

2016

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Recommended Citation

Marco, Jenna (2016) "Soviet Kitsch during Stalin's Purges," *Oglethorpe Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/ojur/vol6/iss2/5>

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Soviet Kitsch during Stalin's Purges

In his work *Rites of Spring*, Modris Eksteins discusses the concept of kitsch in relation to the rise of fascism, particularly Nazism, in Europe. He characterizes kitsch as “the beautiful lie...a form of make-believe, a form of deception” on which a totalitarian regime is built (Eksteins 304). Through the deliberate construction of political and cultural kitsch, “the beautiful lie,” a totalitarian ruler gains control over government and society. The masses, too, come to accept the beautiful lie and join the ruler in acting it out; they become complicit in building kitsch. Kitsch is a falsehood because it is artificial in nature; it is deliberately constructed to support a regime. Notably absent from Eksteins' examination of kitsch, however, is the reign of Stalin in the Soviet Union, particularly the culture surrounding Stalin's purges of the Communist Party in the 1930s. Set in the motion by the Kirov assassination, the staged show trials of Rykov, Bukharin, and others became a way of eliminating Stalin's rivals, establishing the cult of personality around him, and creating a current of paranoia and distrust among ordinary Party members. Kitsch was also present in Soviet cinema and art during this period, as soviet realism was popularized and Stalin became the chief cultural critic. The artificially fabricated nature of the Great Purges of the 1930s and Soviet culture during the period constitutes the presence of kitsch in Stalinist Russia and signifies the construction of a totalitarian regime under Stalin; the cultivation of political and cultural kitsch ultimately had a damaging effect on society and culture.

The justification for the Moscow show trials and subsequent Party purges was provided by the assassination of Sergey Mironovich Kirov in December of 1934. Kirov, the Secretary of the Central Committee, had become a popular figure in the Party to the point where he was becoming a potential rival for Stalin. At the Congress of Victors in 1934, Kirov received more applause and support than Stalin. It is widely believed that as a result of Kirov's growing popularity, Stalin arranged Kirov's assassination, which was blamed on anti-Soviet saboteurs. The official narrative that saboteurs had infiltrated the Party and assassinated Kirov is part of political kitsch. Lenoe asserts that “Soviet political culture determined that the murder could only be interpreted as a result of conspiracy” because all crimes “had political meanings” (Lenoe 352). The Soviet government created the idea that criminals were also enemies of the state, resulting in a culture of paranoia that made it seem as though the Party was in constant danger from conspirators. The assassination of Kirov served to bolster this idea. It became a major pivotal moment for Stalin's urging on of the purges; the murder of a high-level Party official became “proof” of anti-Party conspiracies. Eugenia Ginzburg begins her memoir of the purges with Kirov's assassination, stating that “the year 1937 began, to all intents and purposes, at the end of 1934—to be exact, on the first of December” (Ginzburg 3). She identifies the assassination as the starting point for the coming purges. The murder of Kirov served two purposes: it removed one of Stalin's immediate rivals and created “an atmosphere of violence in which the enemies on to whom he shifted the blame for the murder could be wiped out” with relative ease (Conquest 38). The idea of the presence of

terrorism within the Party cultivated an atmosphere of distrust and fear which justified Stalin's desire to expand his purges. The Kirov murder laid the groundwork for Stalin's construction of Soviet kitsch, which would establish him as the sole authority of the Party.

Stalin used the Kirov murder to justify the show trials of old Bolshevik leaders, all of whom were accused of plotting against the Soviet state and conspiring to murder Kirov and other popular Soviet figures. Kirov's assassination became a "political weapon" for Stalin, allowing him to accuse "former political rivals of the crime" (Lenoe 354). Though believable to much of their audience, the show trials were in fact a farce, designed to eliminate Stalin's rivals. They became a part of his political kitsch by creating the lie that much of the Party was untrustworthy, even some of its oldest officials, which helped establish Stalin as the only viable leader of the regime. In her memoirs, Ginzburg's friend and fellow prisoner Garey claims that the reason for the purges is the "physical extermination of all the best people in the Party, who stand or might stand in the way of his [Stalin's] definitely establishing his dictatorship" (Ginzburg 72). Stalin knew that the trials were a farce, and those convicted likely knew as well; the trials were organized and carried out under Stalin's direct influence. Vyshinsky, the lead prosecutor in the show trials, was appointed to his position by Stalin, as were other key figures who would become "complete devotees of the Purge" (Conquest 74). In addition, Stalin had "developed direct control of the Secret Police," and therefore control of how the investigations into anti-Soviet conspiracies were carried out (Conquest 79). The purges were a victory for Stalin in terms of eliminating both any opposition and any potential rivals within his own circle. According to Riasanovsky, "almost the entire pre-revolutionary Bolshevik leadership was exterminated" during the purges, and "80 percent of the Central Committee of 1934 were executed or driven to suicide" (Riasanovsky 524). Stalin succeeded in firmly establishing his rule within the Party.

The show trials themselves are also part of the narrative of Soviet kitsch. In 1938, in Moscow, the trials of Bukharin, Rykov, Kretinsky, and other prominent Bolshevik leaders took place; the aforementioned three, along with others in the trial, would be sentenced to death. During the trials, Rykov and Bukharin both thoroughly condemned themselves as Trotsky-ites, confessing their involvement in orchestrating older terrorist plots carried out against the Soviet state (such as the Ryutin platform); however, they continually denied any involvement in the Kirov assassination or other murders which had prompted the trial (People's Commissariat of Justice 374, 737, 738, 771). Both men's confessions and last pleas demonstrate their complicity (unwilling or no) in the construction of Soviet kitsch. In his last plea to the court, Rykov asked that "those who have not yet been exposed and who have not yet laid down their arms to do so immediately and openly," claiming that "their only salvation, their only escape, lies in helping the party" (PCJ 741). Rykov's professed faith in the Party, despite the false nature of the accusations brought against him, is component of kitsch; it shows his willingness to serve "the beautiful lie" by upholding the Party as a source of "salvation" despite the corrupt nature of Stalin as a leader.

Bukharin goes even further in contributing to Stalin's constructed narrative by praising the “tremendous success” and “wise leadership” of Stalin in his last plea (PCJ 778, 779). Their confessions and support of not just the Party, but Stalin as the representative of the Party, can be read as sacrifices to Soviet kitsch.

The same, perhaps, can be said of many confessions obtained during the purges. The problem of 'why confess' pervades both the the events of the show trials and the trials of ordinary Party members. Certainly the hostage-taking of prisoners' families, the promise of lighter sentences, and the use of torture were all obvious factors in obtaining confessions. However, the presence of kitsch should be given credit here as well. Certain Party members had come to believe so strongly in “the beautiful lie” that they could not see any other mode of action than to serve the Party by confessing to crimes they did not commit. Ginzburg unpacks this idea in her memoir in her accounts of encounters with certain prisoners. Some defend their imprisonment (despite their innocence) and encourage confession because of the necessity of sacrifice to the Party and Stalin. During her first incarceration, Ginzburg's friend Garey encourages her to confess because “it's the only way to save the Party” (Ginzburg 75). Another prisoner in Butyrki defends the imprisonment of innocent Communists, stating, “You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs”; this idea is repeated on other occasions (Ginzburg 144). One prisoner is described as “an orthodox Stalinist” in her zealous support of the Party (Ginzburg 158). Though some, like Ginzburg, are able to see that they are victims of a farce and that to confess is essentially useless, many prisoners maintain a sacrificial attitude towards the Party and Stalin that prompts them to confess. Like the ordinary party members, older Bolshevik leaders' confessions were not “a single and exceptional act in their careers, but the culmination of a whole series of submissions to the Party made in terms they knew to be 'objectively' false” (Conquest 110). Soviet political kitsch made it so “they could see no political possibilities outside the Party” (Conquest 111). A statement made by Bukharin during the purges demonstrates the influence of Soviet kitsch in the decision to confess:

We can only be right with and by the Party,
for history has provided no other way of being
in the right...And if the Party adopts a decision
which one or other of us thinks is unjust, he
will say, just on unjust, it is my party, and I
shall support the consequences of the decision
to the end.

(qtd. Conquest 112)

This stance of unwavering faith in the Party and the willingness to sacrifice oneself to the Party show how deeply many Party members believed in the beautiful lie of Soviet kitsch, the fantasy narrative built under Stalin that the Party was central to both the state and daily life.

The arbitrary nature in which the purges were carried out is further evidence that they were a tool of political kitsch. The entire basis of the purges—the mission “to document the existence of a huge conspiracy to undermine Soviet power”—was a false construct of Stalin's, designed to establish him as the sole leader of the Party and re-affirm members'

devotion to the Party machine (Riasanovsky 525). The fabricated nature of the purges is also evidenced by the use of quotas for arrests and executions: “It was decided a priori that a certain percentage of the population were enemies of the people” (Riasanovsky 525). There was rarely any true basis for arresting Party members; the volume of arrests merely took place solely to provide proof of an invented conspiracy. That Soviet kitsch had a damaging effect in the context of the purges is undeniable. During the purges, “around 700,000 persons were executed” following their trials, with “millions more sentenced to exile, forced labor, and probable death by mistreatment and malnutrition” through the Gulag system (Lenoe 355). Eksteins refers to kitsch as “the mask of Death”; this certainly seems to hold true in the context of Stalin's purges (Eksteins 304). Soviet leadership was decimated, leaving Stalin in control of the Party, and therefore the government, and able to establish his totalitarian rule.

Kitsch was also a defining aspect of Soviet everyday culture in the period preceding and during the purges. The Soviet version of “the beautiful lie” was perpetrated on the individual level in multiple ways. In one sense, the Soviet state's condemnation of anything related to the bourgeoisie often necessitated a reinvention of oneself and one's past in order to properly orient oneself within the Party. Fitzpatrick notes that “the collective project of 'social construction'” carried out through the use of kitsch “necessarily incorporated millions of individual projects of *self*-construction” (Fitzpatrick 473-74). It was not uncommon for Party members to cover up any “ambiguities or contradictions” in their past that would challenge their identification of themselves as members of proletariat (Fitzpatrick 475). However, during the purges, these contradictions were often uncovered and used as evidence to condemn prisoners, resulting in an atmosphere of distrust and paranoia that pervaded daily life. Under Stalin's growing totalitarian rule, the atomization of society isolated citizens from one another. It represented Stalin's goal to make the Party central to its members' lives by breaking down all other social connections, thus building up a devotion to the Party and Soviet kitsch. In this atomized society, the distrust and paranoia encouraged by the purges easily spread. The discovery that someone had altered parts of their history often had a dramatic effect. The “unmaskers” would often forget that “all sorts of comparatively harmless circumstances could lead people into impersonation/imposture”; instead, they and other Party members “came to see the impostor as something essentially different from an ordinary wrongdoer...extremely sinister and threatening”

(Fitzpatrick 478). The “us versus them” mentality encouraged by atomization began to define Soviet society during the purges. According to the narrative provided by Soviet kitsch, “the terror was portrayed as a battle between the 'people' and the 'enemies of the people’” (Davies 73). The fabricated nature of the purges and the fact that they were often carried out using quotas meant that the division between “citizens” and “enemies” was often arbitrary and based on falsehoods. During the purges, “millions of innocents were transformed into traitors, terrorists, and enemies of the people” (Riasanovsky 525). This distrust then fueled a belief in the necessity of the purges, serving the aims of kitsch. Davies speculates that “the regime may have to a certain extent deliberately manipulated and promoted the us/them thinking” during the height of the purges (Davies 72-3). In an effort to reconstruct Soviet society under his version of “the beautiful lie,” Stalin broke apart every day society and the social bonds between citizens, resulting in paranoia and a willingness to accuse and condemn others as traitors to the state.

In her memoir of her time in prisons and the Gulag, Ginzburg examines this sense of paranoia and the readiness of some suspects or citizens to accuse others, even when they knew the accusations had no basis. After she is arrested, Ginzburg recounts being confronted by two witnesses/accusers, both former staff members with her on the newspaper *Red Tartary*. One of them, Volodya, is clearly anxious and afraid; Ginzburg recalls that he looks “like a rabbit in front of a boa constrictor” (Ginzburg 92). After signing a document accusing Ginzburg of being part of “a subversive counter-revolutionary group” on the newspaper staff, Volodya explains that he and his wife have just had a daughter, and that he has to stay alive and out of prison for her (Ginzburg 92). He is not motivated by malice or self-interest, but a desire to protect his family. The next accuser, Ginzburg's friend and colleague Kozlova, behaves with more confidence; she is “so articulate and fluent” that the officer can barely “keep pace with her” (Ginzburg 94). She claims that Ginzburg is a Trotskyist and associated with other known political criminals (Ginzburg 94). Unlike Volodya, she does not state her motive for coming forward to accuse Ginzburg. However, the fact that she becomes “frightened” when Ginzburg threatens to “sign

any balderdash they cook up, and...name you as an active member of the group” suggests that Kozlova is attempting to protect herself from scrutiny by accusing others (Ginzburg 95). Like Ginzburg, she is at risk of becoming one of the millions of scapegoats from the purges. This encounter suggests that some accusations made against citizens by their fellow Party members were merely reactionary efforts to cast suspicion away from themselves. Conquest describes “mutual denunciation sessions” in which suspects would trade accusations to fight “for their Party membership, and indeed for their lives” (Conquest 45). It seems likely that accusers often knew that they were lying. Thus they contributed to the construction of Soviet kitsch by fueling the lie which created a culture of conspiracies and paranoia.

Amidst the atomization of society which Stalin's regime furthered, Stalin began the construction of a “cult of personality” around himself, which was also an important foundation for Soviet kitsch. He worked to make Communism not just a political or social party, but a sacred ideology that would be present in every aspect of Soviet life, with himself as its representative. At the start of his reign, he “simplified and even sacralized ideology for the masses of ordinary Communists” (Riasanovsky 510). This made Communism accessible to a larger portion of the population, and also served to present Communism and the Party as a substitute for the Russian Orthodox Church. It provided “an alternative to a daily reality that would otherwise be a spiritual vacuum,” which is an aspect of kitsch (Eksteins 304). By founding his version of Communism on ideology and optimism, Stalin began working to build his own version of Soviet kitsch through his vision of an idealized Soviet state. This vision, however, also brought about his purges and terror. Riasanovsky highlights this “contradictoriness” of a variety of factors: “belief in a presumably infallible ideology, a great deal of coercion, force, and terror...subtle forms of cultural and psychological control, and support and enthusiasm for Stalin and the Soviet system” (Riasanovsky 513). These seemingly contradictory components of Stalin's reign and the cult of personality become clear when attributed to Soviet kitsch. Kitsch does not eliminate the control and terror that accompany the establishment of a totalitarian regime, but instead makes use of “the beautiful lie” to mask such brutal tactics with an idealized version of society that the masses

choose to believe in. The presence of kitsch provides an explanation for Party members' belief in and even quasi-worship of Stalin during the purges. For them, the Party was central to their lives, and Stalin was the representative of the Party and the embodiment of its will. He became the architect of Soviet kitsch. Even his image became a part of “the beautiful lie”:

He [Stalin] was built up with the most astonishing adulation...his picture looked down from every hoarding; his bust was carried by Soviet alpinists to the top of every Soviet peak...The histories were, of course, rewritten to make his role in the Revolution a more decisive one.
(Conquest 59-60)

Stalin became not just a political leader but also a cultural icon. The cult of personality introduced his ideology and image into the daily life of every Party member.

Stalin's role in Soviet culture and the construction of Soviet kitsch extended into the arts as well. He became chief art critic in the Soviet Union, and Soviet art was forced to conform to his vision of kitsch. Kitsch, after all, is very much an aesthetic concept rather than merely a political one. Eksteins asserts that “kitsch replaces ethics with aesthetics” through the creation of a political and cultural artifice (Eksteins 304). Bullock also defines kitsch as “a specifically aesthetic form of lying” (Bullock 205). Soviet music, cinema, and art were forced to conform to the regime's “beautiful lie” or was repressed. Soviet art became “complicit in totalitarian deception” (Bullock 211). During the Stalin era, “socialist realism” became the defining concept in Soviet art. The concept can be traced to an article published in 1932, which states: “The masses demand of an artist honesty, truthfulness, and a revolutionary, socialist realism in the representation of the proletariat revolution” (qtd. Bown 89). Socialist realism became the method of defining the Soviet experience and was invariably linked to Party politics; it was a part of Soviet kitsch. All art was supposed to represent socialist realism, which limited the freedom of expression in art. Bullock condemns kitsch as “bad art,” but goes further in stating that “kitsch offers an account of the world that is not so much artistically deficient as wilfully [*sic*] mendacious” (Bullock 204, 205). It deliberately uses art to lie to the masses. Under Stalin, art

became a tool of Soviet kitsch; it was made to serve the vision of regime.

An account of “A Conference of Musicians at the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party” in Moscow in 1948 showcases the musicians dedication to socialist realism and desire to make music that would serve the Soviet state. Zhdanov speaks of the group's “loyalty to the ideas of Socialist realism” (Suny 277). Shaporin, a composer, regrettably states that Soviet composers “have not yet reached that high ideological and artistic level the Party and the Government require from us” (Suny 277). This demonstrates a clear link between the will of the Party, as promoted by Stalin, and the motivations of certain artists. There is also a reference to the Union receiving “ideological instructions” from the Central Committee (Suny 278). Zhdanov, in his final remarks, demands of the composers “music that would satisfy the aesthetic requirements and the artistic tastes of the Soviet People” while “not allowing any decadent Western influences to penetrate into it” (Suny 283, 284). The purpose of the conference seems to be the urging on of Soviet composers to create music that is uniquely Soviet and conforms to the principles of socialist realism. However, it also involves the direct imposition of the Party's political will unto the creation of music, which introduces the element of Soviet kitsch. The composers are meant to deliberately infuse their music with the Party ideology.

The advent of cinema was particularly important for the Soviet Union; they produced a large volume of popular films. Despite the quality of Soviet cinema, however, Soviet films were often used as a tool of Soviet kitsch. Beginning in the late 1920s and extending through the early 40s, “thematic planning” became an important component of the Soviet film industry (Miller 91). Initially, the process involved “a combination of political figures and cinema administration bureaucrats,” who “would compile a list of priority thematic areas, relating to the fundamental political issues of the day”; studios would then receive quotas on how many films to produce on each political issue (Miller 92). Screenwriters became more involved in the process in the early 1930s, but not as part of any “attempt to grant film-makers more creative freedom”; the intention was “to draw them towards the idea of planning” films that would serve the needs of the Party (Miller 92). The creation of pre-determined

themes, quotas, and even plots for the sake of serving the Party narrative made Soviet cinema a part of Soviet kitsch. Many films produced during the Stalin era focused on either re-configuring history to fit the Party narrative or selling current Party ideology and policies to the masses. The Vasilev brothers' film *Chapaev*, for example, told the story of a Civil War general from peasant origins who “dies for the Communist cause” (Miller 94). In the film, the Civil War is simplified, portrayed “as a struggle between the red forces of good and the white forces of evil” (Miller 94). The film represents the ongoing Soviet project of establishing the Communist myth as a part of Russian history: that all revolutionary struggles were Communist, particularly Bolshevik, in nature, and that true revolutionary heroes had died for the Communist cause. As a part of Soviet kitsch, *Chapaev* and similar films helped create a “world of aesthetic make-believe and self-deception” within Soviet culture (Bullock 205). They sold an edited and idealized version of history to the masses which promoted Party ideologies.

Soviet art, using the popular technique of Soviet realism, served a similar function in spreading the narrative of Soviet kitsch to the public. Under the guidelines of socialist realism, artists were required to “turn to actual events and real possibilities” in order to accurately depict Soviet life (Bown 90). This focus on Soviet reality is apparent in Ilya Lukomski's painting “The Factory Party Committee,” which depicts “a komsomol member's acceptance into the party” (Bown 108). In the painting, it appears that the Committee is evaluating the young man before them, who looks anxious. Bown highlights the “social importance” of the subject, stating that “this moment was advertised as being the most significant in a person's life” (Bown 108). The painting then, is not just about portraying a part of Soviet reality, but is also about selling an idea and demonstrating the importance of acceptance into the Party for young workers. The painting shows the presence of “*partiinnost*,” or “party consciousness” in art. It serves the narrative of Soviet kitsch. Further evidence of kitsch in Soviet art is the “obligatory optimism” of socialist realism; all art was supposed to convince people to believe in the ideals of the Communist system and the “glorious future” it promised (Bown 90). This promise of a glorious future is characterized in Serafima Ryangina's painting “Higher and Higher,”

which depicts two workers, one male and one female, repairing what look to be electrical wires in the country side (Bown 106). The two workers are elevated high above the ground, the the woman's smiling gaze is fixed on an unseen point in the distance above them; the painting seems to be an idealized image of happy workers looking towards a happy future. Bown's statement of the role of the artist during Stalin's era reveals the presence of kitsch: "The artist was to instil [*sic*] the communist ideal into the Soviet consciousness, and to convince the people of that ideal whatever the reality" (Bown 90). Thus, what soviet realism portrayed was not reality, but a version of Soviet life glossed over with idealistic optimism dictated by Party ideology. Soviet kitsch pervaded artistic culture in the Soviet Union, feeding the public a false version of reality which only focused on the significance of the Party and the promise for a glorious Soviet future, while ignoring prevalent social issues that unrestricted art has the potential to reveal. Stalin himself worked to promote socialist realism and, as the architect of Soviet kitsch and the prime ideological force behind the Party, "became...the Soviet Union's chief art critic" (Bown 89). He was a cultural figure as much as political one, conforming cultural aesthetics to his narrative of Soviet kitsch. The state had influence through its commission of specific themes in art. Bown estimates that "socialist realism...was ninety-nine per cent commissioned on themes devised by committees and approved by political leadership" (Bown 95). Soviet art came under the control of Stalin's totalitarian regime and became a part of Soviet kitsch; it depicted false versions of reality that conformed to the desires of Party leaders, particularly Stalin.

Political and cultural kitsch were undeniably present during the reign of Stalin. Stalin used political kitsch to raise himself up as the sole leader of the Party (and therefore the government) while working to make Party ideology central within daily society. The show trials eliminated Stalin's rivals and created an atmosphere of paranoia which contributed to the deliberate atomization of Soviet society. Stalin's regime then made use of cultural kitsch in cinema and art to sell the narrative of Soviet kitsch to the masses. Kitsch is undeniably grounded in deception, perpetrated from above by a totalitarian regime and spread within society by the willingness of others to conform to the beautiful

lie. The use of kitsch was harmful to Soviet society and culture in multiple ways. Millions died as a result of Stalin's kitsch-serving purges and social bonds were broken apart by distrust. The production of regime-mandated art severely limited artistic creativity and allowed for virtually no critique of the regime. Whether or not and when kitsch disappeared from Soviet (and Russian culture) remains a larger question. Certainly the political and cultural thaw under Khrushchev allowed for more freedoms, including open condemnations of Stalin; the private social sphere also began to rebuild itself. Even in the more conservative years following the Khrushchev era, disillusionment and dissatisfaction with Communism and the Soviet structure grew more widespread, culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. The end of Stalin's totalitarian rule and the loss of faith in the Soviet system seems to suggest that kitsch largely dissipated. However, the current regime under Putin may suggest a return of Soviet kitsch, but it remains too early to tell.

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