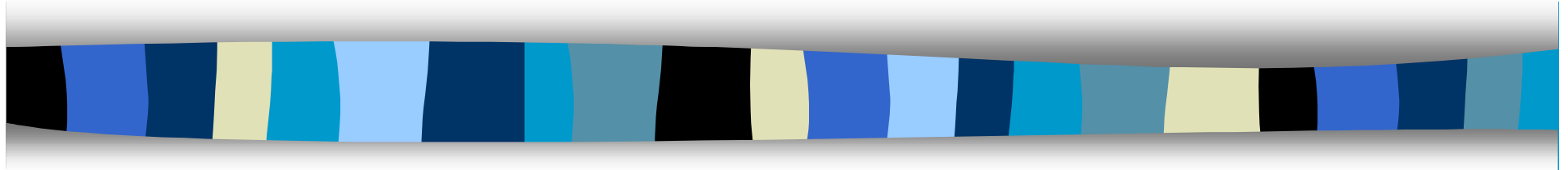


1. Art & Politics

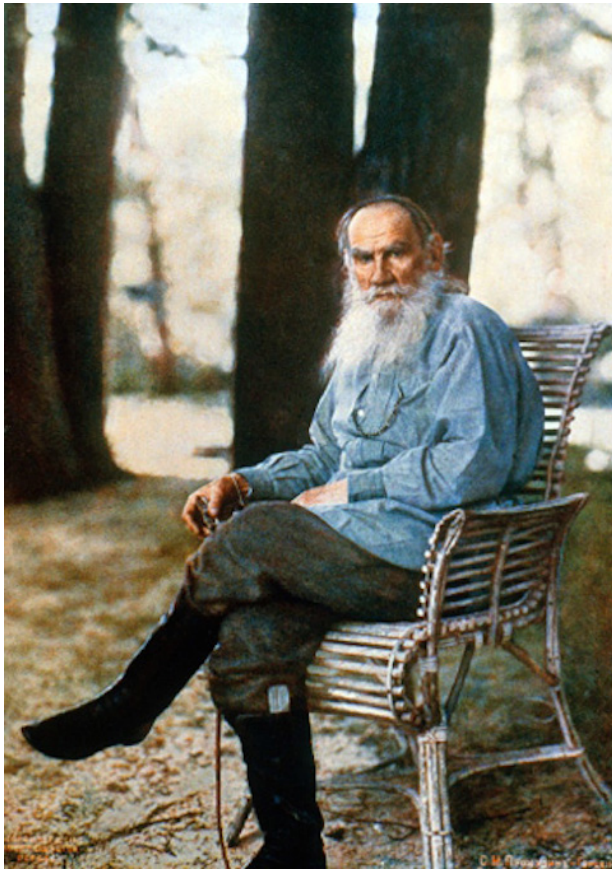


Kenneth G. Hay

Professor Emeritus of Contemporary Art Practice

The University of Leeds, UK

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)



- **What is Art?** (1898) -Art is “an activity by means of which one man, having experienced a feeling, intentionally transmits it to others”
- **Good Art vs Bad art:** the feelings to be transmitted must be accessible not only to the sophisticated but also the humblest of men

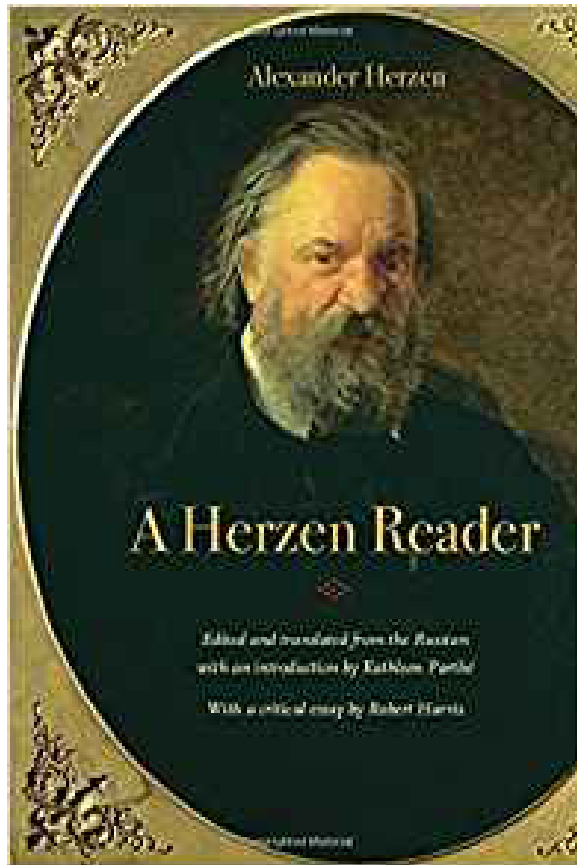
19th-century Tradition of
Russian ‘Revolutionary-
Democratic literary criticism’

Nikolai Dobrolyubov (1836-61)



- Articles in Nikolai Nekrasov's Journal, "The Contemporary" 1857-81
- "What is Oblovism?"
- An art work should serve "as an expression of the natural aspirations of a given people or epoch."

Alexander Herzen (1812-70)



- ‘Father of populist Socialism’ - leading figure in the abolition of serfdom.
- 1847 collaborated with Proudhon in Paris
- (1857-65) “The Polar Star” political articles
- Inspiration to anarchist Prince Kropotkin

Vissarion Gregorievich Belinsky (1811-48)



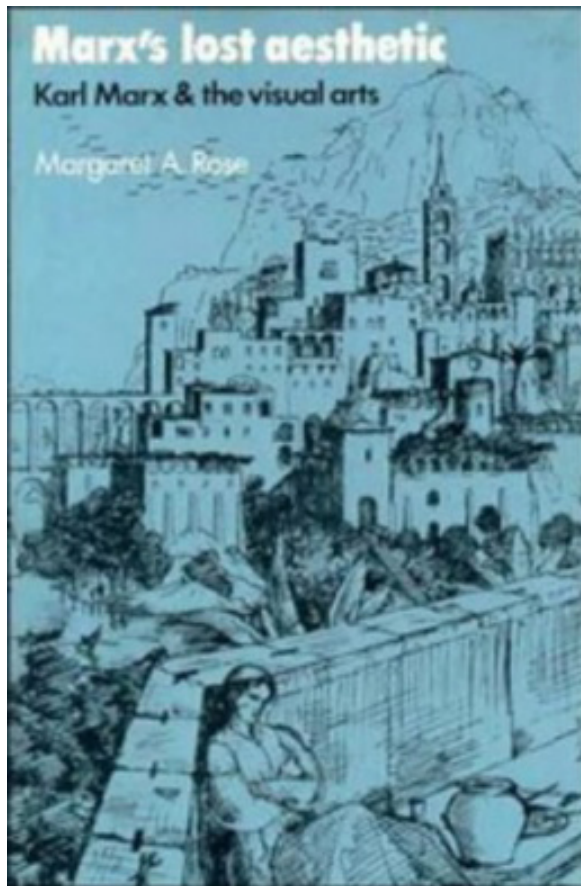
- “An author thinks in images”
- ‘The father of Socialist Realism’

Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-89)



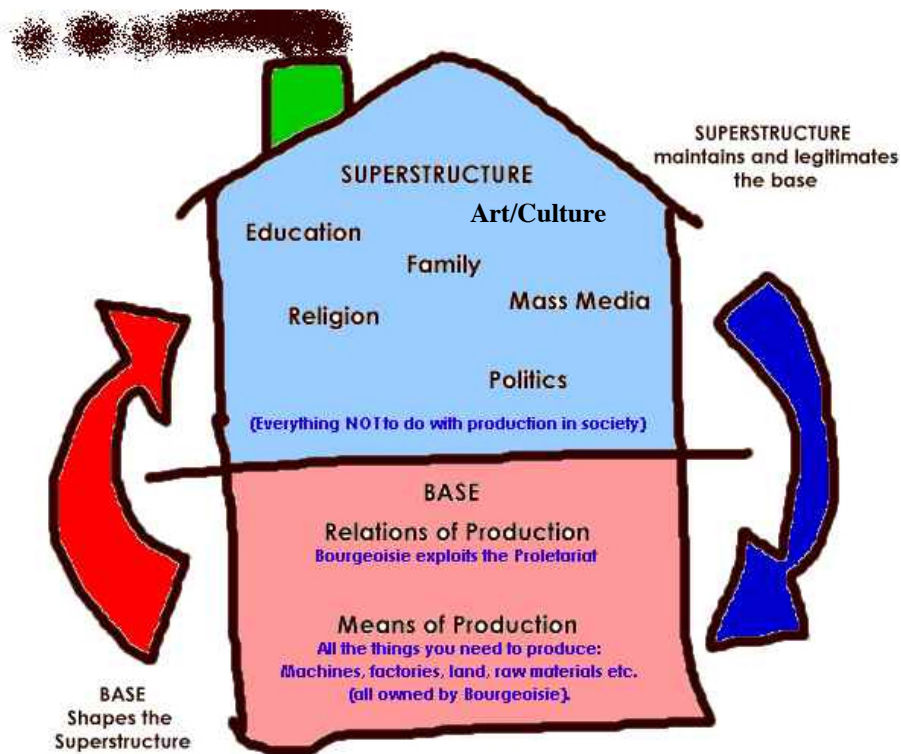
- Critical essay on a Turgenev love story, ‘deciphers’ the latent social/political positions of its characters, ‘*despite*’ the liberal intentions of its author.
- Art as “textbook of life” and conveyor of social content.

Karl Marx (1818-83)



- Art is an activity of the 'superstructure' which retains 'relative autonomy' from the economic base, whilst nevertheless 'in the last instance' is determined by it.
- Never consistently spoke of aesthetics, but there does exist an aesthetic throughout his writings.

Base & Superstructure



- Changes in the base initiate changes in the superstructure
- The relationship of base to superstructure is mediated, complex and ever-changing and should not be oversimplified.
- (Marx: “Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy”, (1859))

- **Key points of Marx's Aesthetic**
- 'Fetishism' - worship of material things, endowing them with the qualities of Man himself
- "The first freedom of the press consists in it not being a business" (1842)
- "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" - Man's consciousness, culture and society are products of Man's activity not some external force
- "The Holy Family"(1845) - (with Engels) - all texts reveal 'ideology' (political ideas) even despite the intentions of the author.
- "The German Ideology"(1846) : Major statement. "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life". "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch, the ruling ideas" The division of labour in society derives from the split between manual and intellectual work.
- "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852) - ideas, deriving from social position and class, drive ideology. There is a homology between base and superstructure, ideology and social class, rather than a simple 'reflection'.

Friedrich Engels (1820-95)



- Critical of Lassalle's 'Tendency writing' which failed to grasp the deeper historical reality and attributed events to individual psyches instead.
- 'Tried to 'codify' Marx's aesthetic after his death in 1883
- Problem of 'Transcendence' of art across time - How is Greek art still considered canonic even after its epoch/base has passed? (Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy(1857)-Marx)

- The Problem of ‘Transcendence’
- 1) - Greek society possessed certain features inherently superior to later European class societies so its art retained certain human values missing from feudalism or capitalism where the commodity form predominates (Mikhail Lifshitz)
- 2) Great art of any period inherently retains the ability to outlive its origins:
 - 2.1 - because of its realism in depicting the moment of its historical origin (Marx, Engels, Lassalle) or
 - 2.2 - because it possesses a harmonious perfection of form (Lifshitz) inherently superior to class societies.
- **Problem:** This grants the Arts a special place in the Superstructure not afforded to Law, Philosophy or Religion, which are determined by the economic base.

Solution: Marx acknowledged that the production of art is bound up with certain forms of social development, but overlooked the conditions of its **reception and consumption**.

Our continued appreciation of Greek art, even though we do not share their economic base, religion, laws etc, is because it fits with something in our Modern aesthetic/social/political ideologies.

Hans Hess (1973) : “The work of art is a piece of establishment furniture, which makes clear where power resides...”

- **Key points of Engels' Aesthetic**
- Struggled against 'determinist' interpretations of Marx's ideas (all superstructural elements are mere epiphenomena of the economic base).
- Engels insists the superstructure has a 'relative autonomy' whilst nevertheless, 'in the last instance', being 'determined ' by the base.
- Engels' letter to Ernst (1890) points out that although Ibsen as a writer cannot 'go beyond 'the horizons of his class, his work could still be progressive since his class in Norway at this time was playing a progressive role in society (vis à vis feminism at the time) compared to the rôle played by a similar class in, say, Germany.
- Letterst to Minna Kautsky (1885) and Margaret Harkness (1888):
- Nature of realism in fiction - praises Balzac for recognising the historical destiny of his bitterest adversaries, who will become the 'men of the future' despite his own class preferences.
- "Realism to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances."

Diffusion of Marxism: end of the 19th-century

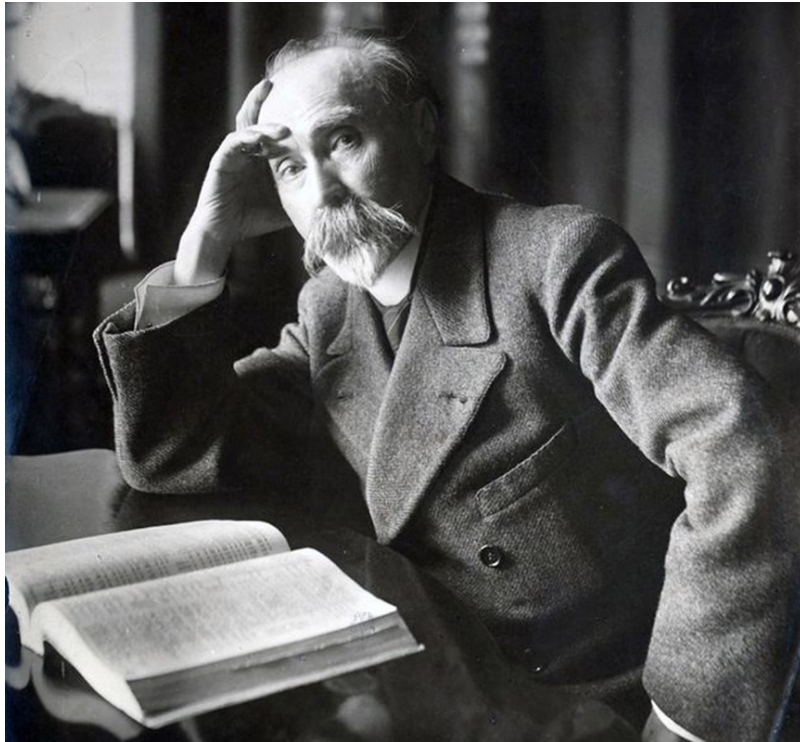
- Marxist Parties developed in various countries at the end of the 19th-century, whose leading intellectuals had broadly the same role as Engels in the last decade of his life.
- They sought to establish Marxism within their own native culture as a unified system of thought, able to deal with phenomena at all levels of the social structure.
- Two outstanding figures:
 - **Antonio Labriola** In Italy and
 - **Georgi Plekhanov** in Russia

Antonio Labriola (1843-1904)



- “Essays on the Materialist Conception of History” (1895-6)
- Defends the complexity of mediation between base and superstructure
- Man’s **biological nature** and link to Nature represents an important material determinant of social life. Biological factors, whilst not ‘eternal’ or ‘unchanging’ nevertheless are ‘long-lasting enough’ to explain art’s apparent ‘distance’ from its material base, and also why art can ‘outlast’ the epoch in which it was born.
- Tried to ‘codify’ Marx’s aesthetic¹⁵

Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856-1918)



- Father of Russian Marxism - Founder of Russian Social Democratic Party.
- Key Marxist intellectual before Lenin; tried to ‘codify’ Marx’s aesthetic, like Labriola.
- “Utilitarian view” of art.
- **“Art & Social Life”** (1912-13): The idea of beauty prevailing at any one time is the product of both ‘biological’ and historical conditions.
- Art always has ‘ideas’ which are expressed in ways specific to the medium (images/logical conclusions)
- Critic needs to address both form and content - ie needs both historical knowledge and social insight. ¹⁶

Vladimir Illich Lenin(1870-1924)



- Developed a political practice, ‘Leninism’, based on historical materialism, but different from it.
- Pragmatist - social change comes first, not always time for art.
- “Leo Tolstoy as a Mirror of the Russian Revolution” (1908) - “The contradictions in Tolstoy’s views are indeed a mirror of those contradictory conditions in which the peasantry had to play their part in our revolution.”
- ‘reflection theory’

Vladimir Illich Lenin(1870-1924)



- 1920 - The Party has been ‘preoccupied with military affairs at the Front and has not had time to devote to these important matters’.
- 1905 ‘**Partynost**’ (Partisanship) - taking sides against the old order, defines the principle of ‘Party literature’ - artwork needs to be an active ‘cog and screw’ in the revolutionary process, albeit allowing some degree of individual choice of form/content.
- Makes no clear distinction between political writing, philosophy and literature.

Vladimir Illich Lenin(1870-1924)



- After the war the main task of the Party was to promote mass literacy.
- Art and literature were of little account -

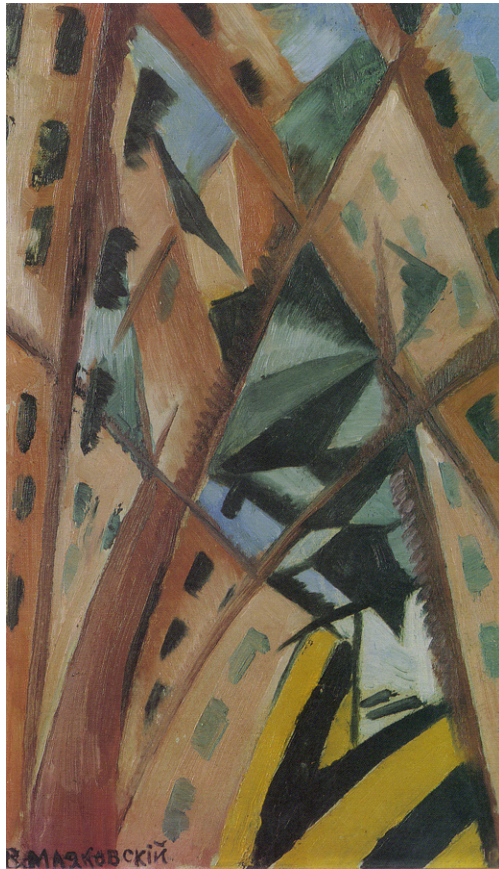
Early Soviet aesthetics from the 1920s - Trotsky

A.A. Bogdanov: The Proletcult



- “Man has not yet arrived, but is nearby, and his silhouette clearly shows upon the horizon” - echoes Nietzsche
- Bitter debate with Lenin about the function and rôle of art in post revolutionary society.
- ‘Art mobilises and organises social forces, knowledge and emotions and is thus one of the most powerful tools for social change. The Proletariat needs its own culture based on a spirit of **‘Labour Collectivism’**, reflecting the world from the point of view of the proletariat, expressing its complex sentiment and militant creative will.’
- With **Lunarcharsky** organised network of creative writing studios

The LEF Group (1920s)



- Mayakovsky
- ‘The Social Command’ - application of Lenin’s notion of “party Literature” to art in post-revolutionary society: an art openly linked to the proletariat

The LEF and the ‘Social Command’



- LEF (Left Front for Art), comprised the left wing of the Formalists
- Included **Sergei Eisenstein** and **El Lissitzky**
- Constructivism had critiqued easel-painting, the El Lissitzky and LEF applied the radical innovations of **Constructivism** and applied them to post-revolutionary society in posters, typography, murals, stage-sets, magazines, urban design.
- Liquidated the former divide between pure and applied art; and ‘the uniqueness’ of former art.
- ‘The Social Command’ (Sotsialnyy zakaz) was that post-revolutionary artists align themselves with the needs and aspirations of the new proletariat class.
- Relationship of artists to public altered - no longer driven by ‘market forces’
- **Mayakovsky**: “How are verses Made?” (1920s)

Alexandr Voronsky: 'Red Virgin Soil'



- Marxist Journal in early 1920s
- Critical of Formalism for reducing art to 'craft' thus denying its cognitive character, its organic link with society and its reflection of social class.
- Saw art as akin to a science, distinct from mundane activities.

Russian Formalism



Osip Brik, by Rodchenko 1924

- **Osip Brik, Boris Eikenbaum, Mikhail Bakhtin, Mayakovsky**
- Originated in pre-revolutionary Russia.
- Focussed on artistic forms and techniques; critical of simple ‘sociologism’ (‘Immanent criticism’)
- Used linguistics to champion avant-garde art, notably the Constructivists.
- Formalism explained the work’s inner structure; Marxism pronounced on its ideological character.
- Critiqued art as inspiration and ‘pre-logical’, stressed technology and logical function.
- **‘Ostranie’** (Making strange).- Mayakovsky: writer’s ability to use artistic devices to present the familiar in an unfamiliar way- reappears with **Walter Benjamin** in the 1930s; **Roman Jakobson**, and **Wellek & Warren’s** “Theory of Literature” (1949), and **Structuralism** in the 1970s

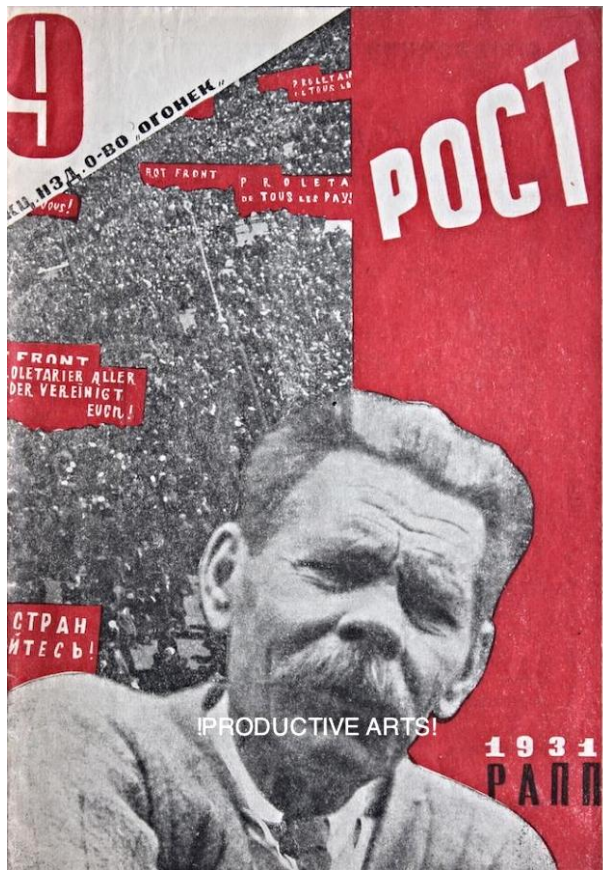
Leon Trotsky (1879-1940)



- “Literature and Revolution”(1923) Soviet art was evolutionary - it should select from the best of the past and build upon it.
- ‘Proletarian art’ was not possible for two reasons:
 - 1) the general cultural level of the class was too low to provide the day-to-day milieu to inspire/nourish the artist
 - 2) Theoretically, the notion of a ‘proletarian culture’ was incorrect - the goal of socialism was to work towards a classless society, whereupon it too would disappear as a class. Only then could a new classless art/culture develop
- Art not simply a ‘mirror’ of the world, but :
“a deflection, a transformation of reality in accordance with the peculiar laws of art.”

Soviet Aesthetics from Trotsky to Stalin

Soviet Aesthetics in the 1920s



- During the 1920s the Central Committee of the Communist Party refrained from giving support to any particular artistic faction
- 1925: “On the Party’s Policy in the Field of Literature” - “Although supervising literature as a whole, the Party can as little support any one literary faction as it can decide by decree the question of the form of the family” - Corresponded to the NEP (New Economic Policy) allowing limited ‘free market’ activity in the economy to alleviate immediate hardships.
- **VAP** (Association of Proletarian Writers) adhered strictly to the principle of communist hegemony in literature

The First Five Year Plan (1928-1932)



- 1928-32: **NEP** ended. Collectivisation of agriculture - led to return of revolutionary enthusiasm and class struggle.
- No single Party line was adhered to
- **LEF** attacked the privileged nature of 'the aesthetic' and embarked on a '**literature of fact**' - 'worker-correspondents movement.': a creative intervention in the realm of journalism.
- Theatre director **Tretyakov** went to factories to observe 'socialist construction' and report on 'wall newspapers'
- 1928: Central Committee's "Measures for the Improvement of Youth and Children's Literature" made no distinction between journalism and literature.
- **RAPP** (successor to VAP) called for 'shock workers of literature'
- **Voronsky** called for a broad socialist humanism in literature, but was already in decline and expelled from the Party as a follower of Trotsky.

The Second Five Year Plan (1932-1936)



- Based on idea that fierce class struggle was over and an era of consolidation had begun
- 1932: Consolidation of Writers and Artists into single Unions.
- Central Committee ordered the dissolution of rival factions and attacked RAPP's variety of partisan psychological realism. In practice, the approved style of Soviet literature after 1932 was very similar to RAPP's
- 1934 **Socialist Realism** was officially adopted as the goal of all Soviet Art at the First Congress of the Writers' Union
- Keynote speeches by **Gorky, Bukharin** and **Zhdanov**. Gorky represented a major literary link with the 19th-century realism, who saw 'art's function as ritual or magic, encourages the attitude that in practice, refashions the world'

Nikolai Bukharin (1888-1937)



- For long, the leading theoretician of the Soviet Party.
- ‘Art is necessarily inferior to Science since art expresses only surface phenomena, while science reflects the hidden ‘essence’ of reality’. ‘Nevertheless, in art, the essence appears in the phenomenon with which it merges’ - (very similar to **Gyorgy Lukàks** position in the 1930s.)
- Whilst Soviet artist should celebrate Unity, this did not mean that the same ideal type/ villains should always be presented uniformly.
- Like **Trotsky**, he acknowledged the technical expertise of the **Formalists** and called for a sociology of Language
- “Within the microcosm of the word is embedded the macrocosm of history”
- Art had long had as a social function whereby the ruling class reproduced themselves in idealised form.
- Socialist Realism must be different from the passive reflection of Zola, because Soviet Man is in a process of becoming, and Soviet culture, ‘Dares to dream’

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975)



- Bukharin went on to side with the Formalist **Mikhail Bakhtin** (aka ‘V.N.Volosinov’) in trying to define a Marxist theory of Language; aligned to new Soviet psychology of **Pavlov** and **Vygotsky**
- “The word = the ‘ideological phenomenon par excellence’
- Language itself was the product of history and class struggle;

Andrei.A.Zhdanov(1896-1948)



- Stalin's son-in-law.
- In charge of Soviet Writer's Union.
- 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers adopted it as legitimate Socialist art form. Became the 'administrator' of Socialist Realism.
- It is necessary "to eradicate all traces of capitalism in the economy and in people's minds"
- Truthfulness and historical exactitude must be linked with ideological transformation, the education of the people in the spirit of socialism.
- 1948 'Zhdanov Doctrine' - the world was divided into two camps: imperialistic (USA) and democratic (Soviet Union): "The only conflict that is possible in Soviet culture is the conflict between good and best".



Sergei Gerasimov (1885-1964) *A Kolkhoz Celebration*. 1937, 234 x 372 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin

(1878-1953)



- Soviet writer is “The engineer of the Human Soul”
- Socialist Realism was the Dominant trend in art/literature until the process of ‘De-Stalinisation’ began in 1956
- ‘Formalism’ was the main deviation with which artists (Shostakovitch, Eisenstein, Brecht, Kafka) could be accused - loosely, this meant deviating from the formats of 19th-century Realism and utilising ‘avant-garde’ or ‘Western’ techniques

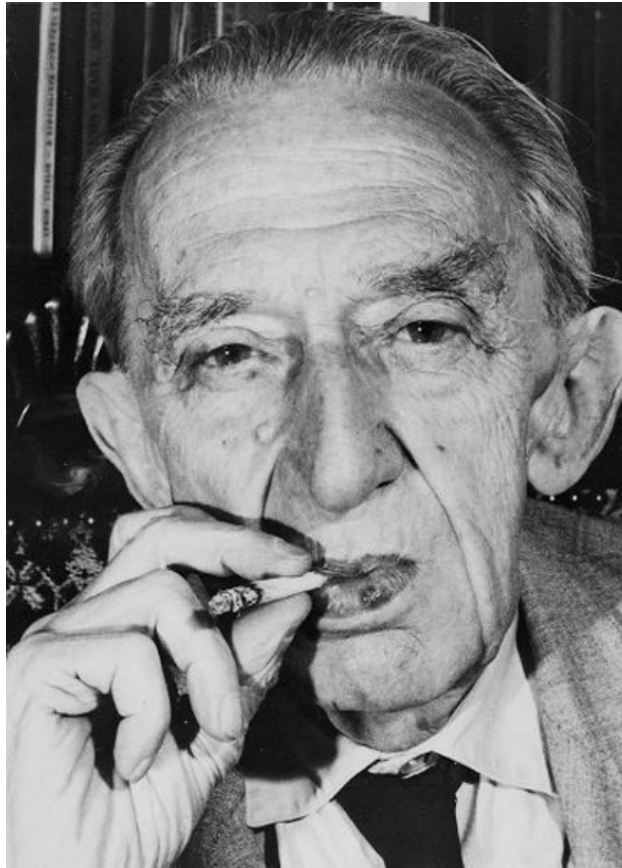
Marxist aesthetics from the 1930s to 1960s

Mikhail Lifshitz (1905-1983)



- Studied Art at the **Vkhutemas**, Moscow 1920s and taught there until 1930
- Worked with Lukács at Marx-Engels Institute, Moscow.
- 1930s Editor of ‘Literaturny Kritik’ (published Andrei Platonov)
- Attacked by Stalin in the 1940s as a ‘cosmopolitan Jew.’
- 1950s worked with philosopher Evaid Ilyenkov’
- Supported the notion of the ‘new man’ created by the new Socialist state - interrelationship of art, culture and social life.
- Major work on “The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx” (English transl 1938)
- Much of his work remains untranslated.

Gyorgy Lukács (1886-1971)



- Worked with **Lifshitz** on Marx & Engels writings on Art, before moving to Berlin in 1931
- Berlin, 1928: The League of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers set up to develop Marxist culture in Germany.
- Developed the theory of Realism and critiqued both ‘naturalism’ and ‘expressionism’ : Reflection Theory
- Anticipates the theory of Socialist Realism
- Active in the ‘German debates’ with **Theodor Adorno**, **Herbert Marcuse** and **Walter Benjamin** in the 1930s

Galvano Della Volpe (1895 -1960)



- Leading writer on Aesthetics within the PCI (Italian Communist Party) - teacher to Lucio Colletti
- Wrote on Art: ‘Critique of Taste’ (1960), Ethics: “Rousseau and Marx” (1956); Logic: Logic as a Positive Science”(1950)
- ‘Critique of Taste’ discusses Formalism and argues for the concrete rationality of art, and from Jakobson, the different generic specificities of different arts which are nevertheless open to various kinds of ‘translatability’.