

Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka in the 1930s

Christina Kiaer

1. Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art under Stalin* (Holmes and Meier: New York, 1991), p. 119. The exception to this critical art historical narrative of Socialist Realism is, of course, the body of art historical writing by Soviet art historians written during the Soviet period. Yet most of this writing tells the same story of an artist's acceptance of the demands of Socialist Realism, but from the perspective that this acceptance finally allowed the artist to find his or her true, mature form. This is stated explicitly in the critic Rafael Kaufman's essay on Deineka in the leading art journal *Iskusstvo* (Art) in 1936; Rafael Kaufman, 'Aleksandr Deineka', *Iskusstvo*, no. 3, 1936, pp. 84–100. For a more measured version of this narrative that gives full credit to Deineka's earlier work, see Vladimir P. Sysoev, *Aleksandr Deineka*, 2 vols. (Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo: Moscow, 1989).

2. Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People's Republic of China* (Collins Harvill: London, 1990). There has been far less scholarship on Socialist Realism in art history than in literary studies; as a field, it is just beginning to develop methodological paradigms that go beyond the totalitarian model of Golomstock, or of Boris Groys's influential notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*, according to which all artists must make their dreams conform to that of Stalin. See: Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1992). Susan Reid has begun challenging the totalitarian model through her rigorous historical research on exhibitions of Socialist Realist work in the 1930s; see Susan Reid 'All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s', *Slavic Review* vol. 57, no. 1, 1998, pp. 133–73; and 'Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The Industry of Socialism Art Exhibition, 1935–41', *The Russian Review*, vol. 60, no. 2, April 2001, pp. 153–84. On later Soviet painting see also Susan Reid 'Masters of the Earth: Gender and Destalinisation in Soviet Reformist Painting of the Khrushchev Thaw', *Gender and History*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1999, pp. 276–312.

3. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (Verso: London and New York, 2001), p. 3.

In the early 1930s, the Soviet artist Aleksandr Deineka began to paint canvases that were more legible and naturalistic than his overtly modernist, montage-like and industrial compositions of the 1920s. This shift in his work – and in the work of other Soviet artists of this time – is usually interpreted by historians of modern art as a sign of capitulation to the demands of the new style of Socialist Realism that was then being developed. In this narrative, Deineka's genuine and perplexing attempt to represent the contradictions of the collective labouring body of socialism, in works such as *Building New Factories* of 1926 (Fig. 1), gives way under totalitarian pressure to far more pictorially immediate depictions of effortless collectivity under Stalinism, such as *Lunchbreak in the Donbass* of 1935 (Fig. 2). As a leading Western author on Socialist Realism put it, Deineka was not damaged by official criticism of artistic formalism in the 1930s because he had already 'bent sufficiently in the prevailing wind'.¹

The aim of this essay is to question this natural metaphor and the larger assumptions about the inevitability of totalitarian coercion that it stands for. The designation 'totalitarian art' – as deployed, for example, by Igor Golomstock in his book of the same name – has the power to foreclose analysis of both artworks and artistic identities.² As Slavoj Žižek writes in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 'the notion of "totalitarianism", far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of *stopgap*; instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively *prevents* us from thinking'.³ Žižek's critique suggests that art historians have the 'duty' to grant a certain degree of agency – both artistic and revolutionary – to Soviet artists working in the 1930s, and therefore to think more seriously about their works than the usual cursory dismissals of the regressive forms of totalitarian art allow. This approach to Socialist Realist art requires, perhaps paradoxically, the application of traditional art historical methods: attention to the biography and statements of individual artists, to broach the question of intention; the study of contemporary critical reception and artists' debates – however circumscribed they may have been – and of patronage structures, to unravel an artistic culture that was more dynamic and varied than is usually supposed; and analysis of the specific visual forms of Socialist Realist pictures that acknowledges their difference and specificity.

This essay argues that the transition from Deineka's more overtly Modernist and experimental images of collective labour of the 1920s to his more obviously Socialist Realist depictions of the collective body of the mid-1930s resulted not from his 'bending to the prevailing wind' of official pressure but rather, or at least also, from his own changing vision of what constituted appropriate revolutionary art. His vision changed through the force of the changing historical circumstances of Russia under Stalin, certainly; he was subject to Soviet ideology. But as Susan Reid has recently

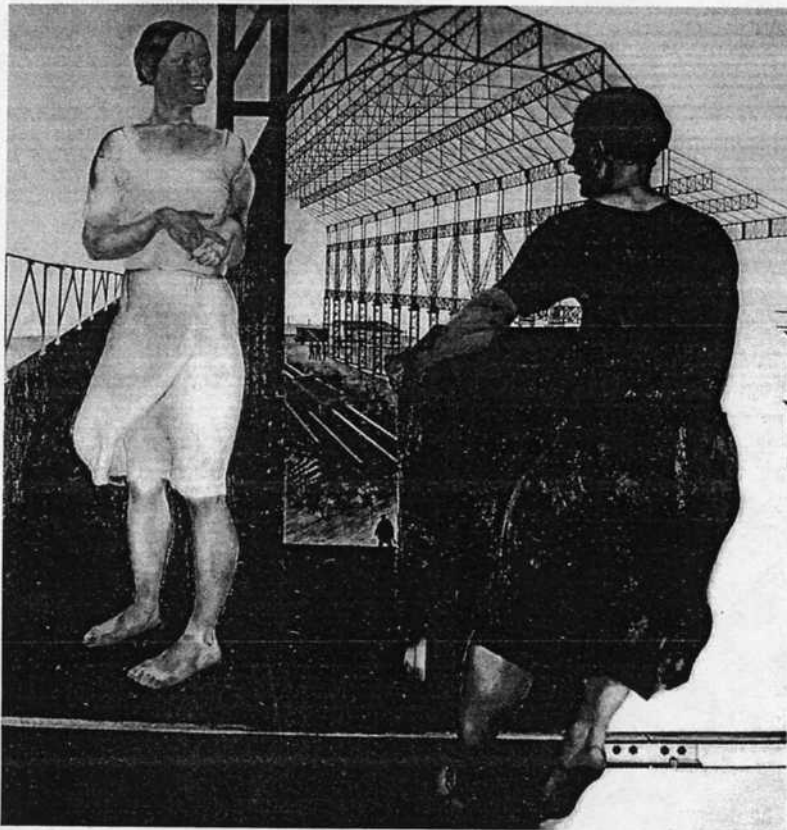


Fig. 1. Aleksandr Deineka, *Building New Factories*, 1926, oil on canvas, 209 x 200 cm. State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

pointed out, Soviet artists were 'far from either the unified body wishfully imagined by Soviet mythology or the browbeaten bunch implied by received Western narratives of the "imposition" of Socialist Realism' in the visual arts.⁴ If the emphasis in Cold War scholarship was on how Soviet state ideology was imposed on society from above, more recent Soviet cultural history has focused on how people lived ideology in everyday life, from below – in the terms of Michel de Certeau, how people 'made do' within ideology and even opposed it – or further, how ideological practices were actively constituted and elaborated by individuals themselves.⁵ In this sense we can understand Deineka – and the other artists of his generation and commitments – as producers of ideology, as creators as well as victims of Socialist Realism. Deineka can be understood not as an exception within a system otherwise designated totalitarian, but rather as a participant in the system who reveals the limitations of that designation.

For many Soviet artists, as well as for many leftist artists around the world in the 1930s, the Soviet model of organised artistic labour – well paid and directed toward a wide public – represented not forced labour but freedom from market forces. For at least some artists, especially those already inclined toward figuration, the massive government demand for socialist imagery provided a productive context for artistic experimentation. In this essay, then, the question of art and labour will be addressed both through a consideration of Deineka's own artistic labour and of his depiction

4. Reid, 'Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror' (2001), p. 161.

5. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1984). For a study of Soviet cultural history that draws on de Certeau's model, see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1995). On the constitution of the Soviet subject within ideology see Jochen Hellbeck, 'Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931–9,' in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Routledge: London and New York, 2000), 77–116 and Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman, eds, *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2005), especially the authors' introduction.



Fig. 2. Aleksandr Deineka, *Lunchbreak in the Donbass*, 1935, oil on canvas, 149.5 × 248.5 cm. State Latvian Museum, Riga.

6. The argument, based on the work of Michel Foucault, that the Stalinist system must be studied for its productive as well as its repressive aspects, has been made compellingly by Kotkin in *Magnetic Mountain*.

of the collective labouring body in his paintings. We already have a history of the repressions and tragic abuses of Soviet Socialist Realism. Without in any way denying that history, this essay proposes that we also need a history of its productive aspects.⁶

Socialist Bodies in Transition

Aleksandr Deineka began his career experimenting with modernist forms in the 1920s, as in his great, early composition *Building New Factories* of 1926. Deineka was at this time a poster and graphic artist, as well as a member of the Society of Easel Painters (OSt), which shared with the avant-garde an interest in modernist techniques and a critique of bourgeois painterly realism, but insisted on the continued relevance of figurative painting as a revolutionary art form. A photomontage of 1920 by Gustav Klutsis offers an avant-garde point of reference for the visual strategies of Deineka's painting (Fig. 3). Its title, *The Electrification of the Entire Country*, is taken from the printed line of text montaged onto the composition; it refers to Lenin's proclamation that 'Communism equals Soviet power plus the electrification of the entire country'. The montage combines the geometric abstraction and spatial destabilisation of Suprematism in the semi-architectural space represented below, with visual forms that would become emblematic of Constructivism: the grid that represents the dream of a vast interconnected technology and, most saliently, the photograph. When the historical fragment of the photograph of Lenin is montaged into an imagined space of infinite technological possibility, the result is an image that both literalises Lenin's futuristic fantasy, and acknowledges its historical contingency – the fundamental temporal disjunction of the as yet unknown passage into Communism.

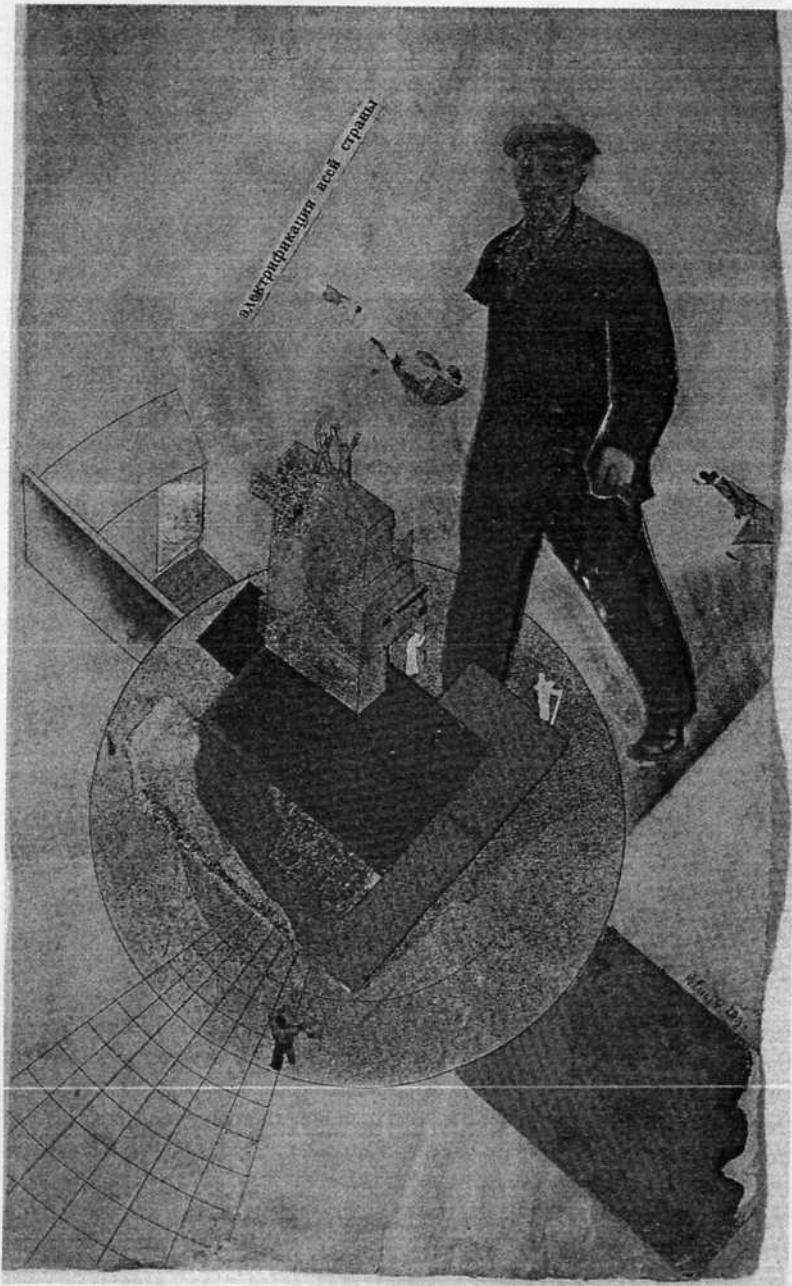


Fig. 3. Gustav Klutsis, *The Electrification of the Entire Country*, design for a poster, 1920, ink, gouache, gelatin silver prints, coloured paper, pencil, printed letters, paste, 46 × 27 cm. Merrill C. Berman Collection.

Against the grain of the modernist ban on figuration, Deineka's painting proposes that the painted figure can participate in a similarly contingent form of revolutionary representation. A kind of modernist pastoral, it deploys flatness, spatial dislocation and machinic forms in calculated tension with an almost Arcadian representation of the proletarian body, evoked by the white dress, bare feet, and sheer beauty and Michelangelesque muscularity of the figures. The result is a representation of the core Marxist

7. 'Sport i iskusstvo', *Krasnyi sport*, 23 May 1936.

8. Andrei Zhdanov, 'Rech' sekretaria TsK VKP(b) A.A. Zhdanova', *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei 1934. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo 'Khudozhestvennaia Literatura': Moscow, 1934), p. 4. Translated in 'Contributions to the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers [Extracts], 1934', in John Bowl, ed. and trans., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934* (Viking Press: New York, 1976), p. 293.

9. On the problems associated with the study of Soviet resistance, and its historiography, see Lynne Viola, 'Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s: Soliloquy of a Devil's Advocate', in Lynne Viola, ed., *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2002), pp. 17-43.

10. On these themes in Socialist Realism, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd edn (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2000) and Aleksandr Morozov, *Konets utopii: iz istorii iskusstva v SSSR 193--kh godov* (GALART: Moscow, 1995), p. 96.

concept of the proletariat in the dialectical process of becoming: one proletarian body facing out, one facing in, one light, one dark, the woman on the lower right standing with her cart at a right angle to the tracks on which it needs to roll for production to begin. The painting stages the contradiction between the labouring body and the space of industrialisation only to overcome it through the sheer intensity of the relation between the two women workers, whose charged mutual gaze bridges that vertiginous space.

In *Lunchbreak in the Donbass*, made nine years later, the naturalism of the sunlight glinting on the splashing water and the spatial immediacy of the naked boys rushing toward the viewer no longer have any connection to Constructivist visual strategies, offering instead a far more legible rendering of a proletarian Arcadia. An enthusiastic contemporary account of the painting in the mass newspaper *Krasnyi sport* (*Red Sport*), for example, is in no doubt as to the laudable Soviet subject matter that it shows us: 'young miners renewing their strength on their lunch break by swimming'.⁷ Painted in the crucial year following the declaration of Socialist Realism as the official Soviet art form at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, its pictorial achievements can be attributed to its moment of making, when Deineka was actively attempting to find a way to work within the famously opaque proclamation of Socialist Realism as 'the depiction of reality in its revolutionary development'.⁸ Deineka's retreat from the pictorial instability of the earlier, modernist work would, in the dominant narrative of the demise of the avant-garde under the pressure of Socialist Realism, signal a transition from a - good - dialectical socialist body to a - bad - stabilised, Stalinist one.

Yet *Lunchbreak* is not fully stable or legible, because anti-naturalist techniques from the history of painterly modernism - linear, hardened bodies, anxiously abbreviated faces and body parts, unexplained croppings and erasures, painterly touches that detract from coherent form, stark contrasts of light and dark, and a constant, insistent flattening or distorting of pictorial space - complicate the figuration. These pictorial departures from the immediacy of academic illusionism should be understood not through the psychoanalytic model of resistance - as Deineka's repressed modernist origins of the 1920s bubbling up symptomatically into his enforced Socialist Realism - nor as a form of covert resistance from within.⁹ Rather, he consciously departs from the critical project of modernism to deploy his modernist training and sensibility toward the invention of a novel form of figuration that gives form to his dream of the socialist body. His dream does not appear to be markedly different from familiar Socialist Realist themes of the 'new man' and the 'bright future'; his difference lies in his refusal to pretend that the dream of collectivity is already knowable and therefore representable in a language of pictorial immediacy.¹⁰ His more legible pictures such as *Lunchbreak in the Donbass* therefore can be understood to continue the revolutionary project of imagining the as yet unknown collective body that he inaugurated in *Building New Factories*.

Deineka was a member of the first fully revolutionary generation of artists. Born in 1899, he was eighteen years old at the time of the Revolution; he was just enough younger than most members of the avant-garde - four years younger than Klutskis, nine years younger than Aleksandr Rodchenko, and fourteen years younger than Vladimir Tatlin - that he had no artistic career before the Revolution. He arrived in Moscow in 1920 from his native town of Kursk, the son of semi-literate proletarian parents.¹¹ Deineka painted *Building New Factories* two years after leaving Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhicheskie masterskie (VKhUTEMAS),

the famous state art school created in Moscow after the revolution, where Constructivists such as Rodchenko taught. VKhUTEMAS students from that time had an acute sense of themselves as the generation that would produce an entirely new kind of art. Their generation of artists would participate in actively developing Socialist Realism in the 1930s, rather than falling prey to it, as many members of the older avant-garde generation did. Deineka's age, background, training and enthusiasm for socialism make him typical of this generation; only his pictorial inventiveness in the face of the constraints imposed by Socialist Realism would make him atypical.

In 1925 Deineka joined OST, which included a number of younger artists trained at VKhUTEMAS. Society of Easel Painters members disagreed with the Constructivists, who in 1921 had rejected oil painting itself as an inherently bourgeois medium, but they also objected to the traditional, transparent realism advocated by the powerful Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR), in which questions of painterly form were subordinated completely to content. Detractors of the AKhRR pointed out the incongruity of using nineteenth-century naturalistic genre painting, often poorly executed, for representing modern socialist life. In contrast to modernist pictures such as Deineka's *Building New Factories*, which did not dictate an obvious viewer response, AKhRR artists such as Fedor Bogorodskii produced easily readable narrative canvases, for example *Ambushed Sailors* of 1927, which demanded the viewer's admiration for the heroic but doomed members of the Red Navy and, by extension, the viewer's hatred for the class enemies these sailors were fighting during the Civil War (Fig. 4). The AKhRR was the most powerful artistic group of the 1920s, but there were a number of other artistic groups proposing alternative models of revolutionary art, all of them registered with the state, exhibiting regularly and receiving some measure of state support. By 1931, with the arrival on the scene of the Russian Association of

11. On Deineka's early biography, see Sysoev, *Aleksandr Deineka*, vol. 1, pp. 10–29.



Fig. 4. Fedor Bogorodskii, *Ambushed Sailors*, 1927, oil on canvas, 246 × 313 cm. State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

12. For a detailed overview of the various artistic groups up to 1932, see Bown, *Art under Stalin*, pp. 35–69.

13. In addition to the painting *Building New Factories*, Deineka's industrial Arcadia appears in his large, well-known canvas *Female Textile Workers* from 1927, as well as in other smaller scale paintings and numerous watercolours that were published as magazine illustrations.

14. The critic Rafael Kaufman would write in 1936, 'Deineka is an artist of the human figure. The leading theme in Deineka is the person in action, in movement.' See Kaufman, 'Aleksandr Deineka' (1936), p. 88.

15. Benjamin Buchloh writes that in *Building New Factories*, the women's 'faces follow the rules of typecasting the anonymous Socialist subject'. See Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Vol. 1 (Thames and Hudson: New York, 2004), p. 263. My reading, in contrast, is that the face of the lighter-haired woman in white is granted a real particularity, and in fact, according to the artist Ekaterina Zernova, this figure was modelled on the artist and VKhUTEMAS student Klasha Kozlova. See E.C. Zernova, *Vospominaniia monumentalista (Sovetskii khudozhnik: Moscow, 1985)*, p. 52.

16. On the ideological distinctions between Soviet and Nazi sport, see John M. Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology* (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1984) and Pat Simpson, 'The Nude in Soviet Socialist Realism: Eugenics and Images of the New Person in the 1920s–1940s', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* Vol. 4, no. 2 and Vol. 5, no. 1, 2003–04, pp. 113–37. Simpson argues, however, that despite the Communist Party's explicit rejection of the racism and class discrimination of Nazi eugenics, the Soviet promotion of *fizkul'tura* formed part of a 'Soviet eugenics' that aimed to 'renovate' the 'genus' of humanity under socialism (see pp. 115–17). On the basis of Deineka's images of *fizkul'tura*, especially his depiction of nude bodies, she argues that 'Deineka seems to have engaged' with Soviet eugenics discourse (p. 130). But other than the existence of Deineka's images of sport, she offers no evidence to support this somewhat sinister eugenic reading of their significance; I argue, in contrast, that they are deeply personal, stemming from his own identification with, and desire for, the athletic body, and that this personal investment allows them to function as emblems of revolutionary possibility in his work.

Proletarian Artists (RAPKh), a stridently proletarian breakaway group from the AKhRR that attacked all other artistic groups, the infighting among the groups had reached a level destructive to working conditions.¹² In April 1932, when the Party issued its well-known decree dissolving all independent artistic associations and establishing one central artists' union, many politically engaged artists perceived it not as a repressive measure, but as a step that would establish a more equitable system of access to commissions, and an atmosphere more conducive to the creation of a new socialist art. While former AKhRR artists, through sheer force of numbers, dominated the new Moscow Artists' Union (MOSSKh) formed in 1932, their model of realism did not have particular official sanction.

Nor does a narrative of an imposition of a particular style from above fully account for the shift in the work of Deineka and other initially modernist painters toward styles that were apparently more in keeping with the perceived demands of Socialist Realism. Deineka's interest in making pictures such as *Building New Factories*, while a genuine response to the abstraction and machine aesthetic of the Constructivists, and to the general industrial enthusiasm of the 1920s, was always balanced by his commitment to figuration.¹³ His interest in the machine aesthetic was short-lived, as was his membership in OST. Already by the late 1920s, with a few exceptions, Deineka's paintings had gradually left overtly montage-like surfaces and industrial subject matter behind in favour of more pictorially unified representations of Soviet bodies in various relations to the collective, particularly through sport.¹⁴ Yet in 1928, around the same time that his work could be said to retreat somewhat from modernist experimentation, he also joined the artistic group October, which included avant-garde artists such as Klutskis, Rodchenko and the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, and which, in its rejection of naturalistic realism and its call for an art of mass production based in new technology, is often seen as the final stand of the avant-garde of Constructivism and Productivism. By joining October, Deineka took a bold stand within the heated atmosphere of competing artistic groups, suggesting that he would not have changed his pictorial style to a more straightforwardly realistic one in order to curry Party favour. Deineka was lured away from October to the by then dominant RAPKh only in late 1931, a few months before the decree of April 1932 dissolving all independent artistic groups.

Yet ironically, as Deineka's canvases became more realistic his painted Soviet bodies became less rather than more explicit. Despite the nudity of the three female figures in *The Ball Game* of 1932, for example, less is revealed about them than in the earlier image of the clothed women in *Building New Factories* (who are posed very similarly to the left and central women in *The Ball Game*) (Fig. 5). The vehement articulation of the facial expression of the woman in the white dress in *Building New Factories* – the sheer exultation in getting her joyful proletarian grin right – shifts to a more distanced depiction of faces and bodies.¹⁵ These women are no longer necessarily marked as proletarian, though with their husky physique and their two different balls – emblems of sport, modernity and dynamism that migrate across Deineka's works – they would automatically have been understood as *fizkul'turnitsy* or physical culture enthusiasts. Despite their blondness, *fizkul'tura* was not a racialised concept; in the 1930s the Soviets specifically distanced their promotion of *fizkul'tura*, which they associated with modernity and the health of the labouring body, from the Nazi cult of the body.¹⁶ Deineka was himself a *fizkul'turnik*

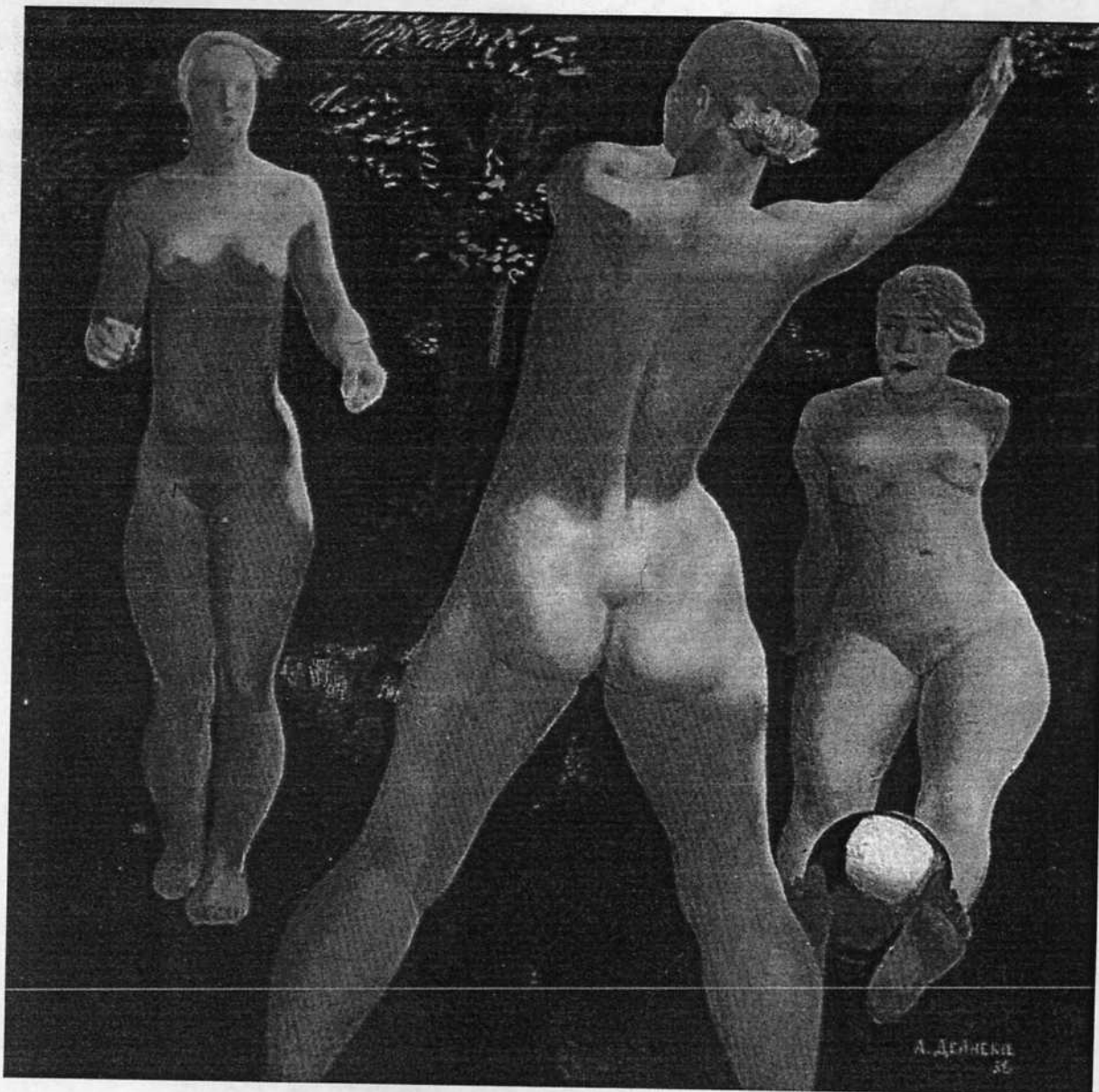


Fig. 5. Aleksandr Deineka, *The Ball Game*, 1932, oil on canvas, 123 × 123 cm. State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

who spent much of his time at the Dinamo sports complex in Moscow, making sketches of athletes and working out. A photograph of him dressed in sports clothes stems from the period when he was well known for his boxing talents on display at the VKhUTEMAS gym (Fig. 6). 'Sport is our living modernity', Deineka told a writer friend in the 1930s 'and the artist is obligated to affirm this in art'.¹⁷ The most clearly visible woman on the right in *The Ball Game* was in fact modelled on an actual Soviet athlete of the time: the sixteen-year-old Liusia (Liudmilla) Vtorova, champion long-distance swimmer, whom Deineka met at Dinamo. Snapshots revealing her full, muscular figure and broad face, such as the one showing her

17. This statement is recounted by Deineka's friend Ivan Rakhillo, a proletarian aviator and writer; see Rakhillo, *Serebrianyi pereulok* (Moskovskii Kabochii: Moscow, 1978), p. 461.



Fig. 6. Aleksandr Deineka, 1920's.

18. The story of how Liusia (Liudmilla) met Deineka and posed for him was told to me by her sister Evgeniia Vtorova – an even more successful champion swimmer in the 1930s and 1940s – in Moscow, April 2002; for a mention of Liudmilla Vtorova in the literature see Rakhillo, *Serebrianyi pereulok*, p. 458. I thank Evgeniia Vtorova for permission to photograph and reproduce this snapshot of Liusia from her family photo album.



Fig. 7. Long-distance swimming champion Liudmilla Vtorova after a swim meet, mid-1930s. (Photo: Courtesy of Evgeniia Vtorova.)

surrounded by fellow swimmers after a swim meet (Fig. 7), confirm that she was the model for *The Ball Game* as well as one of Deineka's best-known paintings, *A Mother* of 1932.¹⁸

Yet despite the documentable 'realism' of the sport on offer in *The Ball Game*, it produces only an unstable figuration of the sportive proletarian body, rather than an affirmation of it. Even in its woodland setting, *The Ball Game* seems paradoxically less pastoral than *Building New Factories*. The trio of women offers no coherent spatial or temporal narrative. If *Building New Factories* offered some psychological access to the proletarian subjects, through the broadly smiling woman in white facing out and through the charged mutual gaze between the two women, in *The Ball Game*, psychological realism is thwarted by the unreadable faces, by the possibility that the figures are all replications of the same woman, and by the continuation of modernist techniques of drastic foreshortening and cropping that reduce the bodies to a pattern of interlocking surfaces. As in *Building New Factories*, there is a woman with her back to the viewer, but here her central placement and vehemently clenched buttocks work much harder to bar access to the picture. The composition is stilled, dreamlike, inexplicable; it is unclear what will happen next.

The large painting *The Goalkeeper* of 1934 might offer one version of what happens next: it is as if the central woman in *The Ball Game* has launched herself into space to the left (Fig. 8). Yet even here, when the moment depicted is one of complete instantaneity and specificity, the body is suspended in time, the face turned away, the immediacy of the action somehow arrested. Or in yet another large painting, *The Race* of 1933, the composition invites the viewer to revel in the patterned interplay of all the horizontals and verticals of legs and backs and arms and feet, emphasised by the white horizontal lines of the black track, more than to identify with the immediate physical sensation of running (Fig. 9). The stiff, stylised poses make the boys seem frozen in time, like hieroglyphics

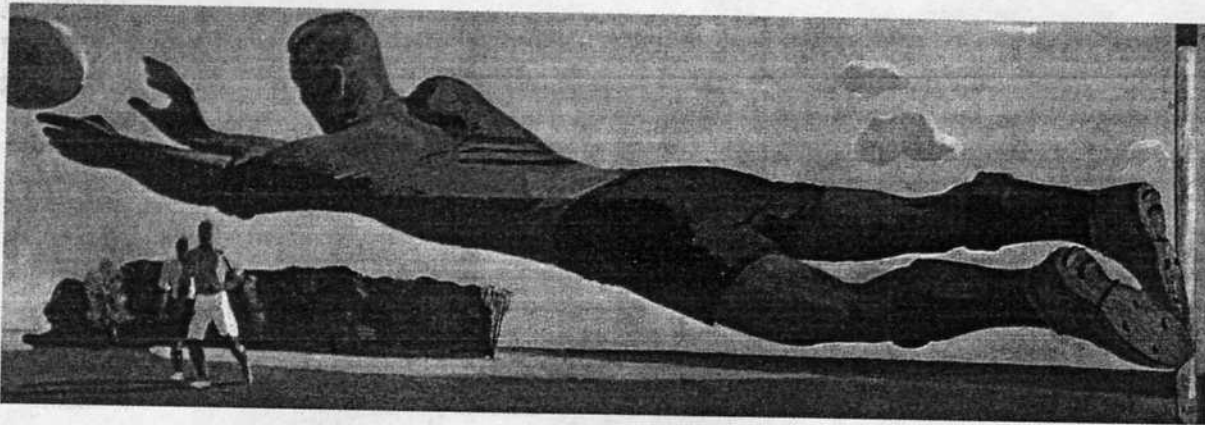


Fig. 8. Aleksandr Deineka, *The Goalkeeper*, 1934, oil on canvas, 119 × 352 cm. State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

to be read. The blank faces refuse to deliver the determination or pathos expected of the Soviet here.

This very inaccessibility of Deineka's figures is the key to making sense of his 1930s pictures as 'dream images' of socialism. This term can be understood partly in the literal sense of the oneiric, invoking the way that, in dreams, people can appear in stilled tableaux, and the faces of personages sometimes do not quite resolve and identities are not grasped before waking, leaving the dreamer only with sensation rather than knowledge of the dreamed body. But it is also meant to invoke the dream in the sense of the 'dreamworld', as Susan Buck-Morss uses it in her analysis of the shared 'dreamworlds' of industrialised modernity under capitalism and socialism.¹⁹ Deineka's bodies populate his own dreamworld of socialism, rather than the actual lived world of the Five-year Plans, or even the Soviet propaganda version of that world. This representational strategy can be seen not as a cop-out – as an attempt to keep working without participating in the worst excesses of Soviet mythmaking – but rather as a continuation of the revolutionary avant-garde's insistence on the unknowability of the passage to socialism.

Deineka's Labour within the Soviet Art System

The strangeness of Deineka's painted bodies did not pass 'under the radar', as it were. When *The Ball Game* was exhibited at his solo exhibition in 1935, the critic Rafael Kaufman, in a lengthy review essay, called it an example of the earlier 'unhealthy tendency' of Deineka to seek out 'showy' subject matter and to deform the human body.²⁰ Yet this kind of criticism, appearing in the central art journal *Iskusstvo*, did not affect Deineka's ability to work within the Soviet art system. The pictures we have been considering were made under the so-called contract system (*kontraktatsiia*), in which branches of the central state commissioning agency, VseKoKhudozhnik, entered into contracts with artists, stipulating that a certain number of works be produced within a certain period of time – often works on a certain theme, or works to be produced on the basis of a paid field trip or *kommandirovka*, undertaken individually or in organised groups, to agricultural or industrial destinations. The agency would then sell the works to museums or other institutions such as factories, government

19. See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

20. Kaufman, 'Aleksandr Deineka' (1936), p. 87.



Fig. 9. Aleksandr Deineka, *The Race*, 1933, oil on canvas, 229 × 259 cm. ©2005, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

21. Bown, *Art under Stalin*, pp. 40–1.

buildings, schools, sanatoria, and so on.²¹ This system created a relatively open space in which a favoured artist such as Deineka could work; for the most part he created the inexplicit, idiosyncratic paintings that he wanted to make, and was guaranteed a purchaser and fair payment for them (*The Ball Game* and *The Goalkeeper* were purchased almost immediately by the Tret'iakov Gallery, for example, while *The Race* was purchased by the Russian Museum). Any artist whose work was sufficiently committed to the socialist project to be a part of the official artists' groups, or, after 1932, the central artists' union, would be able to work under the contract system, yet it could be far more limiting for artists with less status than Deineka. Artists could be subjected to highly specific assignments that limited artistic agency, and the purchasing committees, made up of artists and critics, had the power to reject works, and to tell artists how to rework a commission. Later in the 1930s, as many commissions became

tioned to major, thematic exhibitions such as the *Industry of Socialism* exhibition originally planned for 1937, the contract system became even more circumscriptive in the limitations placed on artists: lists of appropriate titles would be drawn up (for example, *At the Meeting of Female Delegates*), and artists would choose, or be assigned, to produce works illustrating the title.²²

If the contract system allowed Deineka a degree of choice about exactly what to depict, and how, we might expect that, in fulfilling officially commissioned works for specific spaces on assigned topics, he would have to conform at least somewhat to the demands for readily understandable depictions of collectivity. Yet his 1934 oil sketch for a mural destined for the club room of the National Commissariat of Agriculture building, or Narkomzem, on the theme of *The Conversation of the Collective Farm Brigade* (Fig. 10) seems to pose collectivity as its question rather than its subject: What *will* a conversation of the collective farm brigade be like? The bodies of the younger brigade members, despite their sunlit smiles, are flattened, frieze-like figures, pasted poster-like onto the background of the cultivated fields and new buildings of the collective farm (*kolkhoz*). They are meant to be ranged around the central figures of the older woman and man on a balcony, but this balcony device is imperfectly executed, as if as an

22. On this more circumscriptive system, and on the *Industry of Socialism* exhibition, see Reid, 'Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror' (2001).

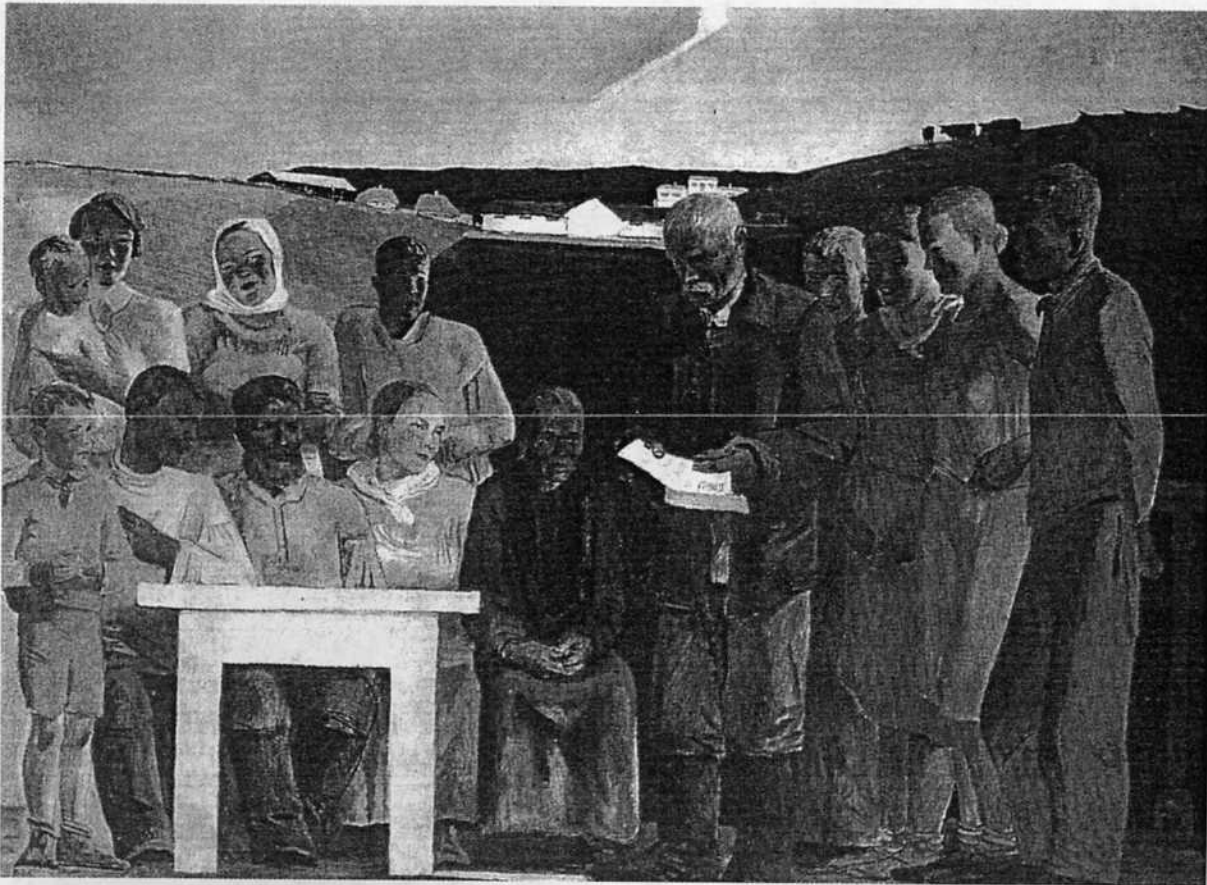


Fig. 10. Aleksandr Deineka, *The Conversation of the Collective Farm Brigade*, sketch for a mural for the Narkomzem building, 1934, oil on canvas, 128 × 176 cm. ©2005, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

23. Boris Nikiforov, 'Panno dlia zdaniia NARKOMZEMA khudozhniki A. Deineka i F. Antonov', *Iskusstvo*, no. 4, 1934, p. 52. The mural project was never completed, for reasons unrelated to the proposed sketches.

24. See Louis Lozowick, 'The Artist in Soviet Russia', *The Nation*, vol. 135, no. 3497, 13 July 1932, pp. 35–6; 'Aspects of Soviet Art', *New Masses*, 29 January 1935, pp. 16–19; 'The Artist in the U.S.S.R.', *New Masses*, 28 July 1936, pp. 18–20.

25. Louis Lozowick, 'Status of the Artist in the U.S.S.R.', in Jerome Klein, E.M. Benson, Margaret Duroc, Louis Lozowick, and Ralph M. Pearson, eds, *First American Artists' Congress* (New York, 1936), pp. 70–1. On the American Artists' Congress, see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (Yale University Press: London, 2002), pp. 123–30.

26. Archive of VOKS (Society for Foreign Cultural Relations), State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), f. 5283, op. 3, d. 586, p. 28.

afterthought, and does not quite do the job of explaining the flattened space of the picture – especially when the depiction of space is undercut by the vehemently two-dimensional table that refuses to display any pictorial indication of three-dimensionality. Writing in *Iskusstvo*, the critic Boris Nikiforov called the figures 'static' and noted that Deineka 'explains the action taking place between the figures with insufficient detail'. In fact, he goes on, 'it is insufficiently clear to the viewer what is going on here'. Yet he notes, in language that sounds almost modernist in its embrace of undecidability, that this may not be a problem; 'the viewer himself can insert into the composition his own interpretation within the parameters of the different possible variations'.²³ The very pictorial form of this high-profile commissioned work, in other words, inserts a moment of doubt about how the collective farm will achieve the wished-for socialist community, and thus shares the reticence of Deineka's other pictures of Soviet bodies.

The contract and commission system undeniably constricted the subject matter and style of Soviet art but, at the same time, it provided an alternative to the art market system of the West – an alternative that significantly expanded the participation of art in public life. This was apparent to the left-wing artists who founded the Artists' Union in New York in 1933, they praised what they saw as the public appreciation for artists in the Soviet Union. The artist and Union member Louis Lozowick, for example, published regularly and positively on art in the USSR, and visited Moscow in 1935.²⁴ At the American Artists' Congress in 1936, which called for a broader spectrum of artists to organise collectively to fight Fascism and demand increased government patronage of the arts, among other goals, Lozowick regaled his listeners with enthusiastic accounts of the Soviet model of well-paid and organised artistic labour, calling for similar structures in the United States.²⁵ Or consider the young American sculptor Emma Lu Davis, a member of the Artists' Union, who received a Guggenheim Fellowship to travel to Moscow for three months in 1935. In a letter to Soviet officials, now held in the Russian State Archive, she explains her reasons for wanting to leave America to see how Soviet artists had organised themselves: 'Four years of earning a living as a painter, sculptor and illustrator, and a winter of work for the government on the Public Works of Art Project have convinced me that art in this country is sick. It has withdrawn from live [sic] and retired into the studio concerned with whims and methods. A few clever artists make a money-racket out of it. A few rich people buy it. But is [sic] has nothing to do with the people or country as a whole, it tells no American story. Thus the artist is reduced to being a sort of curious social scavenger [sic].'²⁶ Davis imagines that true artistic freedom exists in the Soviet Union, where art is not alienated through its privatised reduction to personal 'whims' and solipsistic play with formal 'methods,' and where the artist alienates her labour for the profit not of the buyer, but of the collective.

Davis's faith in the participatory nature of Soviet art is borne out by the broad public presence of Deineka's work. In the eighteen months preceding his December 1935 solo exhibition, organised by VseKoKhudozhnik, there were at least fifteen mentions of Deineka and his activities in mass Soviet newspapers. Typical spreads combined formal portraits with images of his works and a few brief lines about his activities (Figs. 11 and 12). One notice in *Vecherniaia Moskva* from 11 December



Fig. 11. Newspaper notice in *Vecherniaia Moskva* announcing Aleksandr Deineka's departure the previous day for his trip to the United States, showing a photograph of the artist and his 1934 watercolour of Sebastopol, 11 December 1934. (Photo: Christina Kiaer.)

1934 announces his departure the previous day for his trip to the United States and Europe, showing a photograph of the artist and his 1934 watercolour of Sebastopol, while another notice in the same newspaper from 7 December 1935 announces the impending opening of his solo exhibition, showing a photograph of the artist flanked by his paintings *Crimean Pioneers* (1934) and *Paris, St Germain* (1935). His *kommandirovka* to the Donbass region in July 1935, which resulted in the painting *Lunchbreak in the Donbass*, was also documented by newspapers in Moscow and the Ukraine. At least another twenty-five newspaper notices would appear once his exhibition opened.

This is the opposite of Davis's view of American art that had 'withdrawn from life and retired into the studio'. More famous than Davis's words are those of Meyer Schapiro in 'The Social Bases of Art,' his speech to the 1936 Artists' Congress. Modern artists, he declared, had 'eliminated the world of action from their pictures'; they were 'helpless ... to act on the world'; and they evinced 'passivity ... with regard to the human world'.²⁷ Questioning the purported freedom of modern art, Schapiro wrote that in its privatised individuality, 'such an art cannot really be called free, because it is so exclusive and private; there are too many things we value that it cannot embrace or even confront'.²⁸ This paper stemmed from the early, most overtly Marxist period in Schapiro's writing; his radical critique of bourgeois freedom has much in common with Vladimir Lenin's. For Lenin, Slavoj Žižek writes in his essay 'A Plea for Leninist Intolerance', 'formal freedom is the freedom of choice *within* the coordinates of the existing power relations, while actual freedom designates the site of an intervention that undermines these very coordinates'.²⁹ For at least some of its developers and practitioners, for a

27. Meyer Schapiro, 'The Social Bases of Art', in *First American Artists' Congress*, citations from pp. 33, 36 and 36, respectively.

28. Schapiro, 'The Social Bases of Art', p. 37.

29. Slavoj Žižek, 'A Plea for Leninist Intolerance', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 2, Winter 2002, p. 544.



Fig. 12. Newspaper notice in *Vecherniaia Moskva* announcing the impending opening of Aleksandr Deineka's solo exhibition, showing a photograph of the artist flanked by his paintings *Crimean Pioneers* (1934) and *Paris, St Germain* (1935), 7 December 1935. (Photo: Christina Kjaer.)

30. See, for example, Kaufman, 'Aleksandr Deineka' (1936); Boris Nikiforov, 'Aleksandr Deineka', *Iskusstvo*, no. 3, 1933, pp. 85–107, especially pp. 100–7; Konstantin Iuon, 'Vystavka A. Deineki', *Izvestia*, 16 December 1935, p. 4; and Abram Efros, 'Vystavka Aleksandra Deineki' (1935), reprinted in Abram Efros, *Masera raznykh epokh* (Sovetskii khudozhnik: Moscow, 1979), pp. 278–80.

31. See Iakov Tugendkhol'd, 'Iskusstvo i sovremennost' (1928), reprinted in Tugendkhol'd, *Iz istorii zapadnoevropeiskogo, russkogo i sovetskogo iskusstva* (Moscow; Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1987), pp. 208–12. I am grateful to Nina Gourianova for bringing this reference to my attention.

32. On restrictions on travel abroad and contact with foreigners in the later 1920s, see Bown, *Art under Stalin*, pp. 61–2. The subject of Deineka's three-month trip abroad to the United States, France and Italy from December 1934 to March 1935 forms a separate chapter of the study from which this essay is drawn.

33. On the canon of Socialist Realist literature in the Soviet Union, see Clark, *The Soviet Novel*.

34. Archive of the Moscow Artists' Union (MOSSKh), Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2943, op. 1, ed. khr. 41, Debate on the 'Soviet Portrait', 29 November 1935, p. 33. (Page numbers refer to the number designated by the archivist.) I am indebted to Susan Reid's scholarship for drawing my attention to this invaluable archival source through her extensive citations from it in her essay 'Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror'.

brief period in the mid-1930s, Socialist Realism created a space for artistic labour that they could experience as a space of 'actual freedom' because they understood their art to be contributing practically and aesthetically to a social project that fully undermined the coordinates of capitalist exploitation.

The elaborately produced public image of Deineka as a politically engaged Soviet master, embracing Leninist 'actual freedom' as he posed for the official cameras in his suits and ties, is borne out by the historical evidence. His independent or special status is suggested by the way that critics 'forgive' him for his formalist past, including his membership in October;³⁰ by the way he was positively characterised by his 'amerikanizm', signalling his brashness and modernity;³¹ and by the extraordinary privilege of being chosen to travel abroad as the artist representative of the *Soviet Art* exhibition that travelled around North America beginning in December 1934, at a time when foreign travel was essentially no longer permitted.³² His remarkably independent voice emerges from the shorthand reports of the meetings of the powerful Moscow Artists' Union (MOSSKh) in the 1930s. These shorthand reports include everything that was said and, though edited before being finalised for the archive, they still provide a more immediate sense of the actors in these debates than do published writings. Debates often focused on particular artworks, artists or critics: most were offered as negative examples, with few positive examples of works or critical models that could definitively be called 'Socialist Realist'. While Socialist Realist literature had a canon of novels that provided unshakable exemplars, the visual arts had no such unassailable icons.³³ As Deineka put it in his speech at a debate on the Soviet portrait in November 1935, 'We are still scared to say that someone is a Socialist Realist'.³⁴ In this speech he also made a deliberate provocation, accusing the Artists' Union leadership of always being first in line when rations were distributed, even though they were not genuine

artists.³⁵ This statement was applauded wildly by the audience, a fact noted by the secret police agent who was present; he expressed surprise at Deineka's boldness.³⁶ Deineka concluded his incendiary remarks that day by praising the art of 'our new country, our new people', which he contrasted positively to the 'still lifes and portraits of bourgeois ladies' that artists produced in the West. 'In this sense we are pioneers', he said in closing, 'and in this sense people will learn from us.'³⁷

Fedor Bogorodskii, the former AKhRR artist and long-time Party member who had painted the melodramatic *Ambushed Sailors*, and who was Deineka's friend and frequent travel companion on *kommandirovki*, spoke out with similar boldness at an Artists' Union debate on the 'battle against formalism' in March 1936. He criticised another ritual practice of the Soviet system: the procedure of submitting a 'denunciation' (*donos*) of someone to the secret police. He stated, correctly, that denunciations were often misused for personal power struggles rather than genuine concern about enemies of socialism.³⁸ Evidence of this open speech – especially concerning the secret police – may come as a surprise, accustomed as we are to assuming that circumspection was obligatory within the context of Stalinism, especially at the moment when the campaign of repressions was getting under way. At the November 1935 debate on the Soviet portrait a few months earlier, Deineka had in fact called for greater boldness in artistic discourse: 'our criticism attempts to say nothing at all', he stated baldly, again to loud applause.³⁹ Bogorodskii called out from the audience: 'It's just a question of diplomacy'. Deineka shot back: 'This is not a question of diplomacy. We conduct our diplomacy elsewhere, through Litvinov [the foreign minister], but with you I'm not going to conduct diplomacy, Bogorodskii. We live in the Soviet Union'.⁴⁰ Deineka's gut belief – seemingly against all odds – was that the Soviet Union was precisely the place in which one could speak out openly.

Socialist Realism as Revolutionary Art

The paintings from 1935 that Deineka exhibited two weeks after this exchange when his solo exhibition opened in Moscow demonstrate his pictorial vision of what it meant for him at that time that 'we live in the Soviet Union'. His large painting *Collective Farm Girl on a Bicycle* (Fig. 13), for example, had resulted from the same *kommandirovka* to the Ukraine in the summer of 1935 that produced *Lunchbreak in the Donbass*, which was of course also a major work in the solo exhibition. *Collective Farm Girl on a Bicycle* differs significantly from his *Conversation of the Collective Farm Brigade* in its depiction of a solitary figure as a sign for the collective, and it is utterly unlike paintings of collectivisation by other artists, such as Arkadii Plastov's *Collective Farm Festival of 1937* (Fig. 14). Deineka criticised Plastov's kind of naturalistic painting in the debate on formalism at the Artists' Union in March 1936. 'Naturalism', he said, 'is in my opinion one of the most harmful of dangers ... all the more harmful, because it is terribly lively, it is very convenient to work with, and it can hypnotise and lull the viewer'.⁴¹ He criticised, in other words, the immediacy of naturalism, the way in which a painting like Plastov's takes it for granted that we already know what socialist community would look like. Deineka's depiction of life on the collective farm through the lone figure of the woman, who is pictorially almost cut and pasted onto the landscape,

35. He contrasts these non-artists with the genuinely talented artists in the Union, who might argue amongst themselves about formalism, but will continue to respect each other as people – e.g., his friendship with the artist Fedor Bogorodskii. RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, ed. khr. 41, p. 32.

36. NKVD report excerpted in Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov; *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia, Rossiia XX Vek: Dokumenty*, ed. A.N. Iakovlev (Mezhdunarodnyi fond 'Demokratiia': Moscow, 1999), pp. 272–4. The agent notes that the boldness against the MOSSKh leadership demonstrated by participants in this debate could have been buttressed by rumours that the leadership would soon be deposed.

37. RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, ed. khr. 41, p. 35.

38. RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, ed. khr. 81, Debate on the 'Battle against formalism', 20 March 1936, p. 19.

39. RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, ed. khr. 41, p. 30. He also attacked the 'self-criticism' that was constantly required at that time: he noted that in a recent meeting of MOSSKh, a critic had made the usual demand that artists criticise their shortcomings, and when he had asked the critic to name these shortcomings, he had no answer.

40. RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, ed. khr. 41, p. 31.

41. RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, ed. khr. 81, p. 55.

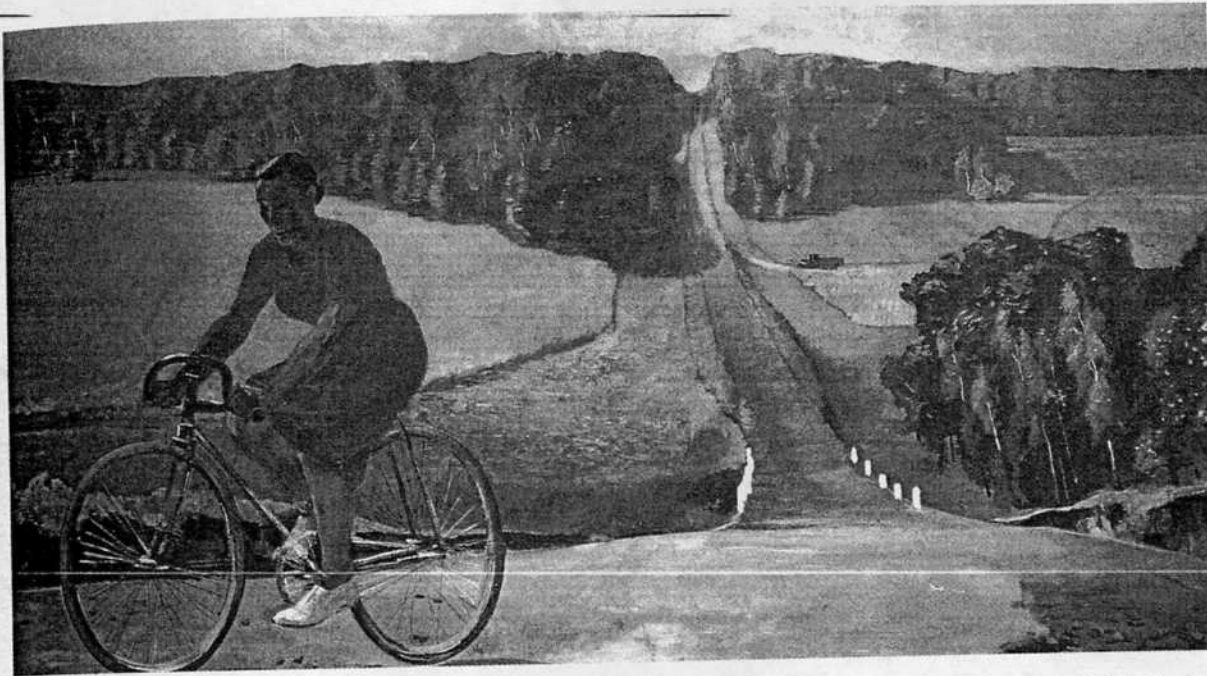


Fig. 13. Aleksandr Deineka, *Collective Farm Girl on a Bicycle*, 1935, oil on canvas, 120 × 220 cm. ©2005, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

42. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1994), pp. 262–285, 'The Potemkin Village'.

43. Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, p. 266.

pointedly refuses Plastov's assumption of a lively community. It also refuses the hypnotising view of a berserk abundance of food and liveliness under collectivisation, suggesting that Deineka was against hypnotisation not only in the formal sense, but also ideologically. If Plastov illustrates Stalin's famous phrase of 1935, 'Life has gotten better, life has gotten merrier' – visible on the banners fluttering from the combine harvester in the back of the painting – Deineka refuses to validate this temporally premature claim. His painting suggests the advantages of collectivised life less futuristically than Plastov, through the depiction of sunlight, the technological presence of the tractor in the background and the highly coveted consumer item of the bicycle.

Deineka undoubtedly participated in the construction of what historian Sheila Fitzpatrick has called the 'Potemkin village' representation of collective farms, after the false facades of prosperous villages purportedly constructed by Prince Potemkin to please Catherine the Great as she travelled through Russia. This optimistic Potemkin view of life on the dismal *kolkhozy* was created by newspapers, movies, speeches and statistics.⁴² Artists were usually sent, not surprisingly, to the better farms, where it was easier to convince oneself that in spite of the visible evidence, collectivisation might in fact be improving peasant life. We know that Deineka embellished reality in this painting by implying that it was common for *kolkhoznitsy* to have bicycles: although statistical handbooks of 1935 claimed that peasants had more access to coveted consumer goods, Fitzpatrick notes that if the total number of bicycles actually produced in the Soviet Union that year had been distributed equally among Soviet collective farms, each one would have received exactly one bicycle.⁴³



Fig. 14. Arkadii Plastov, *Collective Farm Festival*, 1937, oil on canvas, 188 × 307 cm. ©2005, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

Yet only the bicycle and the bright red of the cyclist's dress are pure ideological signs of the party narrative of collectivisation, and their very obviousness licences a more open-ended ideological message in the rest of this image of collectivisation. For the painting offers not 'reality in its revolutionary development' – i.e., Socialist Reality as propaganda says it should be rather than as it is – but plausible elements of a then-present reality rendered as a non-naturalistic dream image. It is not a 'dissident' image that smuggles in a critique of the regime under cover of the symbolic red dress and bicycle; rather, the image represents a more personal dream. Most central to Deineka's own dream of life under socialism is the image of mobility and bodily freedom, as the solitary woman in red pedals out of the picture frame – like the young woman hurling the ball, the boys splashing out of the water, the racers running on the track, the leaping football player. These dynamic figures are all in motion, on their way toward becoming fully achieved and legible Soviet subjects, but as yet still in transition.

Meyer Schapiro took a dimmer view of Deineka's dynamic bodies, connecting his 'military-athletic style of masculine figures' to Fascist art in his essay 'Social Realism and Revolutionary Art', written in 1938 but never published during his lifetime.⁴⁴ Schapiro had attacked the passivity of modernist art in 'The Social Bases of Art' at the American Artists' Congress in 1936, implying support for a more socially engaged form of modern art, but in this essay of two years later he largely recanted that position, savagely denigrating the quality of Soviet art made for the state 'according to a doctrine or command' (p. 226). For Schapiro, the demand

44. Meyer Schapiro, 'Social Realism and Revolutionary Art', in *Worldview in Painting – Art and Society: Selected Papers* (George Braziller: New York, 1999), p. 224. Future references to this essay will be cited parenthetically in the body of the text.

that artists glorify the image of the leader and the power of the regime had a harmful effect on all artists whose training, inclination or personality were unsuited to such themes: 'it is as if the little Dutchman or a Vermeer should have been required to show continually a powerful statuesque figure with flashing eyes' (p. 224). Just such a figure of the leader appears in the back left of the Plastov painting, in the poster of Stalin mounted on the combine harvester. Deineka chose revolutionary subject matter that allowed him to avoid painting the leader, but Schapiro also has sharp criticism for the subject matter he did paint: 'tourist images celebrating the sunshine on the farms, the vast fields and crops, the handsome farmers; they are like the academic pictures of other countries glorifying the happiness of the provinces. They pass imperceptibly into painting of sex and recreation and sport' (p. 225).

This description may accurately characterise Plastov's paintings, but it does not quite characterise Deineka's: any sense of celebration and tourism is complicated by his laconic resistance to pictorial detail and by the continuation of the spatial destabilisation and compositional patterning of his earlier pictures. His figures never settle comfortably enough into their settings to evoke easily consumable sex. In *Collective Farm Girl on a Bicycle*, the dirt road recedes so abruptly into the background that it upends the landscape and threatens to slam it onto the picture surface, while the woman's dress glows so bright red – viewed in person in the storeroom of the Russian Museum the effect is truly 'day-glo' – that she seems to float detachedly above the landscape of collectivisation, rather than to be bound to it.

Schapiro calls the sunny tourist images of Soviet art 'impersonal and unpsychological, possessing an animal complacency' (p. 225). This demand for a missing psychological depth echoes the critic Kaufman, who complained that the *Collective Farm Girl's* face was overpowered by her bright red dress, foiling our desire to know her as a person.⁴⁵ But Deineka consciously resisted the demand for psychological immediacy, which he associated with the hypnotic 'liveliness' of naturalism. Although the boys in *Lunchbreak in the Donbass* represent a collective of young workers sharing leisure, there is no 'comradely' interaction between them; their faces are blank and mask-like, forestalling psychological or emotional access, for the viewer or for each other. Nor yet do they live up to Schapiro's charge against Deineka of having a Fascist, 'military-athletic' style, because they are neither unified nor disciplined; each boy inhabits his own spatial trajectory, each a differentiated, self-contained figure. Deineka holds their bodies at a distance, from each other and from the viewer, as if their forms cannot yet be distinct and graspable because they are not yet fully historically present; we do not know, yet, what a community of socialist leisure will look like. They are embryonic, emerging from the water like Venus herself.⁴⁶

The remoteness of Deineka's bodies can be understood as an effect of his own desire for the endlessly deferred object of the true, as yet unknown, socialist body. Schapiro used the strange term 'animal complacency' to describe the socialist bodies that already securely inhabited most Soviet art. The term is clearly negative, but it is evocative; it might stand for a certain misreading of the socialist myth of achieving a state of abundance and social harmony a state so complete that human critical faculties would no longer be necessary. This uncritical animality would represent both a good and bad dream of socialism – good as a mythic dream of future

45. Kaufman, 'Aleksandr Deineka' (1936), p. 94. He also praised the painting for its inventiveness and originality.

46. Aleksandr Morozov writes that Deineka's figures all have the faces of grown-up children, which relates to my claim for the embryonic nature of the boys in *Lunchbreak*. Morozov's characterisation of Deineka's figures as child-like diverges, however, from my claim for the complexity of Deineka's representation of the Soviet subject coming-into-being. See Morozov, *Konets utopii*, p. 98.

pleasure, but a nightmare when the demand for uncriticality is imposed from above. Whether interpreted positively or negatively, however, 'animal complacency' is not quite the right term for Deineka's pictures, despite their Arcadian sunshine and unpsychological physicality. Rather, the very terseness and distance with which these qualities are conveyed pictorially points to tension rather than complacency. Even though the bodies of the boys in *Lunchbreak* are fully available, bearing down on the viewer in full-frontal, anatomically correct nudity, they are also withheld from us. While the boys' bodies are rendered through painterly modelling, in another instance of montage, their genitals are disjunctively drawn in with schematic lines (Figs 15 and 16). The genitals are precisely not repressed, in the psychoanalytic sense, for they are carefully delineated in brown paint, as if to make sure that they will be in place. The sexuality must be in place, but it cannot yet be fully natural or virile, just as all the other bodies we have seen are still coming into being. Deineka is not yet sure what it will mean to embody the socialist subject.

We have a photograph of a studious, even pompous Deineka at work on *Lunchbreak*, his own formal dress and bodily comportment totally at odds with the naked bodily freedom of the boys emerging under his desiring brush (Fig. 17). If he could just get the genitals right, and the faces, and the torsos, then these boys – and Deineka himself – would measure up to the desired plenitude of the Soviet subject. Yet recent scholarship in Soviet history has emphasised the impossibility of measuring up to the ideological ideal: 'a central characteristic of Soviet subjectivity was the desire to be a Soviet subject – a desire that inevitably fell short of its goal and which, in the subject's knowledge of his or her own inadequacy, was a defining feature of this ideological age. All Soviet subjects were would-be Soviet subjects'.⁴⁷ Deineka certainly never measured up, despite his talent, his many professional successes, his socialist commitment, and his blond sportiness. Critics always found some fault with his work, both technically and ideologically, as was the custom of Bolshevik criticism; his personal life unfolded far from the untroubled sexuality of his painted athletes and workers; and he was self-conscious of his own body because of his short stature and, already in his thirties, the thickening in his face and middle

47. Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman, 'Introduction', in Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman (eds) *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia*, p. 18. See also Jochen Hellbeck, 'Fashioning the Stalinist Soul'.



Fig. 15. Aleksandr Deineka, *Lunchbreak in the Donbass*, detail. (Photo: Christina Kiaer.)



Fig. 16. Aleksandr Deineka, *Lunchbreak in the Donbass*, detail. (Photo: Christina Kiaer.)

despite his devotion to *fizkul'tura*. The socialist bodies that populate his canvases, always just out of reach, stand for the socialist experience itself that is as yet out of reach for him, and for all Soviet subjects.

In contrast to the boys' tentatively rendered genitals, the Freudian train behind them forges ahead across a horizon as linear as in a late Malevich landscape, emitting industrious puffs of steam and suggesting a still lacking relation between proletarian body and industrial machinery. But Freudian



Fig. 17. Aleksandr Deineka painting *Lunchbreak in the Donbass*, 1935.

48. Kaufman, 'Aleksandr Deineka' (1936), p. 95.

or not, in this reading the train is not a sign of the return of the repressed; rather, the contradiction between the as yet inadequately liberated proletarian body and the industrial promise of the revolution is right there on the surface – as was the contradiction between Arcadian body and the space of industry in Deineka's more modernist and overtly montage-like *Building New Factories* of 1926. The surfaces of Deineka's canvases themselves reveal the political significance of the deferred desire for the socialist body. Like the works of the avant-garde, they take the nature of the transition to socialism as their problem, not in their content – which does not depart radically from standard Socialist Realist fare – but in their form.

Kaufman complained that Deineka 'often stops precisely at the point where the work of the Soviet artist should only be starting', but this reticence is precisely what makes it possible to understand him as a revolutionary artist rather than a totalitarian one.⁴⁸ As long as his painted bodies are on their way to an endlessly deferred Soviet subjectivity, but have not reached it yet, his works retain the tentativeness and openness to the possibilities of a future collectivity that characterise a non-totalising Marxist art. Once his bodies arrive as fully realised and grasped Soviet subjects, with detailed faces expressing easily readable emotions and placed in more explicitly narrative, anecdotal compositions – as they do after 1940 or so, in works such as the massive and much beloved wartime painting *The Defence of Sebastopol* of 1942 – his work becomes more a formulaic illustration of an achieved Communist collective than a meditation on its possibilities and contradictions (Fig. 18).

The young American sculptor Emma Lu Davis ended up spending over a year in the Soviet Union, far overstaying her Guggenheim grant. Like Schapiro, she found Soviet art to be disappointingly timid, academic and unskilled, but she was deeply impressed with the system of public economic and cultural support of the arts. Writing in the *Nation* in July 1936, she asked: 'Why, with every advantage of work, freedom of subject,

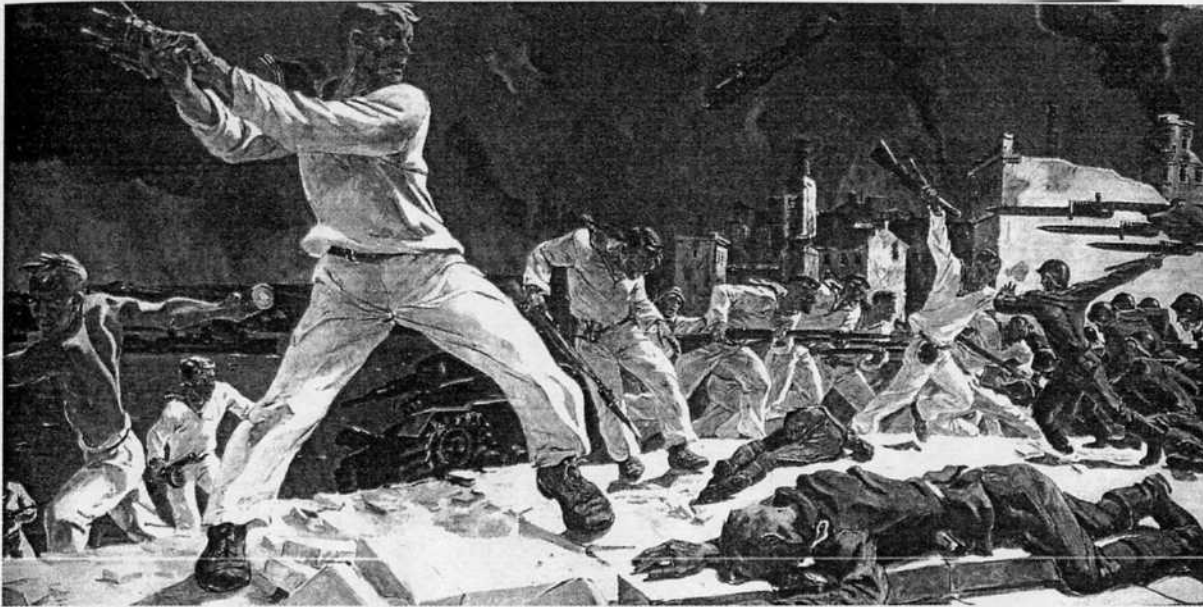


Fig. 18. Aleksandr Deineka, *The Defence of Sebastopol*, 1942, oil on canvas, 200 × 400 cm. ©2005, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

49. Emma L. Davis, 'Soviet Art – A letter from Tiflis,' *The Nation*, vol. 143, July 18 1936, p. 76.

and official patronage, does the Russian artist produce bad work?'⁴⁹ The proposal of this essay has been that the Leninist freedom and official patronage of Socialist Realism did not lead only to bad work, or to forced artistic labour. When we hear Deineka speak of the Soviet artist's freedom to travel around the country painting modern, relevant themes, when he says: 'In this sense we are pioneers and in this sense people will learn from us,' we should consider the possibility not only that he meant what he said, but that he might have been right. To understand the work of Deineka and others such as him in the 1930s only as forced labour is to strip the artists of their subjective will – to deprive them of their subjectivity through art history, just as we accuse Stalinism of having done in history.

This essay forms part of a book-length project on Aleksandr Deineka and Soviet Socialist Realism. I am grateful to the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), the Harriman Institute of Columbia University, and the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation Fellowship in Art History for the funding that made my research on this project possible. I would like to thank Stephen Eisenman and Andrew Hemingway for organising the session on 'Art and Labour' at the annual meeting of the College Art Association in 2003, from which this essay stems, and for their critical comments.