The Persecution of the Soviet "Formalists"
What the Cancelling of Certain Artforms in Stalin's USSR Tells Us About Censorship Today

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On 14 August 1946, the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Moscow issued a decree on literature that denounced the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* and, above all, the writers Mikhail Zoshchenko and Anna Akhmatova. Both were personally despised by Stalin and had refused to adhere to the doctrine of socialist realism which had been laid down in the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress. The resolution compelled *Zvezda* to stop publishing Zoshchenko and Akhmatova and install a new editor and board of party apparatchiks; *Leningrad* was shut down altogether).

Zoshchenko's 1946 children's story 'Adventures of a Monkey'—in which the eponymous creature, freed from a zoo bombed by the Germans, outwits most of those who try to control him—was described as "a vulgar libel on the Soviet way of life and on Soviet people", who were supposedly portrayed as "primitive, lacking culture, stupid, with narrow minds and tastes and tempers". Akhmatova, for her part, was said to write "empty, frivolous poetry", "vapid and apolitical", embodying "the scent of pessimism and decay, redolent of old-fashioned salon poetry, frozen in the positions of bourgeois-aristocratic aestheticism and decadence— 'art for art's sake'". It was claimed that Leninism dictated that magazines "cannot be apolitical", and that any attempts to be so were "harmful to the interests of the Soviet people".

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The leading figure behind this decree was Andrei Zhdanov, active in cultural affairs since the 1930s and placed in charge of cultural policy by Stalin after the war. In a 1934 speech to the Congress of Soviet Writers, Zhdanov claimed that "a riot of mysticism, religious mania and pornography" characterized "the decline and decay of bourgeois culture", and he spoke of the "eradication of vestiges of capitalism in people's consciousness". He had already led a 1940 campaign targeting both Zoshchenko and Akhmatova.

In an article following the decree, Zhdanov noted Akhmatova's involvement with the Acmeists, a short-lived movement in the 1910s around poet Mikhail Kuzmin, with which Osip Mandelstam (also condemned by Zhdanov) was associated. The Acmeists broke with Symbolism and sought poetic clarity and firmness, and were in some ways akin to the Anglo-American Imagists. Alongside the familiar denunciation of "art for art's sake", Zhdanov associated Akhmatova with "amorous-erotic motifs, intertwined with motifs of sorrow, yearning, death, mysticism, a sense of doom", branding her "nun and harlot, with whom harlotry is mixed with prayer".

Further decrees of a similar nature followed on theater and cinema on 26 August and 4 September 1946 respectively. Theatre's only permitted role was "as an active propagandist of the policy of the Soviet state", while Sergei Eisenstein's film *Ivan Grozny* (*Ivan the Terrible*) (1945) was condemned for showing the protagonist as "a spineless weakling".

The most prominent denunciations came with a fourth decree, of 10 February 1948, relating to music. This was provoked by a performance attended by Stalin of the opera *Velikaya Druzhba* (*The Great Friendship*) by Georgian composer Vano Muradeli, who had received the Stalin Prize in 1946. Zhdanov quickly convened a meeting of those involved in the opera's production, before whom he attacked the supposed lack of melody and the work's inability to appeal to an audience (the opera's hero also resembled a Politburo member who had opposed the purges). Muradeli deflected attention by blaming the influence of the "Big Four" Soviet composers of the time—Prokofiev, Miaskovsky, Shostakovich and Khachaturian.

This led to further meetings with these and other composers, as well as with musicologists. Shostakovich, despite featuring texts and music glorifying the Revolution in his Second and Third Symphonies, had been attacked by the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) for the use of advanced modernist techniques in his Gogol-based opera *The Nose* (1927-28), and subjected to full official censure after Stalin attended a 1936 performance of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk* (1931-32), and responded negatively to the music for similar reasons. This led to an editorial in *Pravda*, likely written by Zhdanov, entitled 'Muddle Instead of Music', and to the banning of the opera.

The 1948 decree condemned works of all the composers above and others, leading to censorship of a range of works, and repeatedly invoking the term "formalism", linked to being "anti-people". This term had been used pejoratively since at least the mid-1920s, not only by the RAPM, but also the RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), notably in their journal *Na literaturnoy strazhe* (*On Literary Guard*), (1926–1929), whilst "formalism" was explicitly condemned in a statement from the 1934 Writers Congress which affirmed the necessity of socialist realism.

At the time of the major anti-formalist campaigns, the term "formalism" was rarely defined with any precision, generally used more loosely to refer to cultural production whose attributes could not be accounted for in purely ideological terms. Yet the concept, and the earlier critiques of it, had a wider provenance as a collective label for a group of critics who had emerged in Russia in the mid-1910s, just before the Revolution: the Moscow Linguistic Circle, whose leading figures included Roman Jakobson and Boris Tomashevsky, and the *OPOJAZ* circle in Petrograd, led by Viktor Shklovsky and Boris Eikhenbaum (some restrict the term "formalist" to the Petrograd group). Collectively, these and others came to be known as the Formalists, especially after criticisms from Trotsky in 'The Formal School of Poetry and Marxism' (1923). Eikhenbaum, in particular, chose to embrace the label in his 1926 essay 'The Theory of the "Formal Method"'.

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Influenced in part by the Acmeists and the Russian Futurists, the Russian Formalists—some of whom wrote on theatre and film as well as literature —were amongst the most radical of literary theorists. Shklovsky conceptualized literature (and, by extension, other arts) as something always at a remove from reality, through the process of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization); this was what made it art. This created a dialectic between the thing told (story or *fabula*) and the act of telling (plot or *syuzhet*). This approach led to an intense focus on literary, poetic, dramatic and cinematic techniques —the means by which the art work is made—and to a recognition that language is not solely about communication; properties such as sound, rhythm, rhyme or alliteration are important not only for this end, but also as ends in themselves. This view is clearly articulated in Eikhenbaum's theory mentioned above, with reference to Jakobson and also Leo Yakubinsky's 1916 essay 'On the Sounds of Poetic Language', which considers this dimension, and reflections thereupon, in the work of Gogol, Lermontov, Poe, Turgenev and Kuzmin, through the concept of sound preceding its association with more specific meanings, echoing Saussure on the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. Poetry, from this perspective, is defined by particular formal, stylistic and linguistic features rather than any necessary imagery.

The Formalists likewise studied devices for structuring narrative fiction. Tomashevsky, in particular, developed a theory of *motives* as the smallest elements of the story, arranged to form the plot. He proposed a taxonomy of "bound" (indispensable) and "free" motives, "dynamic" motives that change a situation and "static" ones that do not, and so on. Yuri Tynianov theorised the *dominant* (later explored in detail by Jakobson) as the set of elements that serve as the fundamental organizing principle for a literary work, whilst recognising that this can change in different moments within literary history.

In general the Formalists rejected philosophical and psychological approaches to art in favour of a quasi-scientific analysis of specific, observable features, without prescribing a single unified method. Alongside their numerous theoretical works, author- or work-centred studies—Shklovsky on Cervantes, Laurence Sterne and Dickens; Eikhenbaum on Gogol and Lermontov; Tynianov on Dostoyevsky and Gogol—remain radical, penetrating, and a joy to read, as does Vladimir Propp's monumental formalist study *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928).

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After the Revolution—towards which some Formalists were sympathetic—Marxists initially critiqued their work as "escapist"; after Trotsky, it became commonplace to associate their work with the disinterested aesthetics of Kant, who had also been hugely important to the Symbolists before them. The likes of Shklovsky and Jakobson (who left the Soviet Union for Prague in 1920) treated ideological dimensions of art

as irrelevant, a stance unacceptable to Trotsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky, who linked the movement to pre-revolutionary Russia. Even so, a limited rapprochement emerged: Shklovsky acknowledged the need for compromise, clearing space for a late-1920s current around writers including Mikhail Bakhtin and Valentin Voloshinov—more explicitly social in orientation (and more theoretically sophisticated than the very slightly earlier figure Pavel Sakulin, author of an influential 1925 sociological text on literature) yet indebted to the Formalists.

By 1929, the year of Stalin's "great break", suppression intensified. RAPP and RAPM attacks on formalism peaked, and figures across the arts, including Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Vsevelod Meyerhold, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Kazimir Malevich, were targeted. Malevich narrowly escaped execution; Meyerhold was executed a decade later (and his wife viciously murdered); Mayakovsky died by suicide in 1930. Shklovsky, who had earlier repeatedly gone into hiding and lost two brothers to execution, turned largely to screenwriting; Eikhenbaum shifted to biography and history; others redirected their work. With centralized artistic unions established in 1932 and socialist realism adopted in 1934, Formalism ended in the Soviet Union. The movement lasted only around fifteen years, yet left a remarkable, heterogeneous body of work that remains highly immediate and relevant today.

Today, however, in schools, universities, publishers, arts organisations, media, strong tendencies first and foremost to remove, denounce, censor art show the dominant influence (conscious or otherwise) is not Shklovsky, Propp, Meyerhold or even Bakhtin, but Zhdanov.

In the second part of this article I will trace parallel 'formalisms' contemporary with those of the Russians, and then consider the various ebbs and flows of different types of formalism leading into the present.

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