

## The Struggle Against Naturalism: Soviet Art from the 1920s to the 1950s

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Article abstract

En 1936, en Union soviétique, des critiques anonymes lancèrent une campagne répressive « contre le naturalisme et le formalisme ». Il devint alors impossible, pour plusieurs artistes, d'exposer leur travail et de participer à des concours artistiques. Les artistes « formalistes », tels le suprématisme Kasimir Malevitch et le réaliste analytique Pavel Filonov, étaient facilement identifiables, car ils étaient représentatifs du modernisme européen. La définition du naturalisme, par contre, était beaucoup moins précise. Perçu comme une reproduction presque photographique de la réalité, le naturalisme était pratiqué par les membres de l'Association des artistes de la Russie révolutionnaire. Dans cet article, nous étudions l'histoire de la notion de naturalisme en Union soviétique durant les années 1920–1950 et démontrons son importance pour la définition du réalisme socialiste.

# The Struggle Against Naturalism: Soviet Art from the 1920s to the 1950s

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En 1936, en Union soviétique, des critiques anonymes lancèrent une campagne répressive « contre le naturalisme et le formalisme ». Il devint alors impossible, pour plusieurs artistes, d'exposer leur travail et de participer à des concours artistiques. Les artistes « formalistes », tels le suprématiste Kasimir Malevitch et le réaliste analytique Pavel Filonov, étaient facilement identifiables, car ils étaient représentatifs du modernisme européen. La définition du naturalisme, par contre, était beaucoup moins précise. Perçu comme une reproduction presque photographique de la réalité, le naturalisme était pratiqué par les membres de l'Association des artistes de la Russie révolutionnaire. Dans cet article, nous étudions l'histoire de la notion de naturalisme en Union soviétique durant les années 1920–1950 et démontrons son importance pour la définition du réalisme socialiste.

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION Whenever possible, the transliteration of Russian names and titles complies with the Library of Congress standard, modified to omit hard and soft signs. The only exception to that rule pertains to familiar names that have acquired a recognized English spelling. Unless specified, translations are by the author.

The 1930s were among the most traumatic years of the Soviet era: the seemingly endless repressive campaigns against those in opposition; the disastrous collectivization of 1930–33 (that is, the forced merging of peasant households into collective farms), which caused mass deportation and manufactured famine; and the shocking wave of mass executions in 1937, called the Great Purge.<sup>1</sup> With the latter, no domain of art, science, or culture was unaffected. The ideological “Campaign Against Formalism and Naturalism,” launched in 1936, was one of the most tragic episodes in the cultural history of the Soviet era. It caused irrevocable damage to the Soviet art community, and many world-renowned artists were among its victims, including David Sterenberg (1881–1948), the Jewish cultural activist and chief of the avant-garde Visual Arts Department of the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment in 1918–20, and Pavel Filonov (1883–1941), the developer of organicist theories of painting.<sup>2</sup> In 1936, these leaders of international modernist art, as well as hundreds of lesser-known Soviet artists, architects, and musicians, were vilified as “formalists” and “naturalists” in the course of a political campaign that was sanctioned by the Communist party and intended to discredit and defame so-called bourgeois art in the USSR.<sup>3</sup> Since then, in both Soviet historiography and Anglo-American scholarship, the established view has been that the victims of the 1936 attack were almost exclusively formalists, and that their persecution was due to their engagement with Western modernism.<sup>4</sup> Artists accused of naturalism, however, have been overlooked, and in general there has been little discussion of the actual meanings of the terms “formalism” and “naturalism,” how they were used, and the consequences when the two were conflated.<sup>5</sup> This article seeks to fill a gap in the history of administrative and political campaigns that significantly shaped the cultural atmosphere in the Soviet Union of the 1930s by focusing on artists labelled as naturalists and by critically examining the terms of the debates.

In pre-revolutionary Russia, both “naturalism” and “realism” were part of the art-historical lexicon. The concept of naturalism (*naturalizm*) was borrowed from the literary discourse of Émile Zola (1840–1902), whose article “Le Roman expérimental” was translated into Russian in the magazine *Vestnik Evropy* (*Herald of Europe*) in 1879, the year of its French publication.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by contemporary developments in physiology, Zola underlined how scientific accuracy could be adapted to the description of characters and events in literature. Naturalism was thus established as one of the critical terms used in

1. On the collectivization and famine see Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York, 1996); Lynne Viola, ed., *The War against the Peasantry, 1927–1930: The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside* (New Haven, 2005). On the Great Purge, see Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge, 2008); Karl Schlögel, *Moscow 1937* (Cambridge, 2012).

2. Regarding David Sterenberg, see John E. Bowlt, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934* (New York, 1976), xix–xl. About Filonov, see Nicoletta Misler and John E. Bowlt, eds., *Pavel Filonov: A Hero and His Fate* (Austin, 1983).

3. Rare sources on the repressions in the domain of visual arts include V.A. Tikhonova, “...za otsustviiem sostava prestupleniia...,” *Panorama iskusstv* 3 (1990): 6–30, and Olga Roitenberg, *Neuzheli kto-to vspomnil, chto my byli... iz istorii khudozhestvennoi zhizni. 1925–1935* (Moscow, 2008).

4. The lack of analysis is especially evident in important published and translated sources such as Katerina Clark, Evgenii Dobrenko, et al., eds., *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917–1953* (New Haven, 2007). In this collection, the chapter dedicated to the Campaign Against Formalism and Naturalism is called the Anti-Formalist campaign, which the authors claim was focused on the “remnants of modernism” in Dmitri Shostakovich, Sergei Eisenstein, and Vsevolod Meyerhold (see pages 229–30, 231). On anti-modernism in the 1936 campaign being exclusively anti-formalist, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Lady Macbeth Affair: Shostakovich and the Soviet Puritans,” in *The Cultural Front. Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca and London, 1992), 187–89, 196–215; Susan Reid, “Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The Industry of Socialist Art Exhibition, 1935–1941,” *Russian Review* 60, 2 (2001): 153–84; Ilia Dorontchenkov, ed., *Russian and Soviet Views of Modern Western Art. 1890s to Mid-1930s*, trans. Charles Roulge (London, 2009), 305–07.

5. The only study that concentrates exclusively on the 1936 campaign deals mostly with music, cinema, and literature, with a focus on formalism: L.V. Maksimenko, *Sumbur v mesto muzyki: stalinskaia kulturniaia revoliutsiia, 1936–1938* (Moscow, 1997).

6. Émile Zola, “Eksperimentalnii roman,” *Vestnik Evropy* 9 (1879): 406–38. On Zola’s legacy in Russia,

art reviews at least until the 1890s when it gradually became associated with notions of decline in art.<sup>7</sup> The term “naturalism” was always, however, much less popular in the Russian context than “realism.” In his 1883 review of the history of Russian national art “*Dvadsat piat let russkogo iskusstva*” (Twenty-Five Years of Russian Art), Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906), the most influential Russian art critic of the epoch, ultimately replaced naturalism with realism.<sup>8</sup> Stasov regarded realism, which he defined as a critical depiction of reality and a rejection of idealism, as the truly national feature of new Russian art.<sup>9</sup>

Early Soviet Marxist critics generally expressed a positive and complimentary attitude toward Zola’s concept of naturalist writers, whom he described as *moralistes expérimentateurs*.<sup>10</sup> In fact Zola was among some sixty politicians, philosophers, and writers who were commemorated as the heroes of the proletariat in public art projects commissioned in the first years of the Soviet era.<sup>11</sup> In 1927, Zola’s birthday was widely celebrated across the USSR, and his complete works, published in Russian translation the following year, were enthusiastically introduced by the prominent Marxist Soviet aesthetician Vladimir Fritche.<sup>12</sup>

After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, no artistic group defended naturalism, and none clearly rejected it. Neither its popularity nor its notoriety in the Soviet Union in the following decades could have been predicted.<sup>13</sup> In 1936, however, naturalism was co-opted by one of the most influential and infamous political campaigns that swept the art world seemingly overnight: a movement now known as the Campaign Against Formalism and Naturalism (*kampaniia protiv formalizma i naturalizma*), which lasted until 1938. From 1936 to the end of the Soviet regime, formalism in Soviet contexts was largely considered as a form of modernist art and as part of bourgeois culture, while naturalism was seen as vulgar, lacking in artistic form, and a mere “photographic” rendering of the world.

This article describes the conceptual history of naturalism in Soviet art history as it gradually became associated with a variety of artistic “sins.” I begin by tracing the general history of the Campaign Against Formalism and Naturalism, with a specific focus on the choice of terminology, as well as on the principles critics used to classify artists as formalists or naturalists. I then probe the connection between the 1936 campaign and the political repression of artists during the period 1936 to 1939, which shook and demoralized Soviet artistic circles. Lastly, I analyze the enduring consequences of this campaign on the Soviet art historical lexicon, especially the distinction between naturalism and realism as it played out into the mid-century. This will allow me to address the problem of Socialist Realism, the highly politicized style that still provokes debate

see John McNair, “‘Zolaizm’ in Russia,” *The Modern Language Review* 95, 2 (April 2000): 450–62.

7. V. Goltsev, “Neskolko zametok o naturalizme v iskusstve,” *Trudy pervogo sezda russkikh khudozhnikov i ljubitelei khudozhestv* (Moscow, 1900), 76–84.

8. Carol Adlam, “Realist Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Russian Art Writing,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 83, 4 (October 2005): 638–63, esp. 639–40.

9. Vladimir Stasov, “Dvadsat piat let russkogo iskusstva. Nasha zhivopis. Nasha skulptura. Nasha arkhitektura. Nasha muzyka,” in V.V. Stasov, *Izbrannye sochineniia v trekh tomakh*, vol. 2, P.T. Shchipunova, ed. (Moscow, 1952), 391–568.

10. G. Plekhanov, “Iskusstvo i obshchestvennaia zhizn,” *Sochineniia* xiv (Moscow, 1925): 145–48.

11. V.P. Tolstoi, ed., *Khudozhestvennaya zhizhn Sovetskoy Rossii. 1917–1932. Sobitiia, fakti,*

*kommentarii. Sbornik materialov i dokumentov* (Moscow, 2010), 61–5; 158–160.

12. Éric Naiman and Anne Nesbet, “Mise en abîme: Platonov, Zola i poetika truda,” *Revue des études slaves* 64, 4 (1992): 619–33, p. 621.

13. Ieremiaia Ioffe, *Izbrannoie: Sinteticheskaia istoriia iskusstv. Vvedenie v istoriiu khudozhestvennogo myshleniia*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 2010), 1, 396; 539–40. R Pelshe, “Iskusstvo i oborona,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* 4 (1927):

7–9. It was Wilhelm Worringer, the German art historian active in the first decades of the twentieth century, who, despite the French critical tradition (see Michael Marlais, *Conservative Echoes in Fin-De-Siècle Parisian Art Criticism* [Pennsylvania, 1992], 26), proposed distinguishing realism from naturalism, merely referring to naturalism as a term for the plastic arts, and describing realism as “reminiscent of literature.” See Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock ([1907]; Chicago, 1997), 27. See also Dmitriy Nedovich, “Naturalism,” *Slovar khudozhestvennikh terminov GAKhN. 1923–1929* (Moscow, 2005), 295.

14. For the English translation see Kevin M. F. Platt and David Brandenberger, eds., trans., *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (Wisconsin, 2006), 135–39.

15. “Sumbur vmesto muzyki,” *Pravda*, 28 Jan. 1936, 3. Quoted in: *Protiv formalizma i naturalizma v iskusstve* (Moscow, 1937), 5–6.

16. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

17. *Ibid.*, 13; “Protiv formalizma i ‘levatskogo urodstva’ v iskusstve,” *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 14 Feb. 1936. Quoted in *Protiv formalizma*, 17–18.

18. Committee for Artistic Affairs, April 9, 1936. State archive of the Russian Federation, Box 962, 3, Folder 80.

19. For formalism and naturalism considered dichotomously, see *Protiv formalizma*, 17–18, 24, 39, 71–72.

20. Another version of naturalism was proposed by philosopher Valentin Asmus, who described naturalism as a contradiction in terms, as no one can claim to depict things as they are. Valentin Asmus, “Naturalism kak teoriia i kak iskusstvo,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 5 Sept 1936, 2; Valentin Asmus, “Teoreticheskie korni formalizma,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 17 March 1936, 2. Aiming against the Left Front (LEF) artists, Asmus took part in an overtly populist campaign in 1936 by reintroducing the arguments that he had already presented in the late 1920s, when he had criticized the LEF for a lack of artistic imagination. Valentin Asmus, “V zhashchitu vymysla. Literatura fakta i fakty literatury,” *Pechat i revoliutsiia*, 11 (1929): 11–31. Still, Asmus’s ideas were considered overly philosophical, incompatible with the up-to-date political agenda in art, and were criticized. K. Vladimirov, “Asmus i ego illuzii,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 10 January 1937, 5.

among art historians. I argue that this term acquired its shape due largely to definitions established during the Campaign Against Formalism and Naturalism.

### The Campaign Against Formalism and Naturalism: Definitions

The Campaign Against Formalism and Naturalism was headed by the Committee on Artistic Affairs (1936–53), under the leadership of Platon Kerzhentsev (1881–1940). The role of this newly created organization was to monitor all artistic activity in Soviet Russia. The campaign was launched in the official Party press on January 28, 1936, when the prominent newspaper *Pravda* (Truth) published a notorious editorial titled “*Sumbur vmesto muzyki*” (Muddle Instead of Music), which severely criticized Dmitri Shostakovich’s opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (1932).<sup>14</sup> Shostakovich’s music was declared formalistic (*formalisticheskaia*), and the composer was accused of deliberately perverting the simple and realistic classical genre of the opera with inspirations from petit-bourgeois jazz.<sup>15</sup> The opera was also deemed naturalistic (*naturalisticheskaia*), by which the author meant that Shostakovich had depicted rude, vulgar, and primitive heroes, and had allowed “neurotic” (*nevrasnitscheskaia*) music to accompany disgustingly realistic scenes of death.<sup>16</sup>

No special resolution or Party decree set the course for the 1936 campaign. It was manifested only in newspaper articles written mostly by anonymous Party-affiliated art critics. The contents of these articles in turn immediately became the topic of discussion at numerous artists’ meetings. The virtually spontaneous and uncontrolled course of the campaign led to various inconsistencies that pose serious challenges for anyone today who seeks to untangle its history. For instance, the precise relationship between the two terms, formalism and naturalism, was clarified neither during the 1936 campaign nor in its aftermath. How were formalism and naturalism interconnected? Did they describe a list of undesired artistic characteristics, or did they constitute two extremes that should equally be avoided? Soviet art critics of the 1930s sporadically insisted that the terms were interrelated, that each described distinct, negative features of Western bourgeois art. Many artists who were named formalists were also decried as naturalists. For example, another editorial condemned “the garbage paintings of [Rostislav] Barto” as well as “[Pavel] Filonov’s six-legged people without skulls” for their closeness to both formalism and naturalism because of their passion for deformities, abnormalities, and perversions.<sup>17</sup> Rostislav Barto (1902–74) worked in Post-Impressionist and Neo-Primitivist styles, while Pavel Filonov (1883–1941) developed a sophisticated Post-Cubist style that he called Analytical Realism. Still, the internal relations between the two terms remained unclear to the majority of artists and non-Party art critics. Numerous discussions among artists, writers, and filmmakers—for indeed all spheres of artistic production were affected by the critique—were dedicated to parsing the two problematic terms.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, from the outset of the 1936 campaign, formalism and naturalism tended to be used by the majority of Soviet cultural critics in a dichotomy that described opposed constellations of undesirable stylistic traits.<sup>19</sup> The lack of terminological clarity had serious consequences: the ambiguity enhanced the repressive character of the 1936 campaign, as no one could be certain that an accusation would not, one day, be brought against them.<sup>20</sup>

### Targets of the Anti-Formalist and Anti-Naturalist Attack

Another important question for scholars today concerning the 1936 campaign was why the two terms, formalism and naturalism, were chosen at the outset, and who (or what) their intended targets were. The vilification of formalism in the Soviet Union began in the early 1930s, but no one could have predicted the large-scale aggressive political campaign that would develop. Osip Beskin (1892–1969), a prominent art critic and the main editor of two important art journals, *Iskusstvo* and *Tvorchestvo* (Art and Creative Work), introduced a political dimension to what had been a purely art-historical term in “On Formalism in Painting,” a presentation given in 1933 to the members of the Moscow Artists’ Union (1932–90). For Beskin, formalism was associated with modernism and Western bourgeois art.<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that the term was not attributed to Russian Formalism, the influential school of literary criticism and a forerunner of Structuralism exemplified by the theoretical works of Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984) and Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), but to any artist suspected of valuing artistic form over content.<sup>22</sup> Beskin’s presentation was immediately published in *Iskusstvo* and then as an independent book.<sup>23</sup> In both his 1933 article and at a series of public meetings, Beskin denounced as formalists a number of artists with greatly different styles, such as David Sterenberg, the Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), and the Suprematist Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), who had many followers at the time.

It was Beskin’s denunciation of formalism that served as the basis for the 1936 campaign. Suprematist Ivan Kliun (1873–1943), Cubist Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964), and Aristarkh Lentulov (1882–1943), who experimented with Cubo-Futurism, Post-Impressionism, and Fauvism in his works, were all labelled formalists. Alexander Tyshler (1898–1980), whose varied sources of inspiration included Yiddish culture and Neo-Primitivist and Post-Expressionist styles, also became a target in this first round of accusations.<sup>24</sup>

In Soviet art circles, the tendency to accuse artists of naturalism had already begun in the late 1920s. This criticism was largely levelled at the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (*Assotsiatsiia khudozhnikov revoliutsionnoi Rossii*, AKhRR, 1922–28; then *Assotsiatsiia khudozhnikov revoliutsii*, AKhR, 1928–32).<sup>25</sup> The artists of this group, led by Pavel Radimov (1887–1967), Evgenii Katsman (1890–1976), and others, proclaimed their desire to study and depict everyday revolutionary life and to record both key events and the minute details of Socialist life with photographic precision.<sup>26</sup> Their focus on documentary evidence (*dokumentalnost*) and description led to charges, in the 1920s and later, of superficiality, banality, anecdotalism, an inability to grasp the essence of depicted reality, and the servile copying of reality.<sup>27</sup> Even critics more positively disposed toward the AKhR’s activities, such as Anatoly Lunacharsky (1883–1933), who served as Commissar of Education from 1917 to 1929, had to recognize the poor technical quality and lack of artistic merit in the majority of their works.<sup>28</sup> It was art historian Vladimir Kemenov (1908–88), one of the leaders of the 1936 campaign, who denounced the circle of artists associated with the AKhR for being naturalists, citing notably their indifference to depicted reality, by which he meant primarily a lack of artistic form.<sup>29</sup> The charge of naturalism furthermore implied a photographic (*fotograficheskoe*) rendering of reality, a merely descriptive and imitative approach to depicting life, a taste for the physiological and

21. By the 1930s there existed at least one comprehensive and complimentary study of formalism in contemporary Soviet painting: Yakov Tugendhold, “Formalnyi element v nashei zhivopisi,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 6 (1928): 22–31.

22. Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt, eds., *Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation* (Edinburgh, 1973); Sergei Ushakin, ed., *Formalnyi metod. Antologiya russkogo modernizma*, 3 vols. (Ekaterinburg, 2016).

23. Osip Beskin, *Formalizm v zhivopisi* (Moscow, 1933).

24. V. Kemenov, “Protiv formalizma i naturalizma v zhivopisi,” *Pravda*, 6 and 26 March 1936, quoted in *Protiv formalizma*, 20–28.

25. P.I. Lebedev, ed., *Borba za realizm v izobrazitelnom iskusstve* (Moscow, 1962), 41–44. A.S. Pavluchenkov, *Partiia, revoliutsia, iskusstvo (1917–1927)* (Moscow, 1985), 105.

26. Evgenii Katsman, *Kak sozdavalsia AKhRR* (Moscow, 1925).

27. R. Pelshe, “Iskusstvo i oborona,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 4 (1927): 8; Ignatii Khvoinin, “Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 5 (1927): 63–64; Tugendhold, *Formalnyi element*, 22; *Protiv formalizma*, 25.

28. Anatoly Lunacharsky, *Ob iskusstve*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1982), II, 146–56, 169–75, 199–210.

29. V. Kemenov, quoted in *Protiv formalizma*, 25–26.

biological (*biologicheskie*), that is, “lower” details, and an inability to distinguish between important and unimportant elements. It was often accompanied by accusations of superficiality, haste, and careless technique.<sup>30</sup>

### Naturalism and Realism: The Case of the AKhR

The accusation of naturalism levelled at AKhR artists requires a closer look, however, as it seems to have been an attempt to obscure political rather than artistic motivations. By 1936, all artistic groups had been officially disbanded, including the AKhR. As a result of the 1932 Party resolution *On the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organizations*, there was only one creative organization allowed in the USSR, and that was the Artists’ Union, which forcefully brought together various associations and groups. Having been united against their will, artists persisted in fraternizing with their former colleagues, and regularly relied on past professional connections well into the mid-1930s. Although the AKhR did not officially exist in 1936, the vilifying label of naturalism was nevertheless applied to, and became indelibly associated with, former AKhR artists.

In their manifestos, AKhR artists proclaimed that their work was realist.<sup>31</sup> Their major difference from nineteenth-century Russian realists such as Vasilii Perov (1833–82), Vasilii Surikov (1848–1916), and Ilia Repin (1844–1930), they argued, was their avowed active participation in the development of Socialist society.<sup>32</sup> The terminology that AKhR artists used to describe themselves evolved from year to year. In 1925–26, for instance, they called their style “heroic realism” in order to emphasize the Socialist content of their art,<sup>33</sup> which they believed had the power to “form the psyches of future generations” due to its key role in reframing workers’ everyday lives.<sup>34</sup>

The case of the most famous ex-AKhR member and self-proclaimed realist, Evgenii Katsman, is especially revealing. In the earliest days of AKhR activity, Katsman wrote several manifestos in which he described his art in terms of heroic realism and juxtaposed it to the abstract art of the Suprematists.<sup>35</sup> (Ironically, his brother-in-law was none other than Malevich.) Katsman, along with other AKhR artists, was a proponent of the direct expression of proletarian ideology, the ability to transmit simple and comprehensible images of ordinary workers.<sup>36</sup> The simplicity was deceiving, however, as Katsman claimed to make visible the heroic and dialectic nature of the worker’s character, which implicitly contained all the complexity of class struggle. To achieve his goal, he often used a slightly altered painterly perspective and introduced a sense of lonely desolation in his figures, as if they were cut off and isolated in their own heroic universe. Exemplified in his painting *Countryside Teacher* of 1925, | fig. 1 | Katsman’s highly distinctive way of portraying people was characterized by the pronounced clarity of the atmosphere and by the exaggerated rendering of poses, which suggest a more profound meaning. The overall impression is of the importance of everyday labour. Visually, Katsman’s paintings, and in particular the way he places his “heroes” in their working environment, are reminiscent of paintings and photos from the New Objectivity movement, which came from Germany and was very well known in Soviet Russia.<sup>37</sup>

Already in 1928, AKhR artists were introducing new terms such as “proletarian art” and “proletarian realism.”<sup>38</sup> Proletarian realism was described in terms of dialectics and the depiction of contradictory political and class forces,

30. *Protiv formalizma*, 24–27.  
31. Ivan Matsa, Lidiia Reingardt, and Lazar Rempel, eds., *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let. Materialy i dokumentatsiia* (Moscow, Leningrad, 1933), 343, 345, 347, 351, 363–66, 367–70.  
32. Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 346–48.  
33. Katsman, *Kak sozdavalsia AKhRR*, 10.  
34. Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 345.  
35. Katsman, *Kak sozdavalsia AKhRR*; Tatiana Hvostenko, *Vechera na Maslovke bliz Dinamo* (Moscow, 2003), 11, 6–151.  
36. B. Nikiforov, “Pokaz udarnichestva v massovoi kartine Izogiza,” *Za proletarskoe iskusstvo* 5 (1932): 4–5; R. Kaplan and E. Blinova, “Uchest tvorcheskii opyt,” *Za proletarskoe iskusstvo* 5 (1932): 8–9, et passim.  
37. L.S. Aleshina and N.I. Yavorskaya, eds., *Iz istorii khudozhestvennoi zhizni SSSR: Internatsionalnie svyazi v oblasti izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva, 1917–1940: materialy i dokumenty* (Moscow, 1987), 41–47, 97–230.  
38. Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 377–78.

Figure 1. Evgenii Katsman, *Countryside Teacher*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 120 × 68 cm. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery (photo: Tretyakov Gallery).



as the “plurality of moments in time and foci in space,” as well as a materialistic reading of history.<sup>39</sup> As the exemplary populist art form, the most important outputs of the AKhR were murals, notably for the Dzerzhinsky Barracks (1929), the Vkhutein (Higher Art and Technical Institute) club (1929), the Proletarii club in Moscow (1930), and the Bolshevo Commune for delinquent children headed by the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU) of 1930–31.

The style of these public artworks was more akin to European modernism than late nineteenth-century realism. The artists involved created simple and conventional scenes in a dynamic Post-Expressionist style that depicted the history of Soviet Russia and the failure of the Western bourgeoisie.<sup>40</sup> For the Moscow Proletarii club, | fig. 2 | the artists used a simplistic mode to depict numerous figures such as the Pope, soldiers from European colonies, and a number of almost allegorical—in their scale and posture—figures of women and national minorities, typical representatives of disadvantaged groups in capitalist countries. The figures were placed in a non-linear perspective and non-chronological narrative in order to emphasize the dialectics of history and class struggle. Issues were represented as developing simultaneously, as

39. Ioffe, *Izbrannoie*, 539–40.

40. Tolstoj, *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn*, 309–16.



**Figure 2.** Lev Viasmenskii, Fiodor Konnov, Yakov Tsirelson, David Mirlas et al. Murals in Proletarii club in Moscow, 1930. Mural, 2300 × 45 cm. Not preserved (photo: reproduced from *Iskusstvo v Massy* 1930: 10–11).

parallel to each other, and conditioned by each other. Despite numerous stylistic and historical references, the ideas expressed in the murals were accessible to visitors from all backgrounds, who might have recognized the allegorical figures from festivals, newspapers, or public parks.<sup>41</sup>

But soon after the completion of the Proletarii club murals, its artists, including Lev Viasmenskii (1901–38), | fig. 3 | Fiodor Konnov (1902–38), Yakov Tsirelson (1900–38), and David Mirlas (1900–42), were all either deported to labour camps or sentenced to death. The murals, having been produced by disgraced artists, were just as quickly forgotten. As a result, and also because the AKhR artists were strongly associated with the Party, which echoed their ambitions through to the late 1920s, the legacy of the public murals and the AKhR has not received much attention from scholars.<sup>42</sup> Their close affiliation to the Party through the 1920s and their urge to depict revolutionary byt (everyday life) attracted artists with very different backgrounds and levels of training. The next generations of artists and scholars remembered the AKhR artists as strongly associated with “naturalism,” an umbrella term for the most uncreative and banal partisan works.<sup>43</sup> Yet although the AKhR claimed to be an artistic group most closely connected to the Party leadership, artists were greatly affected by the Great Purge.

### The Political Connection

The widespread questioning, arrest, and imprisonment of artists during the Great Purge led contemporaries to infer that it was an affiliation with avant-garde modernism, the style of the Western bourgeoisie, that incited censure. It was, and continues to be, widely believed that the persecutions were the direct consequence of the anti-formalist and anti-naturalist campaign. In 1937 Katsman listed the recent arrests and tried to untangle the connections. He wondered whether the artists were arrested due to their affiliation to formalism and naturalism or due to a political connection. In his private journal, he wrote, “It is interesting that the pattern of all the arrests coincides with the pattern of Trotskyites and white guard [sympathizers], and not at all with the pattern of naturalism and formalism.” He continued,

Mikhailov is a blackguard but a realist, Shukhaev is a blackguard but a realist, Favorsky is a blackguard but a formalist, Efros is a blackguard but a formalist, Bigas is a formalist

41. *Ibid.*, 283–84.

42. Clark et al., eds., *Soviet Culture and Power*, 45–48.

43. For a revised account of the AKhR see Brandon Taylor, “On AKhRR,” in *Art of the Soviets*, ed. Matthew Cullerne Bown (Manchester and New York, 1993), 51–72; Angelina Lucento, “The Conflicted Origins of Soviet Visual Media. Painting, Photography, and Communication in Russia, 1925–1932,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 2, 56 (2015): 401–28.



44. Hvostenko, *Vechera na Maslovke* 11, 9. Trans. by Delia Melianova.

45. Clark et al., eds., *Soviet Culture and Power*, 229–30; Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, 2011), 211. In the recent literature, the purges of formalists are ascribed to the direct effect of the 1934 Writers' Congress under the supervision of Andrei Zhdanov and Alexander Gerasimov; see Alison Hilton, "Holiday on the Kolkhoz: Socialist Realism's Dialogue with Impressionism," in *Russian Art and the West*, ed. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid (Dekalb, 2007), 202–03.

46. This is especially true for those artists associated with political opposition in national Soviet republics. For instance, Ukrainian artists such as Mikhail Boichuk and Vasil Sedliar were repressed as a part of a "nationalist-fascist group" and shot in 1937. Oleksii Rogotchenko, *Sotsialistichnii realizm i totalitarizm* (Kiev, 2007), 111–25.

47. Matthew E. Lenoe, *The Kirov Murder and Soviet History* (New Haven and London, 2010).

48. Galina Zagianskaia, "V mire pobedivshogo sotsializma. Stenogramma ekstremnogo zasedania pravleniia MOSSKH," *Kontinent*, 148 (2011) <http://magazines.russ.ru/continent/2011/148/mo45.html>.

and a Trotskyite, Kirshon hangs around with Trotskyites but he is a realist and naturalist, Slavinsky is a bastard, [and] a formalist.<sup>44</sup>

Katsman lists artists not only by a variety of styles (formalist, realist, and naturalist), but also by political affiliation, such as "blackguard," which was then understood as a political enemy or Party dissident. It is symptomatic that Katsman links stylistic transgressions with arrests and persecutions, the very connection later embodied by the predominant art-historical narrative of avant-garde victimhood and (Socialist) realist victory.<sup>45</sup>

The arrests of artists that began in the early 1930s, however, were motivated by a wide variety of repressive mechanisms, and overall an artist's style or creative process was not a leading motive.<sup>46</sup> The first political actions under Stalin had already begun in 1934 after the prominent Bolshevik Sergey Kirov (1886–1934) was assassinated that December. Stalin used his murder as a pretext for his sweeping political purges.<sup>47</sup> By the end of December 1934, avant-garde artists such as Vera Ermolaeva (1893–1937) had already been arrested and charged with Anti-Soviet propaganda, while AKhR members were also affected: Nikolay Mikhailov (1898–1940), for instance, was arrested after someone had, in the thick atmosphere of paranoia of 1935, discovered a hidden image of a skeleton reaching out his hand for Stalin and his marshal Klement Voroshilov in one of his paintings.<sup>48</sup> Well before the onset of the anti-formalist and anti-naturalist campaign, these arrests were unrelated to artistic style.

In 1936, the campaign undertaken by the Committee for Artistic Affairs ran parallel to the macabre political processes put in place against Party opposition, both against its numerous real opponents and also against inconvenient functionaries. By August 1936, the so-called Moscow Trials had begun. This series of show trials held between 1936 and 1938 indicted anti-Stalin opposition

Figure 3. Lev Viasmenskii, *Signing the Sozdogovor (Social Order)*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 198 x 249 cm. Moscow Rosizo (photo: Rosizo).



figures such as Grigory Zinoviev (1883–1936), Lev Kamenev (1883–1936), Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), Nikolai Bukharin (1888–1938), and many other prominent politicians. While disgraced politicians were questioned at court, the special secret police drafted lists of family members, colleagues, close friends, and even mere acquaintances of the accused Party leaders.<sup>49</sup> These constitute the darkest years of Soviet history, when millions were victimized.<sup>50</sup> Many artists numbered among them.

The detention of foreign artists and members of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists (*Mezhdunarodnoe buro revoliutsionnikh khudozhnikov*) was followed by the arrests of the so-called Latvian Riflemen (*Latyshskie strelki*), including the Realist Voldemar Anderson, the experimental artist Alexander Drevin, and the avant-garde artist Gustav Klutsis, all of whom were arrested in 1937–38.<sup>51</sup> The AKhR artists who had devotedly portrayed the accused and had previously enjoyed their protection were also jailed, murdered, or committed suicide, while others simply lost their commissions and livelihood—regardless of the artistic style they practised.

This was the case of ex-AKhR member Yakov Tsirelson, one of the painters of the Proletarii club murals in 1930. He specialized in public art and had served as an organizer of the youth section of the AKhR. Tsirelson passionately opposed formalism in art, which he criticized from the orthodox standpoint of the Communist Party. He was nevertheless arrested in Moscow in 1938 as an alleged member of the “Terrorist Group of the Moscow Artists,” as it was called in Secret police files, and was executed by firing squad.<sup>52</sup> Fiodor Konnov, who had collaborated on those same murals, shared the same fate in 1938 despite being an enthusiastic supporter of the Party and an active opponent of formalism.<sup>53</sup> More than ten former members of the AKhR were accused of belonging to the same supposed “Terrorist Group of Moscow Artists,” which, outside the prosecution documents, does not seem to have ever existed. These artists were imprisoned and repressed, not for their politics, nor for their stylistic preferences, but solely for having been patronized by political leaders who fell into disgrace during the turbulent 1936–39 period. Another ex-AKhR artist, Vasilii Maslov (1906–38), was arrested and killed in 1938 simply because his onetime patron, Genrikh Yagoda, former chief of the secret police (the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the NKVD), was demoted, accused of being a Trotskyite, and summarily shot.<sup>54</sup>

For years Katsman, who nervously noted and analyzed his colleagues’ arrests in his journal, had enjoyed his own studio in Moscow’s Kremlin. Soon after Kirov’s murder in 1934, however, Katsman was removed from this prominent location, lost political favour, and, consequently, his artistic prominence.<sup>55</sup> In 1936, Katsman was accused of imparting a quality of religious sainthood to the workers in his portraits, which were said to be reminiscent of Russian icons.<sup>56</sup> In the same years, his name and works became associated with naturalism and pseudo-realism (*pseudorealizm*)—the prefix “pseudo” serving to underline the failure of the artists’ ambition to adjust their style to the accepted Socialist Realism. All the former AKhR artists were accused of falling short of being true realists.<sup>57</sup> During the 1920s, Katsman had enjoyed the direct sponsorship of Leon Trotsky himself (assassinated in 1940), and of József Unszlicht, the founder of the repressive Emergency Committee known as the

49. Oleg Khlevniuk, *Politburo: Mehanizmy politicheskoi vlasti v 1930-e gody* (Moscow, 1996), 187–234.

50. Arch Getty, Gábor T. Ritter-sporn, and Viktor N. Zemskov, “Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence,” *The American Historical Review* 98, 4 (1993): 1017–49.

51. Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art Under Stalin* (New York, 1991), 130; Hvostenko, *Vechera na Maslovke*, 11, 22.

52. “Yakov Tsirelson,” in *Butovskii poligon; 1937–1938: Kniga pamiati zhertv politicheskikh repressii* (Moscow, 1999), 111. www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/khudozhniki/?t=page&id=221.

53. “Fiodor Konnov,” in *Butovskii poligon; 1937–1938: Kniga pamiati zhertv politicheskikh repressii* (Moscow, 1997), 1. www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/khudozhniki/?t=page&id=78.

54. Alexandra Selivanova and Nadia Plungian, eds., *Vasilii Maslov. Avangard Trudkommuny. Grafika iz fondov Korolevskogo istoricheskogo muzeia*, exh. cat., Moscow, Jewish Museum and Tolerance Centre, (Moscow, 2014).

55. Hvostenko, *Vechera na Maslovke*, 11, 32.

56. *Protiv formalizma*, 26.

57. *Ibid.*, 25, 36.

*Cheka* (assassinated in 1938). Due to his former affiliations with disgraced politicians, and following the accusation of naturalism, Katsman remained in the shadows in the late 1930s and successfully evaded bodily persecution.

The question of a link between style, imprisonment, and administrative repression is more complicated than has been previously understood. For instance, early declarations of disgraced AKhR artists have been forgotten in post-Stalinist, and more generally in post-Soviet, scholarship, which has regarded the AKhR as close to the Communist Party and as a triumphant forerunner of Socialist Realism.<sup>58</sup> What is more, art historians have concentrated primarily on the formalists who were detained, incarcerated, or killed. In this context, artists' stylistic choices were seen as the direct cause of their oppression.<sup>59</sup> This false association has led, for example, to historians suggesting that Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Maiakovsky (1893–1930) would also have been purged if they had been alive in 1935.<sup>60</sup> The course of the repressions and the consequences for its victims proved hard to predict, as many highly visible potential targets of the Campaign Against Formalism and Naturalism avoided the sad fates of the artists mentioned above. Composer Dmitri Shostakovich, the main object of early anti-formalist critique, managed to remain one of the most popular musicians of the Stalinist era.<sup>61</sup> Although he adjusted his style to assuage his critics, the reasons for his survival cannot be solely attributed to stylistic accommodations. In the visual arts, the disgraced Katsman managed to restore his reputation and career in the late 1940s without ever changing his style.

#### The End of the Campaign and Its Aftershocks

Officially, the attack on formalism and naturalism ended suddenly when the head of the Committee on Artistic Affairs, Platon Kerzhentsev, who had launched the witch-hunt, was removed from his post in January 1938.<sup>62</sup> His enthusiasm for unmasking the artistic sins of formalism and naturalism and his dedication to Socialist Realism, which according to his own statement in 1936 implied “further struggle against formalism,” did not save him from falling into disfavour.<sup>63</sup>

Despite its relatively quick end, the results of the 1936–38 campaign were far-reaching. The vast majority of artists accused of formalism were forced to give up their public lives and were deprived of artistic commissions for decades. The re-registration of the Moscow Artists' Union members in 1938 would prove to be especially disastrous, because artists in the union were then barred from pursuing public commissions. The membership status of artists accused of demonstrating “regressive formalist and naturalist tendencies” in their artworks was downgraded.<sup>64</sup> It is not a coincidence that the generation of artists who had begun to work in the mid-1930s have come to be called the “unnoticed generation” in Russian scholarship.<sup>65</sup> Another important outcome of the 1936 campaign was art museums' exclusion of paintings by defamed artists. As early as 1936, Kerzhentsev had initiated an examination of the collections of the most important art museums, such as the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the Russian Museum in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), to determine what was fit for public consumption. The works of formalist artists such as Kandinsky, Tatlin, and Malevich, which today constitute an important

58. P.I. Lebedev, ed., *Borba za realizm v iskusstve 20-kh godov: Materialy, dokumenty, vospominaniya* (Moscow, 1962), 10, 13–25; I.V. Gronsky and V.N. Perelman, eds., *AKhRR. Sbornik vospominanii, statei i dokumentov* (Moscow, 1973); Maria Chegodaeva, *Dva Lika Vremeni 1939 odin god stalinskoi epokhi* (Moscow, 2000), 98–102, 198–206, 227–30; Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Soviet Socialist Realist Painting, 1930s–1960s* (Oxford, 1992), 8–10. For the emerging revision of this scholarly tradition see note 45.

59. E.F. Kovtun et al. *Avangard, ostanovlennii na begu* (Leningrad, 1989), unpaginated, quoted in Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Soviet Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven and London, 1998), 10–11; Clark et al., eds., *Soviet Culture and Power*, 240–241.

60. Natalia Murray, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde: The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin* (Leiden and Boston, 2012), 215.

61. S. Mikkonen, “‘Muddle Instead of Music’ in 1936: Cataclysm of Musical Administration,” *Shostakovich Studies 2*, Pauline Fairclough, ed. (Cambridge, 2010), 234.

62. L.V. Maksimenko, *Sumbur v mesto muzyki*, 61.

63. V. Perkhin, ed., *Deiateli russkogo iskusstva i M.B. Kharpchenko. 1939–1948* (Moscow, 2007), 12–13.

64. Roitenberg, *Neuzheli*, 301, 311.

65. Roitenberg, *Neuzheli*, 299, 306–11; F.M. Balakhovskaia, “Kolleksiya novogo tipa,” *Sotsrealizm: Inventarizatsia arkhiva. Iskusstvo 1930–1940-h, exh. cat.*, Moscow, Rosizo (St. Petersburg, 2009), 9–11.

part of a Russian national artistic heritage, were all removed from public view and were not displayed again until the 1980s.<sup>66</sup> Kerzhentsev did not, however, remove naturalist art from museums, and anti-naturalism continued to play a crucial role in the development of the conception of the state-sanctioned style, Socialist Realism.

Immediately after the 1936 campaign, artists and critics alike found themselves facing a confusing problem: Socialist Realist works were sometimes difficult to distinguish from works that had been condemned as naturalist in the Soviet press. Indeed, the term Socialist Realism, first introduced in 1932, was proclaimed to be the only desirable artistic style by the Communist Party in the 1934 Congress of Soviet writers.<sup>67</sup> It was difficult to find critical terms to describe Socialist Realism, and definitions that were elaborated by Party functionaries in the 1950s included such vague concepts as *partiinnost* (Party-mindedness), *narodnost* (accessibility to the masses), and *pravdivost* (truthfulness).<sup>68</sup> The case of Aleksander Laktionov (1910–72) clearly shows that these notions were not contradictory to naturalism, and his works illustrate the difficulty in distinguishing naturalism from classical Socialist Realism. Indeed, truthfulness, a feature said to be characteristic of Socialist Realism, was hard to differentiate from the “slavish copy of reality” (*rabskoe kopiravanie realnosti*) that characterized naturalism.<sup>69</sup>

Laktionov's *Letter from the Front* appeared in 1947 at the annual All-Union Art Exhibition (*Vsesoiuznaia khudozhestvennaia vystavka*), after he had recently graduated from the Leningrad Academy of Arts. | fig. 4 | He had developed a distinctive style of genre painting, academic in its composition and rendering of details, which Soviet critics widely regarded as naturalist.<sup>70</sup> *Letter from the Front* depicts a wartime scene in the old Russian city of Zagorsk. According to Laktionov's later testimony, the idea for the painting was born out of a chance encounter with an injured soldier who was heading to visit the relatives of a comrade in order to deliver a letter.<sup>71</sup> The painting shows a group of five people placed in a semicircle. A boy, presumably the son, is reading the letter aloud. The injured soldier joins the other members of the family—an older woman in peasant dress, a young girl in a traditionally embroidered blouse, and a comely young woman in modern dress wearing the red armband of a local activist—as they listen attentively to the young boy and are shown enjoying both the long-awaited news and the beautiful sunny weather. The artist has managed to depict a peaceful and optimistic scene of wartime life. Some contemporary art critics found it increasingly difficult to describe Laktionov's works as Socialist Realist, as his paintings were strongly reminiscent of the worst sins of naturalism: a mere “photocopy” of reality (*fotokopia realnosti*) and laden with verist details (the soldier's medals, the girl's armband).<sup>72</sup> Yet *Letter from the Front* was honoured with the prestigious Stalin prize in 1948 and was promoted as one of the most popular models of Socialist Realist painting in Soviet Russia. Laktionov became the unquestioned master of Socialist Realism.

Assured of his success, Laktionov further developed his descriptive and illusionistic style in works such as *To a New Apartment* (1952), | fig. 5 | in which he became even more preoccupied with the idealization of everyday life in Soviet society. A happy family of four is depicted moving into a new apartment, which would have been an incredibly lucky occurrence in those years,

66. Maksimenko, *Sumbur*, 227–29; Clark et al., eds., *Soviet Culture and Power*, 241–42.

67. “Obespechim vse uslovia tvorcheskoi raboty literaturnikh kruzhkov. Na sobranii aktiva litkruzhkov Moskvy,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 23 May 1932, 1; Clark et al., eds., *Soviet Culture and Power*, 162–78. See also Katerina Clark, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature* (London and New York, 2001), 174–83.

68. Evgenii Dobrenko, ed., *Izblavlenie ot mirazhei. Sotsrealizm segodnia* (Moscow, 1990), 119–23. On Socialist Realism see Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford, 1992); Thomas Lahusen and Evgenii Dobrenko, eds., *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (Durham, 1995).

69. “K sporam o naturalizme,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 30 May 1939, 5.

70. Oliver Johnson, “A Premonition of Victory’: A Letter from the Front,” *Russian Review* 68, 3 (July 2009): 408–428, at 421; Oliver Johnson, “The Stalin Prize and the Soviet Artist: Status Symbol or Stigma?,” *Slavic Review* 70, 4 (2011): 819–43.

71. Johnson, “A Premonition of Victory,” 410–11.

72. *Materialy Pervogo vsesoznogo sezda sovetskikh khudozhnikov* (Moscow, 1958), 75.



**Figure 4.** Aleksander Laktionov, *Letter from Front*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 225 × 154.5 cm. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery (reproduced with permission of O.A. Laktionova).



**Figure 5.** Aleksander Laktionov, *To a New Apartment*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 134 × 112 cm. Donetsk Art Museum (reproduced with permission of O.A. Laktionova).

73. Blair A. Ruble, "From *khushcheby to korobki*," in *Russian Housing in the Modern Age: Design and Social History*, ed. William Craft Blumfeld and Blair A. Ruble (New York, 1993), 235.

74. Oliver Johnson, "Kul'turnost' or Kitsch: Varnishing Reality in the Art of Aleksandr Laktionov," *Studies in Slavic Cultures* vi (2007): 82–106.

75. G. Nedoshivin, "Nasushchnie voprosy khudozhestvennogo tvorchestva," *Iskusstvo* 7 (1954): 7.

76. "Images of socialist realism from the Stalin era look like color photographs, and indeed, this 'photographicity' is not concealed but rather publicly admitted and celebrated." Boris Groys, "The Art of Totality," in *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, ed. E. Dobrenko and E. Naiman (Seattle, 2003), 109–10. On twentieth-century realism and its reconsideration see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago, 1983); Briony Fer, ed., *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism. Art between the Wars* (New Haven and London 1993), 251–63; Taylor, "On AKhRR," 67–70; Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism, World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven and London, 2013), 1–11, 23–65; Devin Fore, *Realism After Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, 2012), 21–74.

77. Committee for Artistic Affairs, State Archive of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Box 5446, 49, Folder 2810. Quoted in Galina Yankovkaia, *Iskusstvo, dengii i politika: sovetskii khudozhnik v gody pozdnego stalinizma* (Perm, 2007), 102. Trans. by Deliya Melianova.

78. Osip Beskin, "O kartine, naturalizme i realizme. Vystavka molodykh khudozhnikov," *Iskusstvo*, 4 (1939): 5–21; N. Shchekotov, "Zhivopis. Vystavka 'Industriia sotsializma'," *Iskusstvo*, 4 (1939): 59–84; A. Zotov, P. Syssoev, *Vsesoiuznaia khudozhestvennaia vystavka 'Industriia sotsializma'* (Moscow–Leningrad, 1940): 3–23; V. Kemenov, "Cherty dvukh kultur," *Iskusstvo*, 4 (1947): 38–46; L. Reingardt, "Po tu storonu zdoravogo smysla. Formalizm na sluzhbe reaktzii," *Iskusstvo*, 5 (1949): 77–87; G. Nedoshivin, "Nasushchnie voprosy khudozhestvennogo tvorchestva," *Iskusstvo*, 7 (1954): 5–10; Boris Suchkov, *Istoricheskie sudby realizma. Razmyshleniia o tvorchestvakh metodov* (Moscow, 1977), 219.

79. Evgenii Dobrenko, ed., *Izblavlenie ot mirazhei. Sotsrealizm segodnia* (Moscow, 1990), 6–27.

given that by 1951 each apartment in Leningrad, the former national capital, was home to an average of 3.3 families, and the majority of the population lived in barracks and communal apartments.<sup>73</sup> In the painting, there are precisely observed details and illusionistically depicted objects; even the titles and series of the books would have been easily recognizable. Many art critics, such as German Nedoshivin, an old-school Stalinist critic, and Nina Dmitrieva, a Khrushchev Thaw period proponent of revising the Stalinist aesthetic dogma, criticized this work, seeing it primarily as a depiction of a "heap of domestic goods."<sup>74</sup> Avoiding a direct accusation of naturalism, Nedoshivin described the painting as fetishistic and illusionistic, accused Laktionov of being "a slave of superficially depicted facts," and used elusive expressions such as "naturalistic tendencies."<sup>75</sup> With his strikingly rendered objects and almost mirror-like finish, Laktionov's painting demonstrates that the high level of illusionism and descriptiveness makes a differentiation between naturalism and realism impossible, even if the paintings were identified by the Party as realist or naturalist.<sup>76</sup>

The urge to reconcile the search for Socialist Realism with the anti-naturalist agenda persisted for decades in critical discussions, well after the Campaign ended. For instance, the statutes of the USSR Academy of Fine Arts, established in Moscow in 1947, officially determined that "The Academy will fight for the principles of Socialist Realism and the traditions of the Russian realist school... it will seek to destroy formalism, naturalism and 'other manifestations of bourgeois art'."<sup>77</sup> In the decades that followed, it was the anti-formalist and anti-naturalist agenda that continued to shape the theoretical discourse on Socialist Realism.<sup>78</sup> Under Mikhail Gorbachev's rule in the 1980s, many of the long-held tenets of Communism came under revision, and numerous articles and artistic works urged the rethinking of the Socialist artistic legacy. *Ridding Ourselves of Mirages: Socialist Realism Today*, an edited volume published in 1990, sought to revise the history of Soviet aesthetics.<sup>79</sup> It brought together different opinions regarding the genesis, history, and aftermath of Socialist Realism. The volume claims, however, that the style had already ended by the 1960s and that it had been a purely Stalinist phenomenon, and thus ignores the continued production of Socialist Realist art and literary works for several decades. At the same moment, the Moscow Academy of Arts, the ideological mouthpiece of the Stalinist and Post-Stalinist Socialist Realist aesthetics, was drafting a volume entitled *On Socialist Realism in the Visual Arts*, which described the style as open to the masses, monumental, and truthful—all echoes of Party rhetoric. Although the authors of the Academy of Arts manuscript attempted to find a positive definition of the Socialist method in art, they remained confounded for two reasons. First, they came to the same conclusions as the authors of *Ridding Ourselves of Mirages*, that the definition of art put forth by Socialist Realism bore the fatal mark of the totalitarian Stalinist cultural policy; and second, the authors could still not manage to escape the *ex adverso* argument and described Socialist Realism not on its own terms, but in opposition to the naturalism/formalism dichotomy.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, until recently Soviet and Post-Soviet art critics were unable to eschew the intellectual consequences of the 1936 campaign and its influence on the definition of Socialist Realism.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has traced the way in which the term “naturalism” was used by Soviet art critics in order to emphasize its highly distinctive conceptual history in Stalinist Russia. In the course of the 1936 Campaign Against Formalism and Naturalism, it became an instrument in the political and administrative repression of Soviet artists. The campaign created a disciplinary and coercive pattern that would characterize the Soviet art world for decades. In the years that followed the campaign, artists labelled as formalists or naturalists would inevitably encounter difficulties, the most innocuous and frequent of which was the loss of income. Although naturalism was routinely mentioned in articles, artists’ meetings, and exhibition catalogues, the Soviet version of naturalism was never properly formulated, and its definition remained fluid. Because of this lack of clarity, naturalism could be used as an instrument to denounce artists, who found themselves unable to defend their artistic work during the repressive political campaign in 1936–38. Scholarly accounts have made it seem that only those accused of formalism were penalized in 1936–38, but in reality artists were repressed regardless of their creative work and artistic legacy. Furthermore, as I have shown, the victims of the campaign were not necessarily connected to naturalism or to formalism, but were persecuted largely based on political affiliation. Stylistic terms were merely foils to hide political cleansing. This study of naturalism in Stalinist art has also revealed that the ambiguous terminology led to a notable reconsideration of the domain of Socialist aesthetics after 1936. Artists and art critics alike defined Socialist Realism, the sanctioned artistic style of the USSR until its collapse in 1989–91, in part through its opposition to naturalism and formalism. ¶

80. This book was never published due to the challenge of securing funding for scholarship on Socialist Realism during the collapse of the Soviet Union, but a copy of the manuscript resides in the author’s archive: V.V. Vanslov, ed., *O sotsialisticheskoi realizme v izobrazitel'nom iskusstve*, unpublished manuscript (Moscow: n/p. 1990): 4, 308, 311–13, 324.

81. *Socialist Realisms: Soviet Painting, 1920–1970*, 147–51; *Romanticheskii Realizm, Sovetskaia zhivopis 1925–1945 godov*, exh. cat., Moscow, Manezh (Moscow, 2015); Maria Silina, “Sotsrealizm protiv romantiki realizma,” *Artgid*, 10 December 2015, <http://artguide.com/posts/932>; Maria Silina, “Shto stalo v VSKhV,” *Artgid*, 25 April 2016, <http://artguide.com/posts/1022>.