neoclassicism.

While Socialist Realism would continue to be constantly embattled from 1934 to the beginning of the Kruschev thaw in 1953 and onward, it was basically defined by the following key concepts:

1. *Narodnost'* (*narod* meaning "people," "nation"). Coined by the former member of the World of Art group, the Symbolist painter Aleksandr Benua (1870–1960), *narodnost'* insisted on the relationship of art to the *people*. Initially conceived as a multicultural model, which yet allowed for the specificity of each ethnic group within the newly formed Union, it became a monolithic and ethnocentric norm to produce a chauvinist Soviet (that is, a fictitious Russian) culture. *Narodnost'* required that painting should first appeal to popular sentiments and ideas, but the concept also addressed the artist's task to document the current work of the population, to communicate with the working masses and to recognize and dignify the structures of their daily lives. The concept of *narodnost'* also served to support a Soviet version of a return to tradition. The theorists of Socialist Realism—just like their French and Italian counterparts of the *rappel à l'ordre*—embraced the art of classical Greece, of the Italian Renaissance, and of the Dutch and Flemish Old Masters of genre painting. Nikolai Bukharin, for example, argued that artists should "combine the spirit of the Renaissance with the huge ideological baggage of our age of Socialist revolution." Ivan Gronsky, the editor of *Novy Mir* (The New World), stated in 1933 that "Socialist Realism is Rubens, Rembrandt, and Repin put to serve the working class."

▲ 1919

2. *Klassovost'* insisted that Socialist Realism should clearly articulate the class consciousness of the artist as much as that of the depicted subjects, a consciousness that had been heightened during the Cultural Revolution.

3. *Partiynost'* required that representations and their artistic execution should publicly confirm that the Communist Party had the leading role in all aspects of Soviet life. The concept was first defined in Lenin's essay "Party Literature and Party Propaganda" (1905).

4. *Ideynost'* demanded the introduction of new forms as central to the work of art. These new forms and attitudes had to be approved by the Party. The concept also aimed to make evident that every Socialist Realist work of art would enact the project of Socialism and articulate the glorious future promised by Stalin and the Party.

5. *Tipichnost'* requested that portraits and figure painting should depict typical characters in typical circumstances as heroes and heroines, drawn from recognizable and familiar circumstances. As Cullerne Bown states, "*tipichnost'* was a double-edged sword in Socialist Realism: on the one hand it helped the creation of accessible and eloquent works of social art, on the other it was a pretext to criticize (as 'untypical') paintings which failed to present a rosy enough image of the Soviet reality."

Gerasimov's staying power exceeded that of all his colleagues. Thus, when the USSR Academy of Arts was created on August 5, 1947, as the Party's institution of total control, Gerasimov rose to yet another position of supreme power to become the Academy's first president. In this role, Gerasimov would be traveling through the Soviet satellite states—East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia—to inspect the successful enforcement of the Socialist Realist programs in the art academies of those countries. His decrees now defined the tasks of Socialist Realism with an ever-increasing authoritarian animus and antimodernist aggression:

> *To fight formalism, naturalism, and other manifestations of contemporary bourgeois decadent art, lack of ideology and political commitment in creative work, falsely scientific and idealistic theories in the area of aesthetics.*

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