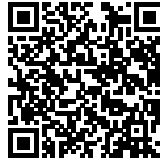




MEMORY AND GLORY—SOVIET ART OF THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

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The experience of the great patriotic war found a crucial place in the heritage of soviet-era art. as a theme that continues to stir strong feelings in Russian society to this day, its existential conflux of tragedy and triumph on a personal level overlapped with official interest in the subject, considered a crucial one for cultivating patriotism and political stability in soviet society. accordingly, war-themed art combined deeply personal motivations with levels of opportunistic ambition, something that determines both its variety and quality.

One factor that often contributes to the difference in quality is the date of the creation of a specific work—whether it was produced during or after the war matters a great deal. Another is whether the creator of a particular piece based it on his personal experience or not. However, there is a borderline between works created during and after the war, akin to the borderline between direct participation in an event and a later on-stage interpretation, between the real subject of the action and an impersonator of the drama. Personal involvement in any well-known historical drama, the fact of having lived through the same years, brings a unique content to any statement on the subject; understandably, impersonation sometimes can rise to a high level of mastery as well. This writer, aware of the dissimilarity between first- and second-hand knowledge, chooses in this article to focus mostly on works created between 1941 and 1945.

Contrary to the well-known maxim that the muses are silent when the guns roar, the voice of art did not fade at the start of the Great Patriotic War, although it certainly rang out quite differently from in the pre-war years. In the years immediately preceding the war, any sense of impending disaster was almost completely missing from Soviet art, although World War II had begun in 1939, and Hitler's Germany was earnestly preparing for its attack on the USSR. Official Socialist Realist art of the second half of the 1930s trumpeted the achievements of the Soviet construction projects, praised Soviet leaders and eagerly flattered the "new Soviet man;" however, the exultant tonality of that art would have looked out of place on the morning of June 22 1941. Now no one wanted to, or for that matter could, create glamorized images; there were no moral, physical or material resources in place for that. The entire cultural environment was changing rapidly, following approximately the same pattern as had marked the beginning of the Civil War. There was an immediate and urgent demand for graphic pieces of two sorts: propagandistic political posters appealing to the population both in the unoccupied heartland and on the battlefields, and "quickie" pictures imaging all that the artist's observing eye could capture—most of all, at the front.

The experience of the political poster in the early years after the Bolshevik revolution, and the "ROSTA

Windows" (Russian Telegraph Agency), was adopted by the "TASS Windows" campaign of the official Soviet news agency, now published in Moscow; a team of artists "Boevoi Karandash" (Combatant Pencil) established itself along similar lines in Leningrad. Today many find the genre of the political poster lacking in appeal, given the bombast and affectation that nearly always marks it. However, the Soviet wartime poster will surprise the unbiased observer with its pinpoint precision in portraying the social energy that was at play in the struggle between Germany and the Soviet Union from the beginning to the end, as well as its capacity to stir, at any given moment, emotions that would encourage, and prove helpful for, victory.

During the first stage of the war the urgency of national mobilization for the fight against the foe was reflected in such posters as "The Motherland is Calling!" by Irakly Toidze, and "We'll Stand Up for Moscow!" by Nikolai Zhukov and Viktor Klimashin. A photo collage poster by Viktor Koretsky "Soldier of the Red Army, Save Us!" engages the viewer directly, like the most famous placard by Dmitry Moor "Have You Joined the Volunteer Corps?" only featuring a far more heart-rending image—a red bayonet poised to rip into a baby's body. It has been reported that Koretsky's poster was well known across anti-Nazi Europe, especially in Great Britain. The period between the battle of Moscow and the victory at Stalingrad would be best linked to the images of bravery in Zhukov's "Fight Them to the Death!" and Alexei Kokorekin's "For the Motherland!" where the human figures are portrayed at a moment of utmost strain in action. 1942 also saw the creation of Nikolai Tyrsa's lithograph "Alarm," released by "Combatant Pencil" as a flyer: the majestic and rueful stillness of the northern capital during that winter under siege, and the beams from searchlights and explosions of anti-aircraft missiles in the black sky above St. Isaac's cathedral proved that the battle line crossed the very heart of Russia's cultural history.

Against such a background, one can better understand the venom of hatred spewed by the Kukryniksy artists in their "Transformations of the 'Fritzes.'" The famed piece from "TASS Windows" depicts a rank of Nazi troops morphing gradually backwards into an endless field interspersed with tombstones. 1943 was the turning point in the war: Viktor Ivanov's poster "To the West!" features a Soviet soldier knocking down with the butt of a gun a signpost "NACH OSTEN," fastened to a birch tree by a German soldier a short while before. And Leonid Golovanov came up soon with an innovative poster "We'll Make it to Berlin!" (1944), with the warrior, who was in the thick of action in the previous posters, replaced in this one by a smiling soldier. Seated in the shadow of a tree, he readjusts his boots before proceeding on his route march (this soldier strongly resembles the humorous and brave hero of Alexander Tvardovsky's popular poem "Vasily Tyorkin"). Joseph Serebriany's poster "Come On, Lend a Hand!" was marked by a novel theme as well—a young woman taking up a barrow full of bricks jovially addresses the viewer: it is time to rebuild everything that the war has destroyed and smashed. This array of

posters is completed by Golovanov's piece "Glory to the Red Army!" (1945), where the soldier previously featured on "We'll Make it to Berlin!" beams with the joy of victory. Golovanov showed his older poster behind the soldier's back—a most appropriate statement—while to his right, a bullet-ridden wall carries the inscription, "We've made it here!" Another smaller inscription reads "Berlin 2/ V 45," and an even smaller one, white on grey, "Glory to the Russian people."

In terms of style, the art of the Soviet poster falls well within the broadly conceived 20th-century international Neo-Classical canon (one, however, undeniably not without its own divisions and inner conflicts), that by and large was the lynchpin of Soviet art of the 1930s-1950s. The substantive aspects of the Soviet wartime poster, its overall thrust and pictorial techniques were largely warranted by the historical context and the existing challenges of social communications: it was a vital inspirational message addressed to millions. The same cannot always be said about many paintings or sculptures, much less about the monumental compositions in the vein of Stalin's Socialist Realism.

Generally, at this early stage the large output of graphic artists was dominated by small-scale pictorial on-the-spot reports, pieces that mostly highlight the states of mind, actions and gestures of people at the front; sometimes these observational sketches were developed into fully-fledged visual narratives. However, both large-scale and small-scale wartime graphic works were stylistically different from the bulk of Soviet graphic art of the previous period, marked as it had been by the cultivation of quasi-Classical academic trends which, in the guise of the "struggle against formalism," superior craftsmanship and the "completeness" of Realist image, implied a highly negative stance towards any kind of live, uninhibited drawing. It turned out that neither the observational sketches from the battle field, nor the wartime graphic pieces were compatible with such requirements: the sort of art we are reviewing here was naturally dominated by a broadly conceived Realist style.

Certain recurrent symbolical motifs, common to all wartime art, appeared within this fairly spontaneous stream of images. Perhaps the most evocative among them was the motif of a front-line road, the upshot of the artists' attempts to reflect on life in besieged Moscow during the early war years. In Alexei Laptev's "Fortifications in Moscow," or "Hedgehogs' near Savelovsky Station," we see not the dressed-up centre of Moscow, but a working-class, everyday Moscow—the way most of the city looked in the mid-20th century, which is almost nowhere to be found today. A street flanked with unprepossessing two- or three-storied houses, with the fire-wall of a lone apartment block suddenly visible; machinery plant workshops wedged into a residential neighbourhood; an old brick chimney. A streetcar track turns into one of the numerous side-streets; pieces of iron hardware block the way, and these "hedgehogs,"

as well as the rail tracks and the wires above, seem to shrink the entire image, as the cold darkness of that winter in Moscow permeates every little hatch of the drawing. A group of black-silhouetted people are gathered near a store—most likely they wait for food to be "thrown their way." The overall spectacle is imbued with pain, as well as the sense of an inflexible strength and steadfast determination to stick it out that motivated millions at that time.

The paintings created in late 1941-early 1942 are charged with similar emotions, as if adopted from the graphic observational pieces mentioned. One of the most prominent such works is Georgy Nissky's "Leningrad Highway" - an endless procession of tanks which are set off by the omnipresent barrier obstructions made of rails welded together. Another equally important work is a well-known landscape by Alexander Deineka "The Outskirts of Moscow. November 1941," showing the city bristled not only with anti-tank "hedgehogs" but also with the swirling frost of recently-fallen snow; the sharp rusty-grey colours of the urban buildings deeply planted into the hillock rise from the earth of Moscow in front of the viewers' eyes—or maybe, in front of the eyes of the foes who are assaulting the capital city?

One of the main Russian artists, Konstantin Yuon, strove to convey in his painting "Parade on Red Square. November 7 1941" the same atmosphere of the city-cum-symbol—the city which appeared to have mustered all the courage of the unvanquished nation; the artist started working on the piece immediately after that singular parade, which took place at a moment when Nazi troops were only two or three dozen kilometers away from the Kremlin, and finished it soon after the end of the war.

Interestingly, addressing such themes, the graphic artists and painters usually avoided introducing into their compositions close-up images of valiant warriors, in contrast to the style of the 1930s, when Socialist Realist paintings for official exhibitions were nearly unthinkable without the trite image of a "positive character." Encouraging artists to avoid bombast and histrionics, the war became for art a moral test. Whereas the posters continued to feature direct representation of the brave ones, the creators of easel pictures sought, successfully, to persuasively convey their desired message through the entire visual structure of the compositions, often favouring such genres as landscape—the space of nature, perceived through a certain lens, appeared to be absorbing scores of personal histories of the people drawn into a common drama.

Therefore, it was only logical that the "Road of Life" across Lake Ladoga became one of the landmark images capturing the experience of the existential endurance test that was the siege of Leningrad. 1942—Vladimir Bogatkin, Solomon Boim, Yevgeny Danilevsky, Joseph Serebriany... Again and again, the

ice-bound lake, the snowy riverside swamps, the heavy clouds above, and in the centre, cars and groups of people taking cover from gun-fire while also trying to save the lorries with their precious loads. Strangely, such compositions bring to mind a favourite theme of the mid-19th-century Romanticists: a raft with people on it, or a boat on the raging sea. Perhaps not unlike the Romanticists before them, the Soviet artists focused not just on a group of humans that had to be arranged in a showy fashion, but on their stamina which challenged the ruthless assault of hostile and elemental forces.

The image of a battlefield road was another well-developed type. Nikolai Zhukov's 1943 picture "Battlefield Road" conveys the message that all of the people were involved in the arduous and time-consuming toils of the war. The trucks, scores of which push their way towards the horizon, carry more soldiers than they can accommodate; their wheels get bogged down in the broken and water-filled tracks, melancholy fields on either side of the road seem lifeless, while torn wires hang loose on the poles, and the roar of the engines and the croaking of flustered crows are the only noises to be heard under the low smoking clouds. Against all the odds, they press ahead, onward towards a place from which this huge mass of people will plunge itself again into a new battle. Comparison of Zhukov's picture with Valentin Kurdov's "Guerilla Fighters on a March" is instructive, the latter with its long meandering procession of black figures slowly and steadily filing across the boundless snow-clad field.

Another Kurdov piece, "Death to the Fascist Occupiers," offers a different take on the subject. In this piece, the road does not lead anywhere; running parallel to the plane of the sheet, it is made to look like a bottom line of sorts. Behind the road is a field after battle with "leftover" debris scattered around—obstructions of barbed wire, a forest with charred, broken trees; a silence seems to envelop everything we can see, as the fading smoke of a fire mingles with the beams of the slowly rising sun, and we notice in the foreground the abandoned body of an enemy soldier by the roadside. This practically uninhabited environment provokes an almost symphonically complex awareness of the finale of the war and the enormous, horrible price paid.

Evidence in the form of drawings helps us to understand what astonished the soldiers especially strongly when the last battle was over—the silence saturating the still air and the entire scenery; the view of sunrises and sunsets no longer shut out by shell bursts and the whiz of bullets. Scenes like these were captured by Vladimir Bogatkin in his unpretentious pieces quickly sketched in pencil, "This is the Tisza" and "Silence at the Spree." Similar emotions underpin a big painting titled "Victory. Berlin," created a little later—in 1947—by the artist Dmitry Mochalsky, who personally witnessed the events of

those days.

Mochalsky's picture may well be one of the most astute victory-themed works produced by a Soviet artist: it does more than tell the story of victory and the exultation of the winning soldiers. The victory-related images, such as the tank drivers raising their helmets and garrison caps to salute the red banner mounted on the Reichstag, and the groups of soldiers excitedly looking at the miracle of the fallen stronghold of the Reich, are positioned by the artist in the middle ground. The picture's background, thoroughly detailed and delicately crafted with a brush, features the silent smoking colossus of the symbolic-looking edifice, presented in all the tragic grandeur of the historical moment. The picture is dominated by the image of the bright morning of the first day of peace, a morning that is savoured, unhurriedly and whole-heartedly, by two soldiers seated on their kit bags who are directly before the viewer. The conceptualization offered by Mochalsky contains both the cruel truth of past experiences and the profound joy of victory, and perhaps an anticipation of the hardships the victorious soldiers were to face after the war.

By way of a preliminary conclusion it can safely be said that for those interested in art and Russian history, the Soviet graphic pieces of 1941-1945 serve, almost literally, as a guide to the roads of the Great Patriotic War. As the drama of the war unfolded, graphic artists became interested in producing more comprehensive, panorama-like images of the war's events. Several experienced artists conceived of, and accomplished a variety of themed series of pictures. Such series of drawings include Dementy Shmarinov's "We'll Not Forget, We'll Not Forgive," Leonid Soifertis' "Sevastopol Album," and Alexei Pakhomov's "Leningrad under Siege;" many of these series are veritable visual chronicles providing a multi-angled take on a certain chapter in the four-year history of the war.

The leading painters who by early 1942 had regained their former artistic skills, did not usually see their mission as chronicling developments on the battlefield and in the unoccupied heartland of the USSR. Gradually the genre of big easel painting returned—the recent mythology of Socialist Realism no longer at work, the painters aspired to reflect philosophically on the most important human collisions of the war in progress.

All this fully applies to Alexander Deineka, the creator of the painting "Defence of Sevastopol" (1942), a very expressive and dynamic work, like the famed pieces the artist had produced in his youth in the 1920s. The picture is impactful and showy, although the artist's concept is hard to grasp without full use of both heart and mind. Probably the most important novelty of the piece is the new type of the model,

who is strangely unlike the trademark models from the posters of the same period, those hard-boiled, mature, battle-tested soldiers. Deineka's model is a young warrior, just as fearless and hot-blooded in the thick of a battle as his poster counterparts, and yet belonging to a different generation, made from a different mold.

The question begs itself: Whence did he come, and for what? The answer can be easily found if you consider the artist's biography: Deineka's new model naturally developed from the models the artist had painted and drawn throughout the preceding decade; this type of model also figured in some of the works created by artists from the Easel Artists' Society (OST) in Moscow and "The Circle" in Leningrad. A sibling of the students of the Communist Party schools and the "young female shot-putters" from Alexander Samokhvalov's pictures, the new soldier was a slightly older variation on the images of exercisers that Deineka, too, had produced in generous quantities. Perhaps the tragic ordeals befalling the younger Soviet generation in war were a matter of special concern for the painter, which inspired in him this pictorial requiem. Because Deineka's painting, as if following the tradition of melodious pictures of this type, presents to the viewer a rich, complex panorama of feelings and emotions, the core theme of which is the doleful beauty of the feat of human self-sacrifice.

What makes the painting so memorable is the depiction of the utmost strain of the mortal combat between the white and the dark hosts—and the symbolic participation of elemental forces in this combat; thus a human tragedy reverberates and even continues in the actual space where the event occurs. The sky is spitting fire and smoke, and seems to be bleeding. A strip of the shore—the last stronghold of the light-hued people—towers under their feet like a stone platform for a future monument. And behind their backs, a black-green abyss of the sea is rippling like a symbol of all-consuming eternity. Deineka circumscribes the vigorous dynamics of a big multi-figure composition within a refined harmonious unity of all aspects of form and colour, and even lends a certain lyrical charm to his long-favoured models. The last rays of the sun hidden behind the backs of the "dark" ones mold the sailors' figures, heads and fair hair, in a style similar to that often used by Soviet artists in the 1930s (especially in 1930-1935), when they strove to convey their elevated visions of the young model—the "person of the radiant future."

Another twist was highly unusual for Soviet paintings focused on similar themes. The sailor in white fatigues holding a cluster of grenades, at the centre, and the dead German soldier in black, lying at his feet, have a similar build. At that time, such a juxtaposition could have called down on the artist the dreadful political accusation of a lack of patriotism. Not surprisingly, Deineka's "Defence of Sevastopol"

almost never received a word of praise from orthodox Soviet critics. The painting was ignored, and even much later it proved difficult to buy it for the Russian Museum in Leningrad. But one is led to think that the problem with this painting is more global than it seems. Sooner than many of his colleagues, Deineka came to think about historical injustice and the anti-human nature of armed conflicts, especially worldwide conflicts—and he managed to convey these reflections through visual images.

He did so more than once. The next year, in 1943, he created one of the grimmest Soviet paintings on the subject of war, "The Knocked-down Ace." The Russian soil itself, scarred and desolate, seems to be on the verge of executing the German pilot—within a moment he is going to crash against the sharp rails sunk into the earth that holds out against the Fascist armada. And although the entire composition is arranged so that the death of the enemy seems inevitable, the falling figure in black seems to be frozen in the air. Retribution to the foe is turned into a perpetual edification of sorts. Deineka's style in this picture is dangerously (by Soviet standards) close to Surrealism. However, the horrifying precision and the slow motion of the dreadful image afford the thoughtful viewer a chance to draw the important parallels himself. The allusions at work are related to the genesis of the pilot's image, because in his appearance Deineka's pilot undeniably resembles the figures from the "Defence of Sevastopol" and, again, the young people from the Soviet paintings of the 1930s.

It would be totally wrong to think that Deineka somehow wanted to pass judgment on one of the utopian ideas in circulation at the time when Soviet art was young. Whatever you might say, essentially that utopia was one of the sunniest fantasies in that new vision of the world the culture of the revolutionary nation tried to create; besides, Deineka whole-heartedly contributed much of his talent to this utopia's artistic realm. Certainly Deineka was neither overtly nor covertly an anti-Soviet dissident and, besides, he was well aware of the potential for punishment of Stalin's dictatorship. It should be noted that Deineka seemed to draw a line under his musings on the destinies of the younger generation involved in the drama of the war when, in 1944, he created a painting titled "Merriment." Like some of his pre-war pictures, this one features Deineka's favourite image: athletic-looking girls, after a swim, run up a high river bank, towards the wind and the sun. A very cheerful spectacle, indeed—however, all the young men remained in Deineka's paintings dedicated to that war—on the boundary of violence and coercion that humankind had no right to transgress. So far as we can tell looking at the fairly complex fabric of the imagery of Deineka's pieces, the master implied something more significant than a specific clash of political opponents.

No matter how ambiguous a relationship the artists under review may have had with the official

doctrines, a conclusion suggests itself: during the war they mustered enough strength to cast aside many of the dogmas and stereotypes that had been deeply entrenched in the official art of the nation during the peak years of these cultural policies, i.e. in the late 1930s.

Arkady Plastov's picture "After a Fascist Plane Flew By" (1942) seems to yield itself easily to interpretation. Its story is clear: a German pilot has shot at a flock of cattle in a village. The dead body of a shepherd boy lies in the grass, a couple of animals by his side... It is narrated in a purely Realist vein, but at the same time the artist succeeds in lifting the image to the level of a very poignant metaphor, and this combination has ensured the great popularity of the painting with many generations of Russians. Eschewing any superficial stylization, the picture appeals to the deepest layers of the national consciousness as well as strata of pre-revolutionary Russian culture that the Bolshevik ideologues had tried to erase from the memory of Soviet people. Since time immemorial, ordinary Russians believed that killing a child, ruining an innocent child's soul, was the worst form of villainy. In addition, the image of a shepherd boy amidst quiet autumnal scenery could have brought to the viewers' minds a most revered painting by the young Mikhail Nesterov "Vision of the Young Bartholomew." Seemingly painted direct from nature, Plastov's landscape featured paradigmatic imagery remembered and relished by many who saw it in the Russian paintings of the turn of the 20th century—a grove with golden birch trees quivering in the wind, a reddish brown autumn field—and thus revived the traditions of Nesterov, as well as Valentin Serov and Isaac Levitan; it seems as if working on the piece Plastov had his inner eye focused on such landscapes as "October in Domotkanovo" and "Golden Autumn"...

Not only did the theoreticians of Socialist Realism normally view landscape as a marginal genre (unless it depicted the colossal construction sites of Stalin's five-year-plan periods), they also hypocritically criticized the Russian school of lyrical landscape painting for its alleged lack of political engagement and relaxing sentimentality. Nesterov's religious art was particularly unacceptable to them. The state-sponsored critics worked to persuade the public that the old artist who was also the creator of popular Soviet portraits had completely given up the "wrong ideas" of his earlier years (indeed, in the 1920s-1930s Nesterov only rarely tackled religious themes). But Plastov's piece was undeniably inspired by Nesterov's early oeuvre. To sum it up, the war liberated Soviet art from Socialist Realist clichés and cleared the way for an authentic, vibrant realism, for the long-standing values of the national tradition. That was the source from which our people drew their spiritual strength to fight the great battle against the vicious invaders.

The masterpieces of Plastov's mature period were conceived within this context. The old peasant in his

"Harvesting" seems to be close kin to Surikov's Streltsy with their silent unbending will power. His "Haymaking" (both pieces were created in 1945) shows a celebration of summer in the countryside unfolding after the disaster of the war. But this is a feast mixed with the hunger of the first months of peace and soaked in the bitter sweat of the peasants' relentless toils. Here, too, Plastov seems more of an heir to the realism of the "Peredvizhniki" (Wanderers) society and a precursor of our hard-boiled neo-nativist "village prose" writers ("derevenshchiki") of the 1960s than, say, kin to Ivan Pyriev with his idealized "Cossacks of the Cuban"—the musical film that glamorized pre-war life under Stalin.

An equally topical and even more deeply-rooted cultural and historical retrospection characterizes the art of Pavel Korin. In 1942 he created a composition "Alexander Nevsky" overflowing with heroic patriotic fervour—it would become the mainstay of a big triptych including two other symbolical representations of Russia's past, produced later, "Northern Ballad" and "Ancient Legend." "Northern Ballad" depicts two statuesque figures—a man and a woman—who stand still near a magic lake contemplating the quiet morning; this image, too, evokes the landscapes of Mikhail Nesterov, Korin's mentor and friend. The right section of the triptych, "Ancient Legend," added after the war, shows an old woman storyteller and a brave fellow holding a club, against the backdrop of a fresco of St. Nicholas. Undoubtedly, the centrepiece is Prince Alexander Nevsky, the defeater of the Teutonic Knights: partially shutting out a view of a Novgorod church, he stands under a banner from which the ancient iconic image of the Saviour the Fiery Eye, borrowed from the icons of the 12th-13th centuries, stares at the spectator—an element that was something unheard of, and even barely contemplated, in official Soviet art.

Nonetheless, such historical references, as mentioned earlier, came naturally during the war, a period marked by an awakening of the national consciousness; without it, the people's struggle against the enemy would have been pointless and even hopeless, something which even the Communist leaders of the nation pragmatically understood. Simultaneously with "Nevsky," Korin conceived the idea of, and even started working on, another triptych, "Dmitry Donskoy," but left it unfinished. Although the centrepiece of the former work met with quite a favourable reception and soon made its way into the collection of the Tretyakov Gallery, it appears that both triptychs caused much anxiety to Korin, because they somehow echoed the concept of his gigantic painting "Vanishing Rus," the work which the painter was forced to abandon in the second half of the 1930s given that the authorities saw in it a "glorification of religion."

The acclaimed portraits Korin created in the first half of the 1940s are marked by the same air of solemn

heroism as "Rus" and the triptychs. The painter portrayed the pianist Konstantin Igumnov (from 1943) at a grand piano with an open top, performing one of Beethoven's sonatas; the curtain behind the model seems to be scalding us with the icy heat of a flame. Arguably, the visualization of the curtain is highly appropriate for the wartime atmosphere. Korin also portrayed several Soviet army commanders, including Georgy Zhukov (the artist was sent to Berlin in early May 1945 especially for that assignment). It should be added that at that time references to the drama of the Patriotic War of 1812, too, met with appreciative responses in society. Evidence of this appears in Nikolai Ulyanov's historical painting "Jacques de Lauriston at Kutuzov's Headquarters" (1945), where the artist confidently applied the pictorial technique of his celebrated teacher Valentin Serov in conceptualizing the models in the mold of Tolstoy's "War and Peace."

Joseph Stalin's and Kliment Voroshilov's favourite artist Alexander Gerasimov created in 1944 a fairly impressive piece marked by great craftsmanship (emulating the style of Repin), a painting which today appears as something of a paradox—it is a portrait of some artists whose creative careers started back in the late 19th century and carried on quite smoothly for decades in Soviet Russia. The group includes the graphic artist Ivan Pavlov and painters Vasily Baksheev, Vitold Byalynitsky-Birulya, and Vasily Meshkov. In this "Group Portrait..." Gerasimov was eager to impress on viewers that even at the time of the biggest calamity the nation had ever had to face, its cultural icons were receiving their due.

It is pointless to debate whether it was appropriate to support in every possible way the country's cultural luminaries through those tough times. That said, this painting will hardly reveal to the viewer of the future its most intimate and probably most momentous aspect. The support given to many of our greatest cultural figures did not consist in the creature comforts reserved for them, in some instances at a period when the rest of the country was living in dire need. During the war, Stalin's state had to loosen its suffocating grip on art, culture, intellectuals in general, to lift some of those infinite censorship restrictions, to stop the campaigns of lacerating criticism fanned by Party dogmatists—in short, to put on hold the machine that it had been rampantly winding up in the 1930s. Boris Pasternak, Dmitry Shostakovich and many others, when talking with intimate friends, said they did not believe the coercive practices against artists would be resumed after the war. It was amazing but true—during wartime art breathed more freely than before the war or during the final years of Stalin's life. The hopes for the future cherished by those cultural figures were not to be realized. And yet the nation had a brief spell of political liberalization which left behind an impressive body of work as evidence. As for the visual arts, such achievements were mostly concentrated in the genre of the portrait.

Although one can detect little signs of greatness in Gerasimov's group portrait, it should be noted that the period when "the portrait of the four elders" was created saw the appearance of deeper, even confessional works. Two outstanding masters responsible for the emergence of prominent innovative trends in Russian 20th-century painting deserve mention—Martiros Saryan, one of the founders of the "Blue Rose" group, and Pyotr Konchalovsky, a founder of another association, the "Jack of Diamonds." It needs to be remembered that under Soviet rule both artists were forced, time and again, to speak out publicly about their contrition over their youthful "formalism," modernism, and avant-gardism; until their deaths they remained the suspects of choice among orthodox "Marxist" critics.

In 1942 Saryan came up with a magnificent self-portrait, "Three Ages." Its three self-representations have at their centre the image of the 60-year-old artist peering inquisitively and intently at the people, and into the life that was so breathtakingly unfolding before the very eyes and mind of the sage master; holding a pencil, his fingers are never parted from the sheet of paper. On the right and left, the old Saryan is flanked by two figures—an answer of sorts to those who wanted to force the artist to disown his credo and life-long experience. Without a shadow of doubt and fully equipped with his mature artistic temperament, Saryan offered a new take on his most famous self-portraits made in his youth and in the 1930s. We have every reason to view such consistent self-affirmation as a powerful artistic and, also, civic statement—an affirmation of the unity and the value of the cultures of the beginning and the middle of his lifetime, of all the spiritual riches of the disastrous 20th century, which were destroyed and dispersed by self-interested politicians and ideologues.

Saryan's self-portrait begs to be placed beside one by Konchalovsky from 1943. In this piece the date of creation, too, can be easily inferred from the austere inner concentration distinguishing the artist holding his brush. Behind him, a small statue of the great artist Vasily Surikov sits on a small table. Konchalovsky's father-in-law, Surikov forever remained for him an example of inspired and dauntless life-long dedication to Russian culture. Now, with the war in progress, the artist, already well advanced in his years, believed that an uninterrupted intense pursuit of art was his foremost obligation. The sharply highlighted contrasts between yellow and green in this piece fit in well with the portrayal of the painter's keen scrutiny of his self and of his viewing public. At the same time, the carefully-arranged colour clash evokes the experiences of his youth in the "Jack of Diamonds" group, when Konchalovsky and his companions assailed the public with dozens of bold paintings marked by highly expressive colours and rhythms.

Here we have yet another eloquent confession of an unrepentant rebel. The level of its importance for

the artist can be fathomed by the fact that in 1946, as if to mark his 70th birthday, he created pieces astonishing both for their unbridled painterly vigour and complete lack of conformity with the official rules of Soviet cultural life. The works concerned are "The Floor Polisher" and "The Golden Age." Hardly any painting created by a Soviet artist at that period was marked by so conspicuous a defiance of Socialist Realist dogma: in the whole period from 1947 to the "thaw" at the turn of the 1960s, no Soviet painter created anything as artistically bold as these two pieces. To be sure, neither contains any reference to the war, yet they owe their very existence to the shifts that took place in the spiritual life of society during wartime and, apparently, to the overall atmosphere brought about by the great victory. During the last decade of his life Konchalovsky never accomplished anything similar, and he returned to his familiar track, working daily on still-lives and portraits of his family and friends.

Looking at the array of wartime portraits, the viewer cannot but see that each has at the centre a formidable personality literally "hammered out" by history. This sort of individuality can be best explained by the great Soviet writer Andrei Platonov's characterization of one of his heroes—a man who had fought in the war: Fomin, in his soul, was "pounding the stone of a grief." This "pounding" implies a tremendous fortitude mixed with the pain of great bereavement. Both appeared to be conditions established by the reality of the national disaster for the people involved, both servicemen and civilians. And the artist's individual sensitivity, meanwhile, revealed in each of his models the specific personal traits and peculiarities of his emotional make-up that helped the person to respond to the challenges of the time with dignity. This probably explains why the self-portraits of artists so dissimilar as Konchalovsky and Saryan have so much in common in terms of their mood. The academician Joseph Orbeli, director of the Hermitage museum who during the war took care of its priceless collections and saved them from destruction, was their peer in terms of personal qualities, as can be inferred from his small-size portrait from 1943, very emotional and expressive, by the same artist, Saryan. Pyotr Kotov, whose legacy includes a score of portraits of prominent military doctors and commanders, left behind a masterfully-crafted portrait of the illustrious surgeon Nikolai Burdenko, whose unique powerful personality is conveyed with dry precision and without any flourishes.

Highly noteworthy are the works of the sculptor Vera Mukhina, who in 1942 accomplished commissioned portraits of the first holders of the highest military decorations of the USSR Heroes of War, Colonels Ivan Khizhnyak and Baryi Yusupov. These images represent nothing more than life-size heads seated on modest black rock plinths. Mukhina determinedly eschewed all the accessories of a ceremonial portrait. The pieces are astonishingly believable images of individuals who have taken full charge of the toil of warfare; the expressive modeling of the material used (bronze) brings out on the men's faces, with a pitiless objectivity, all the traumas caused by the war. The cruel truthfulness of their

visages seems nearly scary, and yet the key characteristic of both portraits is a sound veracity of image whose moral base, for Mukhina, consists in stubborn will power stemming from deep commitment, which motivated the heroes of the Great Patriotic War.

It was a question of the individual's unconditional choice. This writer believes that in Mukhina's art the theme of such choice culminated in two pieces she made in 1942-1943. The first is a female "Guerilla Fighter," an image seemingly out of place among other similar portrayals. In fact, the piece was inspired by the story of Zoya Kosmodemianskaya, who was executed by the Germans in a village near Moscow, a story which stirred the entire nation at that time; Mukhina lent to her image an even more symbolic meaning. Several other sculptors, such as Matvei Manizer and Yevgeny Vuchetich, dedicated works to Kosmodemianskaya, but only Mukhina wholly focused on the essence, eschewing descriptiveness and mundane characterization of any kind. Zoya's head captivates at once with its powerful concentration of spirit and commitment to certain fundamental values, evoking the Classicism of the age of the French Revolution (similar characteristics distinguish the creations of Jacques-Louis David). With her good knowledge of the history of European culture, Mukhina seemed to be molding her image along similar lines. But she redirected the theme onto a female track, as was suggested by Russian and Soviet realities; Leo Tolstoy's female characters volunteering as fighters in the national war against the French cannot be forgotten, either.

At the same time, the appearance of the "Guerilla Fighter" is completely within the range of 20th-century Russianness. This image slightly evokes that of Phaedra, as performed by the actress Alisa Koonen in Alexander Tairov's theatre production, which Mukhina saw, and was well familiar with, in her youth. And besides, it obviously draws on the Soviet portrayals of young females from the pre-war decade—to name but one example out of many, Deineka's women exercisers. Probably Mukhina also drew on the "Nude" (also titled, "Woman Exerciser"), a famous statue (1937) by her elder colleague, the sculptor Alexander Matveev. Yet, although Mukhina's art has Classicist overtones, she never completely lapsed into academism—she was never one to opt for idealized, sterile, smooth forms.

Mukhina very persuasively showed such an approach in her sculpted bust of Nikolai Burdenko (reference has already been made to Pyotr Kotov's portrait), which appears as important as Zoya's portrait within the context under discussion. Mukhina's treatment fascinates with its dynamic, expressive molding of the face, helping the sculptor to literally immerse the viewer into the boiling stream of emotions and ideas that was the characteristic of the Surgeon-in-Chief of the Soviet Army, who did so many good things for the military that he became a legend. However, in Burdenko's warm-

blooded personality, as in her other creations, Mukhina highlights the most essential: his awareness of his mission, and all-consuming dedication to it. This is what the national character, tempered in the crucible of war and leading the nation to victory, amounts to—Burdenko's image is free of any trappings of his rank.

The last of Mukhina's wartime portraits features a renowned nautical architect, the academician Alexei Krylov. This piece combines an individualized image of a compelling, singular personality and, as we can tell by Krylov's overall mood, a retrospective look directed from the victory year of 1945 back to his wartime emotions and deeds. Interestingly, Krylov, with his focus on the past, resembles the peasant from Plastov's "Harvesting," especially considering that Mukhina used wood—one of the most natural materials to be found. Both Plastov's and Mukhina's Russian old men, alertly listening to the silence in the wake of the battle, "pound" in their souls much more than the simple lessons of Russian history...

A portrait bust of the poet Alexander Tvardovsky, created by Sarra Lebedeva (in gypsum in 1943, and in marble, 1950), stands in remarkable contrast to these works. In Soviet art of that period, Lebedeva's piece was one of the few deeply insightful images of an individual who belonged to the younger Soviet generation whose destinies interested Deineka so much, but who, unlike Deineka's models, had the good fortune of staying alive in the crucible of war. Admiring the youth and the allure of talent in her model, the sculptor perceptively captured in the eyes of this man, habitually dressed in a soldier's shirt, a not-so-comfortable experience gained during these years of war. Hence the special bitter lyricism marking the concept of the portrait—a feature of the age as well as of Tvardovsky's poetic gift, which the master no doubt wanted to record for posterity in white marble shortly after the war.

The last stage of the war and the first post-war years saw the appearance of many monumental paintings and sculptures dedicated to the epic historical events that were by then winding up, as statues of the war heroes and monumental memorials became the mainstay of the Soviet art of that time. A memorial in the Treptower Park in Berlin, completed by 1949 by the sculptor Yevgeny Vuchetich and a group of architects headed by Yakov Belopolsky, is the most significant work accomplished then. The memorial is dominated by Vuchetich's highly popular statue of the Soviet soldier ("The Warrior-Liberator").

However, the erstwhile lavish official recognition of the large-size war-themed artwork should not prevent us from appreciating much more modest pieces that nonetheless often conveyed a priceless poetic truth about the impact of the victorious completion of the war, which included not only grand

parades and commemorations involving hundreds and thousands of people, but also a radical turn-around in human existence—the return from the hell of the war to a peaceful life. The need to reflect on this change brought about lyrical, personalizing trends that accounted for many fine paintings that appeared in the mid-1940s, and were generally not welcomed by the corps of Party-affiliated critics. Still, both in the centre of the battle line and on its margins people remained people—they loved the beauty of their homeland's natural scenery, trees and flowers, loved their habitual household objects and domestic animals.

It was at that period that Nikolai Romadin started out as a master of heartfelt lyrical pictures of Russian scenery. Magnificent images of nature and still-lives with flowers, which put the viewer in a contemplative mood and seemed to promise a relaxation to the soul, time and again cropped up in the workshops of such notables as Sergei Gerasimov or Martiros Saryan. Importantly, these seemingly modest, intimate genres were used by both artists as the vehicle to convey to us the feelings overwhelming the people at the war's end when the Nazis were practically routed. Gerasimov's landscape "The Ice Is Gone" portrays, with a remarkable subtlety and dignified restraint, the quiet beauty and the pain of nature's incipient awakening.

Such crystalline and straightforward personal statements recorded through the medium of visual art not only represented an important aspect of the self-discovery of the generations who lived through the war, but also formed the basis for the revival of art in the final decades of Soviet rule, after Stalin's dictatorship was finally gone.

Alexander Morozov is at the [State Tretyakov Gallery](#), through whose kind courtesy this article appears.

***Featured:** "Parade on Red Square. November 7 1941," by Konstantin Yuon; painted in 1949.*

