

Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union:
Alexander Grigoriev and Isaak Brodsky's Influence.

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Painters Alexander Grigoriev and Isaak Brodsky were products of two different outcomes artists from the original Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR) lived through during the reign of the Soviet Union. Grigoriev was branded an enemy of the people for his Trotskyist beliefs and Brodsky was a decorated painter for his involvement in propagandist art. The defining factor between them was how they adhered to the limiting Socialist Realism movement under Soviet guidelines. Even though Grigoriev developed the style when forming the AKhRR in 1924, it wasn't until 1934 that Communist Party Leader, Andrei Zhdanov, declared Socialist Realism as the official and only art movement approved by the government during his speech at the Congress of Soviet Writers. The new censorship in art left former artists of the association in high vigilance and protest. However, artist Isaak Brodsky was already devoted to the Communist Party because four years earlier, in 1930, he completed the infamous propagandist painting, V.I. Lenin in the Smolny.

To further understand how incredibly different Grigoriev and Brodsky were, it is essential to look at their artwork before the AKhRR formed. In 1919, four years before the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic (U.S.S.R.) officially established itself, Brodsky painted Lenin and Manifestation (fig.1). His commitment to portraits of leaders and support to the communist regime led him to paint much propagandist art with Lenin and later Stalin as his subject matter.

In Lenin and Manifestation (fig.1.), Brodsky positioned Lenin as an idealized figure of calmness and rule over the people. The textured red velvet fabric draped behind Lenin's form

forced the viewer to focus on his facial features and how his skin contrasted the background. The use of color and shadows made his face half of the focal point of the painting. In the top left corner, there is a window-like view of a city in Russia. The movement of the people and the detailed addition of more giant square-like banners made the viewer speculate that a protest was taking place. This opening into the streets is the second focal point of the painting and the stark contrast of Lenin's calm face. Below the protests and under Lenin's hand, there is a document with a seal and a pen. This element in the portraiture separated Lenin from the chaos in the streets and alluded to the belief that he was a peaceful ruler.



Fig.1 Brodsky,Isaak. Lenin and Revolution. Oil on canvas, 35" x 53". Moscow, Russia: State Historical Museum, 1919.

<https://spartacus-educational.com/00brodsky1.jpg>

Brodsky's intention to make Lenin look like a strategic and organized leader wasn't a product of artistic liberties. In fact, it was a direct effect of the Cult of Lenin.¹ A national tactic developed by the Communist Party to subside political chaos by centering its legitimate rule to one figure. Lenin was the revolution's author and political source, so he became a symbol of reverence to the public and helped the party gain their trust.

As Brodsky established himself as an ally to the Soviet Union, Grigoriev's views on the revolution weren't entirely devoted to one leader. In 1922, two years before forming the AKhRR and towards the end of the Russian Revolution, Grigoriev painted *Tarusa* (Fig. 2), a nod to the Naturalist roots of Socialist Realism. Even though the U.S.S.R was in its early stages, naturalists were branded as formalists and soon declared enemies.²



Fig.2 Grigoriev, Alexander. *Tarusa*. Oil on cardboard, 32.5" x 37.5". Mari El Republic, Russia: Cultural and Historical Museum Complex. 1922.

<http://www.artmuseum.ru/UserFiles/Exponent/52830/52830.jpg>

¹ Tumarkin, Nina. "Political Ritual and the Cult of Lenin." *Human Rights Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1983): 203.

² Silina, Maria. "The Struggle Against Naturalism: Soviet Art from the 1920S to the 1950S." *RACAR: Revue D'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 41, no. 2 (2016): 91-104.

The color palette in Tarusa (Fig.2) balanced the light and shadows present in the town of Tarusa. The painting is naturalistic in style for its depiction of everyday life in the outdoors. However, the brushstrokes' movement resembled Impressionist techniques. An interesting duality in the painting is how the naturalist subject matter is grounded in reality. Yet, the technique and execution breathe into the piece a sense of ethereal calmness and peace. It could be an effect of the degradation of light as it hit the tree branches, grass and roofs.

Grigoriev wouldn't reside in Tarusa for another decade, but for now, his artistic style and views on Socialist Realism aligned with Leon Trotsky's literary critique, "Literature and Revolution." Trotsky argued the effectiveness of the censorship of art of the Soviet Union. He explained that denying artists the experience to incorporate the past of artistic movements by rejecting all art unless it served the Communist Party was a limiting and false scope to fuse art and life.³ Trotsky also acknowledged the Marxist philosophy that art was limited to the bourgeoisie culture and that after a revolution, the proletariat should strive to create its own culture and art. His philosophy applauded the experimental Proletkult institution during the Revolution as it encouraged avant-garde artists to Westernized expressions of art instead of adhering to the new regime.

However, when the AkhRR was formed in 1928, it only mirrored Trotsky's admiration for the avant-garde. Yet it still rooted its subject matter in revolutionary art compliant with the Soviet Union. The circular titled, "The Immediate Tasks of AKhRR" urged its members and

³ Trotsky, Leon. "Literature and Revolution" (1924). In *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 442-447. New Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

supporters to believe that the artistic subjects of the Revolution weren't driverless sentimentality but a real service because it could shape the psychology of future generations.⁴ Even though the circular encouraged the development of artistic skills in workers and peasants, unlike Trotsky, the AkhRR wanted the proletarian culture to focus on unifying itself as an ally to the Soviet Union. While Grigoriev and Brodsky were both members of the AkhRR, the new regime favored Brodsky for his unquestionable support to the Community Party. In 1930, Brodsky was commissioned to paint V.I. Lenin in the Smolny (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Brodsky, Isaak. V.I. Lenin in the Smolny. Oil on canvas, 77" x 126". Moscow, Russia: State Historical Museum, 1930.

<https://www.wsws.org/en/media/photos/legacy/2006/2271.jpg>

⁴ AKhRR. "The Immediate Tasks of AKhRR" (1924). In *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 404-406. New Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

Lenin in the Smolny had a composition different from other portrayals of leaders. Lenin wanted to remove himself from the opulence of the previous Tsarist regime, and instead, Brodsky opted for a humble portrayal of Lenin working on policies. The furniture pieces were placed to remind the public that he was an ally of the proletariat and always worked hard to ensure peace. The documents placed on the small table were a nod to Lenin's exemplary policies and ability to be a strategic leader. Lenin didn't want to face the viewer in the portrait and convinced Brodsky to paint him in a quiet and solemn pose as if even creating propaganda, he was still busy working.⁵ After Lenin's death, the painting was printed and distributed all over the Soviet Union to symbolize gratitude and respect for his time at office.

However, despite the efforts of the AkhRR to comply with the Soviet Union, the institution was disbanded in 1932 and renamed as the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia. This was a result of a decree passed by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party. Titled "Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations," the Stalinist rule called all artistic movements not inspired by the Socialist Agenda a danger to socialist construction because it was harboring deviations from the Party's support to proletarian culture.⁶ Months later, Communist Party and Stalin's chief cultural commissar, Andrei Zhdanov, gave a speech Congress of Soviet Writers where he praised the dissolution of competing art groups and issued the policy that Socialist Realism would be the only art movement appropriate for building Communism. Zhdanov said that the decadence of bourgeoisie art and literature was

⁵Keller, Andrei, and James White. " Vladimir Lenin in Smolnyi" by Isaak I. Brodskii: The History of a Twin." *Slavic Review* 76, no. 2 (2017): 350-71.

⁶ Central Committee of All-Union Communist Party. 'Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations,' (1932). In *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 417-418. New Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

responsible for the collapse of capitalist systems. Instead, he believed that Soviet artists had to build art reflecting their daily lives and cater to the united cause of socialist construction.⁷

During this time of political unrest, Grigoriev now the Chairman of the All-Russian Union of Cooperative Associations of Fine Arts Works. His relationship with former artist Brodsky became even more strained. But aside from their political differences, even if they followed the Socialist Realist style, *Tarusa* (Fig.2) and *Lenin at the Smolny* (Fig.3) show different interpretations of said style. *Tarusa* has undeniable Impressionist influences, while *Lenin at the Smolny* adheres to Realism packaged as propaganda. The subject matters give the viewer an abstract idea of the political influence Socialist Realism had during different points in time. *Tarusa* was painted almost a decade before *Lenin at the Smolny* and it's evident because it retains aspects of respect and idealization of nature instead of a political ruler. *Lenin at the Smolny* flips the subject matter and focuses on how exploitable Socialist Realism is and how it can help manipulate the masses as shameless propaganda. Both paintings may be Socialist Realism, but their artists and subject matter are far from similar.

Grigoriev's life during and after The Great Terror is an indisputable focal point to further drive the differences in style and historical context of these two paintings. Grigoriev and political figure Trotsky were victims of the Stalinist unstable campaign of political repression.

⁷Zhdanov, Andrei. 'Speech to the Congress of Soviet Writers' (1932). In *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 426-429. New Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

While Grigoriev served nine years at the Karaganda Labor Camp, the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia fell under a dangerous period of political unrest.⁸ Stalin's paranoia led to Grigoriev's incarceration and label of "enemy of the people," Trotsky's assassination in Mexico, and Zhdanov's mysterious disappearance to neutralize all possible threats against the Communist Party.⁹

Up until the disbanding of the USSR in 1991, the censorship of artistic expression became a hostile and life-threatening doctrine that forced many Soviet artists and intellectuals into a period of oppression. Trotsky and Grigoriev were only two cases of the potential fifteen million lives lost during the Communist regime. However, Brodsky's compliance and artistic contribution to the Communist Party helped him remain unscathed and live like a hero. For the people who lived under the Soviet Union's era, The Communist Party represented a period of political chaos, socio-economic uncertainty, and artistic limitations. But for a few pawns in the podiums and well-connected figures, it was a period of strategic alliances to ensure survival.

⁸ Kuromiya, Hiroaki. "Accounting for the Great Terror." *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, 53, no. 1 (2005): 86-101.

⁹ C. N. Boterbloem. "The Death of Andrei Zhdanov." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 80, no. 2 (2002): 267-87.

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